UNESCO the Courier

PEOPLE AND PLACES
Djenné, now and forever

PLANET
Large dams, the end of an era?

SIGNS OF THE TIMES
African museums on a meet-the-people mission

INTERVIEW
Enki Bilal's journey to the end of time

UNESCO the Courier

April 2000

Languages: conflict or coexistence?

USA: 4,25$US.

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Contents

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PEOPLE AND PLACES

3 **Djenné,now and forever**
Photos by Christien Jaspars; Text by Albakaye Ousmane Kounta

OPINION

9 **Cultural cloning or hybrid cultures?** Eduardo Portella

PLANET

10 **Large dams—the end of an era?** Peter Coles
11 **A barrage of protest** Peter Coles and Lyla Bavadam

WORLD OF LEARNING

14 **USA: TV commercials in the classroom** Mark Walsh

17 Focus

© Philippe Franchini, Paris

Languages: conflict or coexistence?

Today, many minority languages are struggling harder than ever to survive. They are the cornerstone of cultures whose fate depends on the outcome of this struggle. This Focus section looks at the confrontation between dominant and dominated languages. It also presents initiatives to promote the coexistence of languages as a guarantee of cultural diversity and dialogue between peoples.

Detailed table of contents on page 17.

ETHICS

37 **DNA in the dock** Martine Jacot

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

40 **African museums on a meet-the-people mission** Cynthia Guttman
42 **Namibia: students boost a museum's workforce** Zoe Titus

CONNEXIONS

43 **Media self-control: the South's new option** Jean Huteau

INTERVIEW

46 **Enki Bilal: a journey to the end of time**

Cover: © Philippe Franchini, Paris

UNESCO the Courier

53rd year
Published monthly in 27 languages and in Braille by the United Nations Educational,Scientific and Cultural Organization.
31,rue François Bonvin,75732 Paris Cedex 15 France
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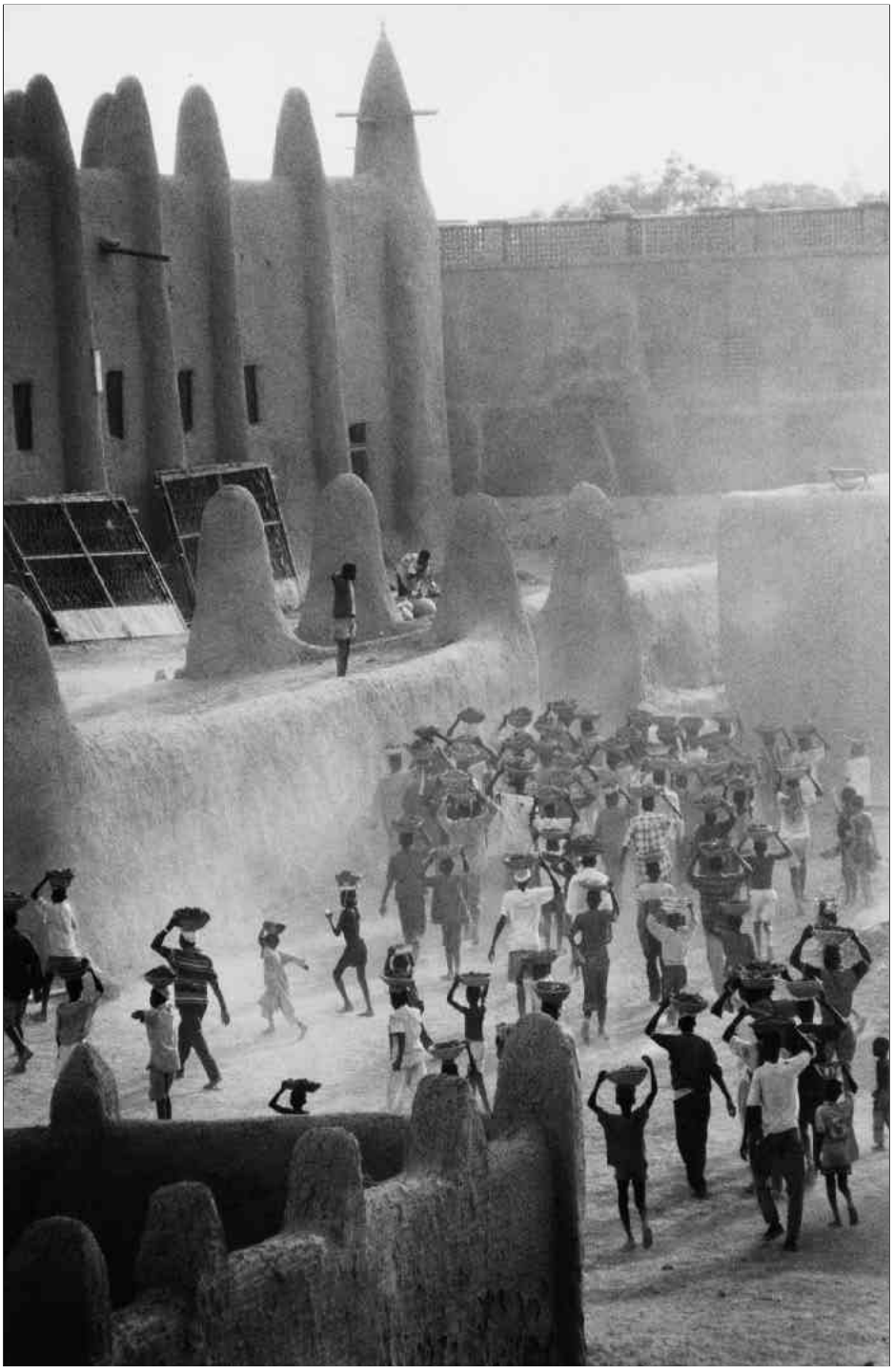
IMPRIMÉ EN FRANCE
DÉPOT LÉGAL : C1 - APRIL2000
COMMISSION PARITAIRE N° 71844 -
Diffusé par les N.M.P.P.
The Unesco Courier (USPS 016686) is published monthly in Paris by Unesco. Printed in France. Periodicals postage paid at Champlain NY and additional mailing offices.
Photocomposition and photoengraving:
The Unesco Courier.
Printing:Maulde & Renou
ISSN 0041-5278 No. 4-2000-OPI 99-590 A

DJENNÉ, NOW AND FOREVER

Photos by Christien Jaspars; Text by Albakaye Ousmane Kounta

Each year the people of the Malian town of Djenné put a new coating of adobe on their great earthen mosque. A festival held to celebrate the occasion starts at dawn, at the end of Ramadan.



It was a feast day. The end of Ramadan. The people of Djenné gathered on the great square in front of the mosque for nine o'clock prayers on this holy day.

The ritual drew to a close. The men were sitting on the ground listening to the Imam's sermon, spoken by the greatest griot (storyteller)[1] a slim, alert man with a silver tongue. His metallic voice roamed through the audience, seeming to probe their reactions.

With his hands and his gaze, he took the pulse of the crowd.

At the end of the sermon, his eagle eye caught sight of the upraised staff of the patriarch, who sharply struck the ground with it three times. Everyone listened to the sound in complete silence. Then the storyteller prepared to pass on the old chief's words.

The storyteller listened to the words, the sentences and the sounds, gathering them for a moment in his ears, his heart and his head. Then his tongue caressed them, cleansed them, drew them out, spun them, rinsed them and delivered them to the gathering, purged of all anguish and poison. For the spoken word can be a pain that kills and a dagger that scars for life.

He said:

That the north wind rises with every dawn
And murmurs each day
And drains everything of water
That the waters of the two rivers
Flow eastward each day

He said:

That the walls have stopped weeping
That it's time to heal
The wounds left by winter

They understood:

They turned towards the West ▶

Christien Jaspars, of the Netherlands, is an Amsterdam-based photographer. Albakaye Ousmane Kounta is a Malian writer, poet and story-teller whose publications include *Un complot de chèvres* (Jamana publishers, Mali, and Beauchemin, Canada, 1998), *Les sans repères* (Balanzan publishers, Mali, 1997) and *Sanglots et dédains* (Jamana publishers, 1995). To find out more: **www.promali.org/kounta**

1. In sub-Saharan Africa, the Imam, like all important figures, often does not speak directly to the crowd but through an intermediary, the griot.

▶ Towards the temple of Tapama[2]
They called on the great fishermen

On the Karanyara[3]
On the Famenta
On the Kasaminta
Lords of the waves of night
On the Niomenta
On the Sininta
On the Tienda
Lords of the manatees and the crocodiles

They went straight through the southern gate and on to the one opposite, the Sory gate, and then turned east to "the Pond of Fresh Milk".
There were the masons
The men who mark in the sand
With wooden hands
The magic formulas
That turn into lizards
And cling to the walls
Or doves amid
The pillars.

They went to talk
To those who slap the walls
With slabs of clay
Then they went to the place where the two rivers meet.
The little river, the Bani,
Pretty as a little sister.
And the great river, the Djoliba[4]
Strong as a bull.
They went off to look for all the Soninke, all the Songai, all the other peoples
To re-plaster the sanctuary
People bent with age
Who sleep in the bosom of the earth.
The chiefs used their staffs
To decree to everyone
Whatever their age or clan
That Djenné shall be and shall remain forever.

The clay was already
Mixed with powdery rice straw
Kneaded out of millet husks and bran
Bare feet trampled it.
Bare hands worked it.
They filled all the containers with it
Using shovels and big dabas[5]
And hundreds of women and men
Formed a crowd that flowed
Towards the giant walls
Of the mosque of Djenné
the Great. ■

2. A girl sacrificed to the spirit of the river when Djenné was founded.
3. This and the following names are those of families that founded Djenné.
4. The Bambara name for the river Niger.
5. Hoes.

BETWEEN THE DESERT AND THE SAVANNAH

The site of Djenné has been inhabited since 250 B.C. It has always been a commercial crossroads between the desert and the savannah, on the trans-Saharan caravan routes which vehicled the gold trade. From the 15th century on, Djenné also became a centre for the spread of Islam. Almost 2,000 traditional adobe houses with Arab decoration have survived. They are built on hillocks to escape flooding by the Bani and Niger rivers during the rainy season. Djenné was placed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1988. ■

Photos © Christien Jaspars/Panos Pictures, London

With his soft hands
He caressed the minaret
With slabs of clay hurled up
from below.
His body moved gracefully back and
forth
Like the wings of the Mandé pelican
Accompanied by the sobbing of the
drums
Kara will not fall.

◄ They took the pillars by storm
As if to climb up to heaven
Carrying buckets and baskets
As if filled with milk and honey.

But often on this heady day ►
People have no time
To eat or drink
Without stopping, they make do
With sachets of milk
Meatballs
and boiled rice.
Clay is everywhere
Mud is everywhere
You are
Coated with it
From head to foot.

◄ They splay out their feet
On boxwood sticks stuck in the wall
Their heads between the legs of their
neighbour
Willing hands
Take the slabs of clay
Perched on the scaffolding
Like horsemen in the sky.

Photos © Christien Jaspars/Panos Pictures, London

A heavy silence descended on the town, in fits and starts, in torrents, in sobs. The drums, the tall drums, the balafons and the flutes fell silent.

Only the voice of the town crier echoed over the roofs and the minarets, announcing mealtime. The meal is holy and is for everyone.

Eyes are raised
To question
Columns and minaret
Have you been well coated?
With the finest earth?
You say in your heart of hearts
Once again
An idea greater
Than the head and the body
That endures and reaches up into the clouds.

Photos © Christien Jaspars/Panos Pictures, London

CULTURAL CLONING OR HYBRID CULTURES?

Eduardo Portella

© Fabian Charaff/UNESCO

To raise the issue of culture today is to position oneself at the crossroads of two forces, globalization and the persistence of national identity, that are both contradictory and intertwined. Culture can no longer be developed without a basic, existential, vital tension between the universal, the regional, the national and the local.

Although cultures remain anchored in their national contexts, it is increasingly hard to believe that the traditional concepts of identity, people and nation are inviolable. Our societies have never experienced such a widespread break with traditions that have grown up over centuries.

But we must ask ourselves whether modern trends usually presented as possible threats to these traditions, including that of the nation-state, might not turn out to be fertile soil for culture, i.e. favourable to the coexistence of diversity. They might help to avoid the two pitfalls of ordered cohesion and artificial uniformity.

The first arises from the hegemonic identity model being based on a single, total, dominant, integrating culture. It was seen as something fixed and immutable. It was brandished as a weapon, and we are only now beginning to measure its impact. The twentieth century saw the most sophisticated cultures give in to barbarism. It took us a long time to realize that racism flourishes where cultural identity is regarded as an absolute. Cultures based on exclusion inevitably lead to the exclusion of all culture. That is why the concept of cultural identity as we have known it since the beginning of globalization is out of date.

But culture must not free itself from national identity by surrendering to the might of globalization and privatization. Emerging post-national identities have not yet shown their capacity to withstand inequality, injustice, exclusion and violence. To subordinate culture to criteria developed in the laboratories of the dominant ideology, which make a cult of the ups and downs of the stock market, the uncertainties of supply and demand, the snares of functionality and urgency, is to cut off its vital supply of social oxygen and to replace creative tension with the stress of the marketplace.

Two big dangers loom ahead. The first is the current tendency to relegate culture to the status of a superfluous product, whereas cultural perception could well become for information societies what scientific knowledge has been for industrial societies. It is too often forgotten that repairing social divisions means having to pay a cultural cost. Investing in culture is also investing in society. The second danger is that of "electronic fundamentalism". Cultural factories and supermarkets spread a culture that is so technology-oriented that it could be described as dehumanized.

But how can culture be "technologized" to the point where it is just a collection of cultural clones, and still claim to be culture? A cloned culture is an aborted culture, because when a culture ceases to be interdependent, it ceases to be a culture. Interaction is the hallmark of culture. And interaction leads to hybridity, not cloning. With cloning, the one is an exact copy of the other. With hybridity, the one and the other give birth to a new entity which is different but also naturally retains the identity of its origins. Wherever it has occurred, cultural hybridity has sustained roots and forged new solidarities, which may be an antidote to exclusion.

To paraphrase André Malraux, I would say that the third millennium will be one of hybridity or it will not be. ■

Eduardo Portella is a Brazilian philosopher, author and literary critic. He was formerly his country's Minister of Education and Culture and has served as Deputy Director General of UNESCO. This text has been extracted from his contribution to a series of "21st-century Talks" held at UNESCO's Paris Headquarters in November 1999.

On the rise: construction of a dam as part of the giant Three Gorges project on China's Yangtze River.

LARGE DAMS–THE END OF AN ERA?

Peter Coles

Growing debate about the rights and wrongs of large-scale dam construction focuses on the very meaning of development

At the last count, there were around 40,000 large dams on the world's rivers, according to the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD).[1] Most of them were built in the last 35 years. A further 1,600 are under construction in over 40 countries. But is the era of building very large dams coming to an end? Pressure groups of displaced rural communities and ecology organizations have already disrupted dam building in the United States and India.

This coming August the independent World Commission on Dams (WCD), set up in 1998 by the World Bank and IUCN (the World Conservation Union) to look at the long term developmental effectiveness of dams, will publish its conclusions after two years of fact-finding. Preliminary reports to the Commission, whose 12 commissioners span most groups of stakeholders, are already suggesting that the development benefits may not be all they promised. And that the people who gain least from dams are those already at the bottom of the socio-economic pile.

"Dams are both a technology option and a development choice," said South African Minister of Education and WCD Chair Professor Kader Asmal last December. By focusing on dams as a reflection of societal needs, he said, WCD is inevitably confronting the very meaning of "development". "We are tackling the question of how knowledge, interests, and values determine the context within which dams are either chosen or rejected as the preferred option, and how such decisions can best be negotiated between competing interests." Part of WCD's remit is to find out what these interests are. They might, for

1. ICOLD, founded in 1928, seeks to advance the art and science of dams. It has some 6,000 individual members and National Committees in 80 countries. ICOLD defines a large dam as one that is over 15 metres high.

British journalist specializing in scientific and environmental issues

example, include the needs of industry and urban residents versus agriculture and rural populations, or, more cynically, the dam industry versus those interested in intermediate technology or traditional solutions to development challenges.

For ICOLD, the links between dam building and development are obvious. Two prerequisites for the development of a nation are energy and water, says one ICOLD paper. But since these resources are most scarce precisely where demand is rising most rapidly, dams have become almost synonymous with development. So, while dam building in developed countries has slowed to a trickle in the last decade, major constructions are underway in industrializing countries, like China's massive Three Gorges project and India's Narmada Valley Development project (see article below). Over half of all large dams (more than 22,000) are in China, while India has become the third largest dam constructor in the world, with over 3,000 large dams.

Smoothing the flood-and-drought cycle

Although dams produce power without contributing to the greenhouse effect—about 20 per cent of world electricity and seven per cent of all energy, according to ICOLD—their primary purpose is water control. Reservoirs can provide drinking water, while smoothing out the "boom and bust" cycles of flooding and drought brought about by monsoons. They do this by storing excess water in reservoirs during the rainy season and releasing it in times of scarcity. But by far the greatest use of dams is to supply irrigation water for agriculture. In developing countries, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), irrigation accounts for over 75 per cent of water consumption. In some countries, the figure is over 90 per cent.

At present, according to ICOLD, one third of all food produced already comes from irrigated land. And the organization sees irrigation as the only way to meet the future increase in demand, expecting 80 per cent of food production to come from irrigated land by 2025.

But the case for irrigation is far from clear-cut. According to the International Rivers Network (IRN), a non-governmental organization, irrigation canals cause eutrophication[2]. Meanwhile, the crops produced are often for export and do not feed the sectors of the population that are expanding most rapidly—the poor. And ironically, these are the very people who lose their homes, farms and livelihoods when river valleys are flooded by dams.

Even before a dam has produced a single watt of power, or litre of irrigation water, tens of thousands of people may need to be evacuated from the river valleys to make way for the reservoir. World-wide, the flooded valleys that accompany large dams have forced at least 30 million people to abandon their homes since the 1930s, according to IRN. In the past, governments have seen the human cost of displacement as an inevitable "side effect" of development. Now these displaced people are fighting to be heard.

"Past experiences," says one report to the Commission, "show that typical resettlement programmes are: often prepared late in the project cycle; under financed; devised using insufficient understanding of people's social, cultural, economic, psychological conditions and environment in which they were located; implemented with a very short time frame, with limited objective of restoring previous income levels, and too often terminated even before all displaced people were resettled and rehabilitated." One question that WCD will be trying to answer in its final report is whether the loss of an ancient rural lifestyle is the inevitable price a nation has to pay to achieve security for the majority.

Some of those opposed to large-scale dam construction, like IRN, see the development that dams supposedly promote as spurious in any case, even for the largely urban communities who benefit. In its publicity for *Silent Rivers*, a book by Patrick McCully that IRN co-published, the NGO says that "massive dams are much more than simply machines to generate electricity and store water. They are concrete, rock and earth expressions of the dominant ideology of the technological age: icons of economic development and scientific progress to match nuclear bombs and motor cars."

Other critics suggest that the dam industry simply turned to developing countries because the market in developed countries had almost dried up. In the past, loans from the World Bank and international aid programmes indirectly kept the multi-billion dollar industry afloat, while scoring lucrative trade and technology transfer deals for the lending nations. But now, under mounting opposition from pressure groups, the U.S. and many European governments have declined to become involved in projects like the Three Gorges and Narmada dams.

With power still mainly in the hands of the dam builders, the coming WCD report might at least provide guidelines on how to include the dispossessed among those who benefit, while minimizing the extent of irreversible damage. ■

2. Eutrophication is a phenomenon occurring in stagnant water, whereby vegetation proliferates and the water's oxygen content is reduced.

A BARRAGE OF PROTEST

Peter Coles and Lyla Bavadam

The tide may be turning against the giant Narmada dam project in India

Vadaj is a desolate place about 40 km from the historic city of Baroda in India's Gujarat state. During the summer months the baked earth cracks in the heat. When the monsoon comes, villagers perch on the furniture like chickens to avoid the rising waters. After the floods have subsided, the waterlogged clay soil is impenetrable, trapping cattle and people alike. For the past four years, the tin shacks of Vadaj have been home for dozens of families forced to leave their ancestral village to make way for the giant reservoir of the controversial Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river.

These "oustees" could even count themselves lucky. According to a report by Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a pressure group fighting the Narmada project, when the Bargi dam was finished in 1990, over 1,000 km upstream in Madhya Pradesh, the 114,000 people from 162 villages in the path of the floodwaters were simply jettisoned with nowhere to go. The government, says ▶

Bombay correspondent of the Indian bi-monthly *Frontline*

© Karen Robinson/Panos Pictures, London

In August 1999, protesters campaigning against the building of a dam on the Narmada River in India were ready to drown themselves in the rapidly rising monsoon waters.

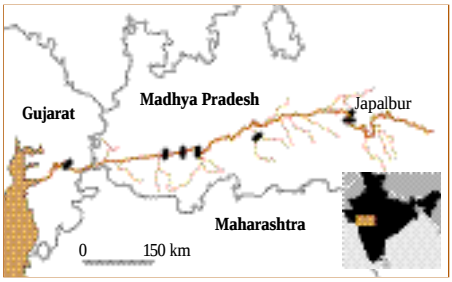
NBA, offered no resettlement land and only minimal cash compensation. Many of these villagers, says the report, now have menial jobs in the slums of Jabalpur, the main city in the region.

The plight of the Vadaj oustees could be shared by over 300,000 others as construction moves slowly ahead on the 30 large dams, 150 medium and 3,000 smaller dams in a vast project that will transform the Narmada into a staircase of reservoirs and turbines. For the past 15 years, the backlash of opposition from NBA, a coalition of local people's movements opposed to the different dams, has been challenging the view of development that these dams promote. NBA argues that the beneficiaries of the project will be city dwellers, not the rural communities forced to leave their homes in the flooded valley.

Over 80 per cent of India's rural households have no electricity—and little hope of ever being connected to the electricity grid—according to Arundhati Roy, the acclaimed Indian author who has recently championed NBA's struggle. She says the increased food that the dams' irrigation canals may produce will be destined for export, doing little to feed the nation's poor. In 1995, she says, some 30 million tons of unsold grain were stockpiled in state granaries, while 350 million Indians still live below the poverty line. What is more, most of the people affected by the Narmada project, says NBA, are tribal communities, fishing villages and Dalits (the so-called "oppressed" lower stratum of the Hindu caste system), who already benefit least from India's prosperity.

The notion of dam building as a prime technology solution to development is not new. Back in the 1940s, just after Independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru saw dams as "the Temples of Modern India". The Narmada Valley Development Project was to be a showcase for this vision. Although this particular project stayed on the drawing board for over 30 years, mostly because of disputes over water rights between the three states—Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat—through which the Narmada flows, India went on to build some 3,600 dams.

Coupled to the Green Revolution of the 1960s, these dams provided massive irrigation systems that have underpinned a fourfold increase in food production. And similar prospects are being heralded for the Narmada dams. According to official figures, the Sardar Sarovar dam, the last and largest of the dams before the river reaches the Arabian Sea, will provide water for 20-30 million people all year round, especially in the arid areas of Kutch, Saurashtra and the state of Rajasthan. At the same time, the 138.6-metre multi-purpose dam is scheduled to produce 1,450 MW of hydroelectric power, while its reservoir should smooth out the yearly seesaw of floods and droughts, protecting some 400,000 people.



Source: International Rivers Network

World Bank withdrawal

NBA contests just about all the official statistics on the future benefits of the project. It also questions the very principle of the dams from the point of view of development. Led by Medha Patkar, a sociologist originally from Bombay, NBA argues that the benefits will never justify the irreversible loss of forest, fisheries, farmland, culture and livelihood for the hundreds of

THE REALITIES OF RESETTLEMENT

In some cases resettlement has meant the fragmentation of village communities, because neighbours are given land in different sites. Meanwhile, over 5,000 oustees from villages in Gujarat are being rehoused in settlements alongside others from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. People from three different states, each with their own languages and dialects, culinary habits and dress, are thrown together.

Resettled people may also have to face hostility from their host communities. New lands can be barren rocky ground or waterlogged, saline stretches where farming is impossible. Fishing communities find themselves far from the river on which their livelihood has depended for centuries. Often, these resettled people try to return to their original homes, even if all that remains is a muddy hilltop.

Uncertainty is another dimension of resettlement. Entire generations grow up not knowing what the ultimate fate of their village will be. As NBA activist Shripad Dharmadhikari explains, "when it is announced that an area will face submergence, all development work comes to a halt. So if a school is being built or roads are being constructed it is all stopped. The actual submergence may remain on paper but the work stops." In the village of Kakarana Behena, a Bhillala tribesman said the electric supply to his village was cut when its status as a submergence village became known. Power supply was stopped a year ago but the waters are still below Kakarana.

There are also social ramifications. Sulgaon is a village in the prosperous and fertile Nimad region that will be submerged when the Maheshwar dam in Madhya Pradesh is constructed. Lakshman Patidar says it is becoming increasingly difficult to find brides for eligible boys. "Who will want to send their daughters to a home that will soon be under water?" he asks. And, like other Nimadi farmers, Patidar values his land above all else. Since boys invariably join their fathers on the farm they get little formal education. This will make it even harder to adapt to their loss of livelihood and culture. ■

thousands of displaced people. Some 30 million people depend directly or indirectly on the 1,312-km-long river and its valley, with its fertile farmland, historic temples and pilgrimage routes.

In 1986, a year after the World Bank lent $450 million to construct Sardar Sarovar, NBA commissioned a series of impact assessment studies that, it claims, exposed crucial flaws in the official cost-benefit analyses for the entire project. But at the heart of NBA's campaign is the apparent lack of resettlement provision for oustees. With mounting international support, NBA was able to force a review of the Narmada project. In 1991 the World Bank commissioned an independent inquiry, whose report essentially endorsed the NBA claims, saying that there had been "no proper appraisal" of the project's impact. Two years later, in an unprecedented about-turn, the World Bank withdrew from the scheme.

In 1994, India's Supreme Court upheld a case presented by NBA, freezing all construction on the Narmada dams until the state governments carried out adequate impact assessments. NBA insists that there must be no displacement if there are no realistic plans for resettlement. With the exception of Sardar Sarovar, none of the dam projects had any resettlement plans, says the organization. NBA is adamant that it is not opposed to the development that the dams promise. It is also looking for a compromise solution, calling for the final height of the dams to be reduced. The lower the final height, the fewer people will be forced to move to make way for the reservoirs and the less land will be lost.

Rally in the valley

Although it now seems unlikely that NBA's actions will stop the dams, the organization has brought the issue of resettlement to the fore. In 1998 the Madhya Pradesh government set up a task force to look at resettlement possibilities. It found that not only was there no land in Madhya Pradesh to house oustees but that the land promised by Gujarat either did not exist, or was of too poor quality. Madhya Pradesh has now called for a new evaluation. The state of Gujarat, however, has dug in its heels. Not only did it refuse to allow the independent World Commission on Dams, set up by the World Bank (see page 10), to visit the Sardar Sarovar site, it also challenged the Supreme Court's earlier ruling. In February 1999, after a four-year moratorium, the Supreme Court reversed its earlier decision, allowing construction to begin again at Sardar Sarovar, adding a further 5 metres to the 80 metres already built.

NBA has now reinforced its struggle, organizing a series of passive sit-ins and hunger strikes. At the end of July last year Arundhati Roy organized a "Rally in the Valley", marching with 400 other public figures and supporters from village to village in the affected area. An estimated 10,000 oustees joined the rally in the fertile Nimad region of Madhya Pradesh, where the local farmers will lose their land if construction goes ahead. And when the monsoon rains began in August 1999, Medha Patkar and other NBA members took up positions in the village of Domkhedi, refusing to move as the flood waters rose up to their shoulders. Police in boats finally removed them. At the end of last year, Arundhati Roy published a closely-documented essay entitled "The Greater Common Good" in *Outlook* magazine, criticizing the Narmada Valley project both in principle and in its application.

As the mud flies between NBA and supporters of the project, the withdrawal of the World Bank could have unpredictable effects in the longer term. With most international aid programmes now unwilling to be associated with the dams, the developers are looking for private sector funding. This could be much harder to influence than an institution such as the World Bank, which has a "worthy" image to protect. ■

In Khoteswar, a temple still used in 1998 has since been submerged, a direct consequence of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

© Karen Robinson/Panos Pictures, London

USA: COMMERCIALS IN THE CLASSROOM

◗ Mark Walsh

Channel One has survived a decade of criticism over a daily TV show for schools in the U.S., where advertisers are ready to pay premium rates to reach youthful audiences

Ten years ago, a commercial revolution began in U.S.classrooms. After a 1989 test run, Channel One debuted in the spring of 1990 in 400 secondary schools across the country. It was the brainchild of Christopher Whittle,a brash media entrepreneur from Tennessee who had built an empire by dreaming up new ways to expose Americans to advertising and marketing.

"Were this a perfect world, we would agree that government, not commercials, should provide this technology and programming," Mr.Whittle said at the time. He frequently quipped that students believed "Chernobyl is Cher's full name"—proof that they were in dire need of relevant current-events programming.

Channel One wasn't the first case of advertising in the schools. American students were accustomed to seeing athletic scoreboards sponsored by Coca-Cola or Pepsi, advertisements in yearbooks, and newspaper-in-education programmes. But the daily classroom news show for teenagers was something different, and it caused quite a stir. The basic offer was this: Channel One provided schools with a satellite dish, a videotape recorder, wiring, and a television monitor in each classroom to show the 12-minute daily programme, which includes two minutes of advertising. Schools signed a contract guaranteeing that they would show Channel One to most students virtually every school day.

12,000 schools

The schools could use the in-school video network for other purposes, such as producing their own local student news shows, or to run educational documentaries. Critics called it a bargain with the devil. Schools were ceding control of a small part of their class time, and providing advertisers with access to students' attention in unprecedented fashion, they said.

Many educators did fight the concept. Virtually every major education group in the United States passed resolutions opposing Channel One. Some states, such as New York, banned it outright in public schools while others threatened to withhold school funding for the two minutes per day schools gave over to advertisers.

But at the time, the United States was in the throes of an education reform movement that favoured decentralized control and school-based decision-making. And many local school boards and school principals decided they would accept the video equipment. Some found the news show informative at a time when few teenagers picked up a newspaper or tuned into network television news. And the commercials were rarely different from the ones students saw thousands of times watching television at home.

Before long, Whittle Communications had wired some 12,000 schools,and eight million students in U.S. middle and high schools were watching Channel One daily. Although Channel One became profitable, the classroom news show couldn't save Mr. Whittle's crumbling media empire. He sold Channel One in 1994 to K-III Communications Corp.,now known as Primedia Inc. Meanwhile, with the ground broken by Channel One, American companies and advertisers have come up with many new forms of commercial messages in and around schools:

◗ Major soda bottlers such as Pepsi and Coca-Cola vie for exclusive beverage contracts with school districts,so they can place logo-laden soda machines on campuses and share revenue with the schools.

◗ *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and *The New York Times* publish special newsmagazines for elementary and secondary school classrooms, most of which carry advertising.

◗ A mathematics workbook published by McGraw-Hill, a major textbook publisher, caused a stir last year because of its use of product trade names and logos in word problems. The publisher said it was trying to make the texts more relevant to students.

◗ In a venture modeled somewhat after Channel One, a California company called ZapMe! Corp. provides schools with a package of free computers and an Internet connection as long as they agree to have students use them at least four hours a day. ZapMe! carries advertising targeted at students.

◗ Associate editor, *Education Week* (USA)

Channel One's news content comes in for heavy scrutiny. The tone of its daily show has see-sawed over the years between an emphasis on hard news and serious topics and what some educators derided as a too light, pop culture orientation. In recent years, however, the show has emphasized social issues of interest to teenagers and world reports. "I think that if you went back to the early 1990s what you would have seen is more of a headline approach," said Paul Folkemer, Channel One's executive vice president for education. "Our present strategy has a more in-depth look, with more of a teaching side to it."

The January 4, 2000, programme was fairly typical. Fresh into the new millennium, Channel One offered an extended report on the surprise resignation of Russian President Boris Yeltsin. It interviewed national security experts and dug up video of a 1997 visit to Russia by its own correspondent, including shots of Russian citizens selling their belongings in the streets. Other elements of the day's show included a pop quiz, a regular feature designed to engage students in the classroom, a report about the conclusion of an airliner hijacking in India, and two commercial breaks. Among the advertisements on this day were one for Juicy Fruit gum and two "public service announcements": an anti-drug message and one warning young people about potential dangers on the Internet.

"I have a role every day in the discussion of what we are going to air. I've tried to link all of our materials to national education standards," explains Dr. Folkemer, a former school principal. Dr. Folkemer considers himself Channel One's equivalent of a school district's assistant superintendent for curriculum, who typically oversees what is taught and which books and tests are used. The United States has no federally mandated curriculum standards, but groups for virtually all school subjects have developed voluntary standards. Dr. Folkemer has emphasized several initiatives that show up on Channel One. *Teaching the News*, for example, helps educators identify which subjects the Channel One news report will relate to on a given day.

Another initiative is *The Power of One*, which includes a series of stories that stress the difference that one individual can make. Last November, for example, Channel One featured a Virginia high school student who started a project to raise money to provide goats for families in strife-torn Rwanda. A Channel One reporter, Tracy Smith, traveled to Rwanda last year to report on the receiving end of the charitable project. Her report also explained the background to the conflict among Rwandan ethnic groups. Such foreign reporting forays are a staple of ▶

This Colorado school bus carries advertising as well as children.

© Shock/Gamma Liaison, Paris

Channel One, and some observers give the network credit for its emphasis on world news. In 1998, *Brill's Content*, a national magazine of media criticism, lauded Channel One for providing a more substantive report on the Indonesian political crises than NBC Nightly News, one of the major national news programmes, did on the same day.

But William Hoynes, a professor of sociology at Vassar College, criticizes the news content. An analysis of 36 programmes found that only about 20 per cent of airtime was devoted to coverage of news stories, with the rest of the time filled with a news quiz, weather, sports and Hollywood gossip. His research, conducted with a media expert, concluded that the channel's "real function is not journalistic but commercial." Hoynes also criticizes the channel's reporting style. "The anchors are cast as adventurers who travel the world for a good story," he said. "It focuses the news and the drama on the individual personalities instead of the issues and events. . . Channel One news serves as a promotional vehicle for itself and for youth culture and style," Hoynes added. This approach, not incidentally, promotes a friendly environment for advertising, he believes.

Reaching the teen market

Without a doubt, the presence of advertising remains the most controversial aspect of Channel One. The advertising debate had appeared to quieten down until early 1999, when several prominent American conservatives joined with longtime liberal critics of commercialism in schools. This coalition successfully lobbied a U.S. Senate committee to hold an oversight hearing on school commercialism that was focused almost entirely on Channel One.

Although there was no serious prospect of federal legislation on the issue, the May 1999 hearing was nevertheless a dramatic confrontation between Channel One's proponents and its legion of critics. Despite their decision to co-operate, liberals and conservatives have distinct concerns. The latter tend to focus on the contents of the programme, objecting to a variety of pop culture references such as a riff of music from the shock rocker Marilyn Manson or ads for R-rate movies, restricted because they contain sex or violence. Phyllis Schlafly, the president of the Eagle Forum, and a prominent conservative activist, called Channel One a "devious device to enable advertisers to circumvent parents."

The liberal attack on Channel One is from the perspective of consumers versus advertisers and big business, arguing that corporate advertisers should not be able to buy access to children's minds in school and that public schools should not abdicate control of class time to commercial interests. Ralph Nader, an American liberal icon, called Channel One "the most brazen marketing ploy in the history of the United States." The programme conveys a message of materialism, Mr. Nader said, and it "corrupts the integrity of schools and degrades the moral authority of schools and teachers." A year ago, Commercial Alert, a consumer organization affiliated with Mr. Nader, wrote to all the major advertisers on Channel One, urging them to end their sponsorship of the show.

The letters cited four main concerns:

"Our decision to advertise on Channel One was made only after a thorough review of the programming and its benefits to schools and school children"

Channel One forces children to watch the ads; it wastes valuable class time (in 1998, two researchers asserted that the two minutes of time devoted to commercials in Channel One's 12,000 schools was costing those schools some $300 million in lost time); it wastes taxpayers' dollars for education; and its content is under the control of its producers and not of parents or elected school boards. Most advertisers did not even respond to the letter, much less agree to drop their advertising. One company that did respond was Nabisco, which has advertised BubbleYum gum on the show. "Our decision to advertise on Channel One was made only after a thorough review of the programming and its benefits to schools and school children," the company wrote to Commercial Alert. "We do not believe evidence supports the charge that two minutes of daily advertising is putting our children's future at risk."

Advertisers such as Nabisco, Pepsi, Proctor & Gamble (with ads for Clearasil skin cream and Pringles potato chips), movie studios and the U.S. Armed Forces (for recruitment) pay premium rates (up to $200,000 for a 30-second spot) to reach Channel One's audience of eight million students. As the channel's advertisement to media buyers puts it, the show "is viewed by more teens than any other programme on television." Another industry advertisement refers to the channel as "the smartest place to reach tweens." Tweens is a Madison Avenue term for children 9-14 years old, a coveted demographic group. "Many children and especially teens are difficult for advertisers to reach," said Gary Ruskin, the director of Commercial Alert. "So the product hawkers are going where the kids are—where they are forced to be, in school."

New outlets

Channel One executives paint the advertising critics as a loud but small group that is pushing tired old arguments. "I don't know of anyone who is an advocate of simply commercialism," said Andy Hill, Channel One's president of programming. "The debate has been about two minutes of advertising and not about 10 minutes of good programming. Our critics tend not to be people in schools." Roy Lewis, a teacher in California, asserted that "what Channel One does so beautifully is provide background." But critics point out that there are other ways of bringing news into the school: CNN has developed an ad-free newscast for the classroom, but the cable station does not offer schools the equipment to go along with it.

Now Channel One's journalism is moving beyond the classroom. It recently began submitting twice-monthly reports to a morning television news show on CBS television. It has similar projects in the works for the MTV cable channel and a new women's cable network called Oxygen. Channel One is developing a media literacy curriculum for schools, and its website, which has long supplemented the TV show with additional information, quizzes, and the like, is getting an infusion of spending.

Primedia, which publishes such magazines as *Seventeen*, *Soap Opera Digest*, and *Automobile*, does not disclose revenues for Channel One. But Simba Information Inc., which tracks spending on educational media, estimates that Channel One and a sister unit that sells documentaries to schools had revenues of $118.5 million in 1999.

Primedia recently sold off some of its educational properties, including the venerable American classroom magazine, *My Weekly Reader*. There has been speculation that the company wanted to divest itself of Channel One as well, but the company has a new chief executive officer, Tom Rogers, who came from the NBC television network. Mr. Rogers seems to be intent on keeping Channel One and fitting it into a media future in which television, the Internet, and education are expected to merge in new forms. ■

- **www.channelone.com**
- **For criticism of Channel One and other forms of school commercialism, see www.obligation.org**

Focus

Languages: conflict or coexistence?

Contents

18 **6,000 languages: an embattled heritage**
Ranka Bjeljac-Babic

19 **Zaparo's lost secrets**
Carlos Andrade

20 **Winners and losers**

1 | War of words

23 **Can English be dethroned?**
Roland J.-L.Breton

24 **The trials of a Gikuyu writer**
Mwangi wa Mutahi

26 **Berber's shining star**
Jasmina Sopova

27 **A Basque writer leaps into translation**
Interview with Bernardo Atxaga

2 | Concordant voices

29 **In praise of multilingualism**
Interview with Joseph Poth

30 **Defenders of diversity**

32 **Shuara, a language that refused to die**
Marcos Almeida

33 **India:bursting at the linguistic seams**
Amitav Choudhry

35 **Users are choosers**
Jean-Louis Calvet

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From time immemorial,languages have come to birth, lived and died with the societies that engendered them.Today, however, they are dying out at unprecedented speed.As a result of what have been called "language wars", the great majority of the 6,000 languages spoken in the world today may disappear in the foreseeable future. Linguistic diversity is imperilled, and with it a part of the human heritage, for language is the cornerstone of cultural diversity, which is in its turn a mainstay in the preservation of biodiversity (pages 18-19).

There are many reasons for language wars in which English at the world level (pages 23-24) and other "major" regional languages gain ground at the expense of "minority" languages. But the big battalions do not always win,as the struggles to preserve Basque, Berber and Gikuyu illustrate (pages 24-28).

At the same time, coexistence between languages can and is being fostered (page 29). Through international co-operation to promote multilingualism, especially in education (pages 30-31); through specific national policies, as in India (pages 33-34); and through grassroots initiatives like that of the Ecuadorian Shuar, who have used the rebirth of their language as a springboard into the modern world (pages 32-33).

Also in Ecuador, the story of the Zaparo (pages 19 and 22) shows the other side of the coin. The Zaparo did not mobilize until late in the day, and their language now seems doomed to disappear and with it their very existence as an ethnic group. As the last article in this Focus section reveals (pages 35-36),the fate of a language depends ultimately on the commitment of its users. Meanwhile, the disappearance of minority languages may be accompanied by the emergence of new hybrid tongues or variants spawned by the diversification of dominant languages. ■

6,000 languages: an embattled heritage

Ranka Bjeljac-Babic

Ten languages die out each year. International action is needed to counter this erosion of cultural diversity

© Philippe Franchini, Paris

Are the vast majority of languages doomed to die out in the near future? Specialists reckon that no language can survive unless 100,000 people speak it. Half of the 6,000 or so languages in the world today are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people and a quarter by less than 1,000. Only a score are spoken by hundreds of millions of people.

The death of languages is not a new phenomenon. Since languages diversified, at least 30,000 (some say as many as half a million) of them have been born and disappeared, often without leaving any trace.Languages usually have a relatively short life span as well as a very high death rate. Only a few, including Basque, Egyptian, Chinese, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Persian, Sanskrit and Tamil, have lasted more than 2,000 years.

Nothing stays longer
in our souls
than the language we
inherit.
It liberates our
thoughts
unfolds our mind
and softens our life.

From a poem in the Sami language (Sweden)

Minority languages sidelined

What is new, however, is the speed at which they are dying out. Europe's colonial conquests caused a sharp decline in linguistic diversity, eliminating at least 15 per cent of all languages spoken at the time. Over the last 300 years, Europe has lost a dozen, and Australia has only 20 left of the 250 spoken at the end of the 18th century. In Brazil, about 540 (three-quarters of the total) have died out since Portuguese colonization began in 1530.

The rise of nation-states, whose territorial unity was closely linked to their linguistic homogeneity, has also been decisive in selecting and consolidating national languages and sidelining others. By making great efforts to establish an official language in education, the media and the civil service, national governments have deliberately tried to eliminate minority languages.

This process of linguistic standardization has been boosted by industrialization and scientific progress, which have imposed new methods of communication that are swift, straightforward and practical. Language diversity came to be seen as an obstacle to trade and the spread of knowledge. Monolingualism became an ideal, and at the end of the 19th century the notion of a universal language was born—a return to Latin was even considered—which gave rise to a spate of artificial languages, the first of which was Volapük. The one that gained the widest acceptance and has survived longest is Esperanto.

More recently, the internationalization of financial markets, the dissemination of information by electronic media and other aspects of globalization have intensified the threat to "small" languages. A language not on the Internet is a language that "no longer exists" in the modern world. It is out of the game.It is not used in business.

The rate of language extinction has now reached the unprecedented worldwide level of 10 every year. Some people predict that 50 to 90 per cent of today's spoken languages will disappear during this century. Their preservation is an urgent matter.

The effects of the death of languages are serious for several reasons. First of all, it is possible that if we all ended up speaking the same language, our brains would lose some of their natural capacity for linguistic inventiveness. We would never be able to plumb the origins of

Lecturer and specialist in the psychology of language at the University of Poitiers (France)

human language or resolve the mystery of "the first language". As each language dies, a chapter of human history closes.

Multilingualism is the most accurate reflection of multiculturalism. The destruction of the first will inevitably lead to the loss of the second. Imposing a language without any links to a people's culture and way of life stifles the expression of their collective genius. A language is not only the main instrument of human communication. It also expresses the world vision of those who speak it, their imagination and their ways of using knowledge.

If Guarani comes to an end, who will pray that the world won't come to an end?

Guarani saying (Paraguay)

Dying whispers of traditional cultures

To grasp how differently each tongue reflects the world, one only needs to list the words that crop up in every language with exactly the same meaning, words like I, you, us, who, what, no, all, one, two, big, long, small, woman, man, eat, see, hear, sun, moon, star, water, fire, hot,cold, white, black, night, land. There are about 300 at the most.

The threat to multilingualism is similar to the threat to biodiversity. Not just because most languages are like disappearing "species", but because there is an intrinsic and causal link between biological diversity and cultural diversity. Like plant and animal species, endangered languages are confined to small areas. More than 80 per cent of countries that have great biological diversity are also places with the greatest number of endemic languages. This is because when people adapt to their environment, they create a special stock of knowledge about it which is mirrored in their language and often only there. Many of the world's endangered plant and animal species today are known only to certain peoples whose languages are dying out. As they die, they take with them all the traditional knowledge about the environment.

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit set up machinery to combat shrinking biodiversity. Now it is time for a Rio summit to tackle languages. The need to protect languages began to be appreciated in the middle of the 20th century, when language rights were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 2). Since then, a number of instruments have been adopted, and projects have been launched (see pages 30-31) to safeguard what is now considered a heritage of humanity. These laws and initiatives may not prevent languages from dying out, but at least they will slow down the process and encourage multilingualism. ■

Zaparo's lost secrets

Carlos Andrade

The hundred or so Zaparo Indians who live in the Ecuadorian Amazon are racing against time to save their language, land and culture

'My name is Manari, which in my language, Zaparo, means a hefty lizard that lives in the forest. But if we want to register ourselves for official purposes, we're obliged to put down Spanish names. So I'm also called Bartolo Ushigua. The Zaparo used to be one of the Amazon's greatest Indian peoples. Our shamans were very powerful because they knew the medicinal secrets of more than 500 plants."[1]

Twenty-five-year-old Manari is the son of the last shaman, who died three years ago, and chief of the 115 Zaparo who live in the Amazonian province of Pastaza, along the banks of the Conambo River 240 kilometres south of Quito. The river has brought all the misfortunes that have speeded up the decline of the Zaparo—settlers, disease, the rubber boom, slavery, wars, oil drilling and "the modern world".

"When the white rubber traders came to our forest," says Manari, "they took away our people to work as slaves and to sell them off like chattels. They also brought with them diseases that our shamans didn't know how to cure. So most of our people died."

"The Zaparo are officially extinct in this country," announced an article published in Ecuador nearly 10 years ago. But today they are still fighting to survive, though the number of threats are more than they can count—in their language, numbers only go up to three. ▶

Continued page 22

1.Manari's words are taken from a letter sent two years ago asking the cultural attaché at Ecuador's embassy in Peru to intervene so that the Ecuadorian Zaparo could cross the frontier and meet the Zaparo of Peru.

Ecuadorian linguist and journalist

Winners and losers

Half the world's population uses a total of eight languages in daily life, while one sixth of the world's languages are spoken in New Guinea alone

The linguistic heritage is very unevenly distributed. According to estimates made by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), which campaigns for preservation of the least-known tongues, only three per cent of the world's 6,000 languages are used in Europe, whereas half of them are spoken in the Asia-Pacific region, with the top prize going to New Guinea (the Indonesian territory of Irian Jaya plus Papua New Guinea), which is home to one sixth of the world's languages.

Linguistic diversity does not match population density: 96 per cent of languages are spoken by only four per cent of the world's population and over 80 per cent are endemic, i.e. confined to one country. Only about 20 languages are spoken by hundreds of millions of people in several countries.

Although the figures vary according to the method of counting, the *Millennium Family Encyclopaedia* (Dorling Kindersley, London, 1997), estimates that around half the people in the world use in everyday life one of the planet's eight most widespread languages: Chinese (1.2 billion speakers), English (478 million), Hindi (437 million), Spanish (392 million), Russian (284 million), Arabic (225 million), Portuguese (184 million) and French (125 million). SIL and Linguasphere Observatory (see page 31) provide comparable figures, by adding to those who speak a language as a mother tongue those for whom it is a "second language". (see p. 21).

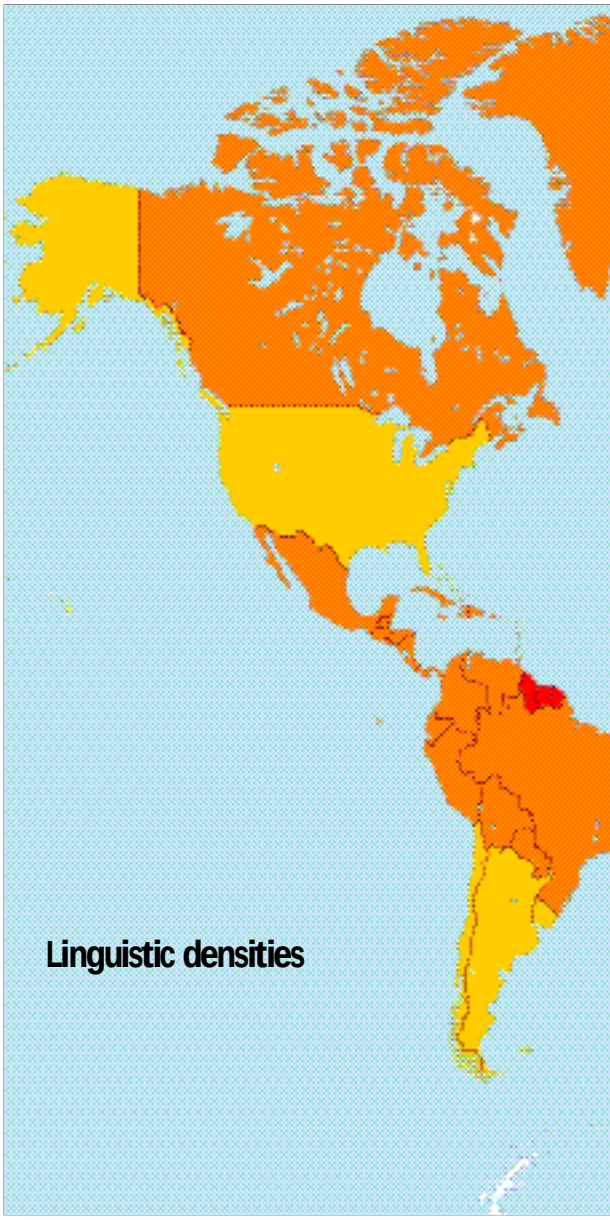
Ten languages die out every year

This imbalance leads specialists to forecast that 95 per cent of all living languages will die out during the next century. At present, 10 languages disappear every year somewhere in the world. Some go so far as to claim a language dies out every two weeks. The rate of disappearance is especially high in areas where linguistic diversity is greatest.

In Africa, more than 200 languages have fewer than 500 speakers each and may soon die out. The minimum number of speakers to ensure survival is put at 100,000.

In North America, the biggest threats are to indigenous and Creole languages. With the exceptions of Navajo, Cree and Ojibwa, the 200 Amerindian tongues which have survived until now in the United States and Canada are endangered.

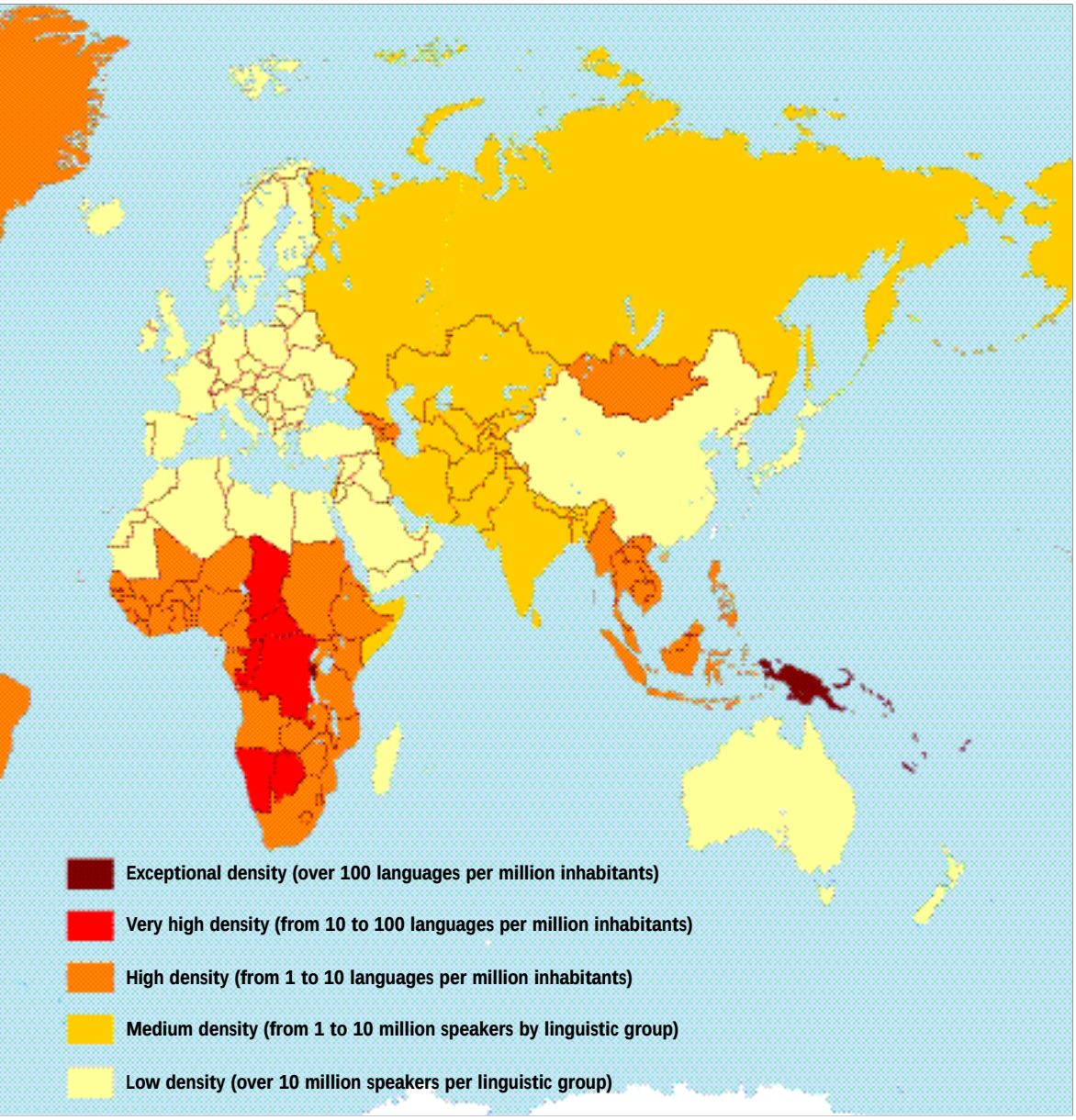
Between a third and a half of Latin America's 500 Amerindian languages are in danger, with the highest rate of extinction predicted in Brazil, where most languages are spoken by very small communities.



The languages of Southeast Asia are each spoken by relatively large numbers of people, and the future of about 40 of the 600 to 700 languages there will depend largely on government policies.

On the other hand, only six languages out of north-east Asia's 47 have any real chance of survival in the face of Russian. Twenty are "nearly extinct", eight are "seriously endangered" and 13 are "endangered". The first group are spoken by only a dozen people at most. The second group are more widely used but are not being passed down to children. The third category includes tongues spoken by some children but fewer and fewer, according to the forthcoming UNESCO *Red Book on Endangered Languages: Europe and North-east Asia*.

In Europe, where the number of languages varies by a factor of two according to the criteria used to define them, 123 languages are spoken, including nine which are nearly extinct, 26 seriously endangered and 38 endangered, according to the UNESCO book. ■



Source:R. J. L. Breton

The world's top ten languages by number of speakers*

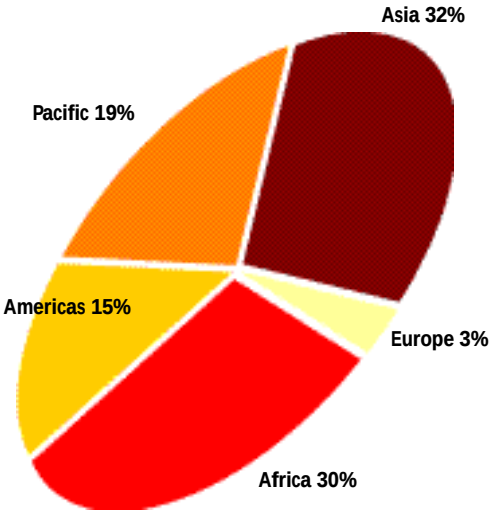
(millions)

English, Mandarin Chinese	1 000
Hindi (with Urdu)	900
Spanish	450
Russian	320
Arabic, Bengali	250
Portuguese	200
Malay+Indonesian	160
Japanese	130
French,German	125
Punjabi, Yue Chinese	85

* Primary (mother tongue) and alternate (second) language

Source: Linguasphere Observatory/Observatoire linguistique, 2000

Geographical distribution of the world's languages



Source: Summer Institute of Linguistics

For the last three years young Zaparo led by Manari and supported by the Pastaza Indigenous Peoples' Organization (OPIP) have been engaged in a battle to save their culture and traditional way of life as hunters and gatherers. They have three main objectives: to keep alive the Zaparo language, to clearly mark out Zaparo territory and to arrange a meeting with Zaparo who live over the border in Peru. The results so far have not been very encouraging.

The last shaman

They have not been able to meet their Peruvian kinsfolk, from whom they have been separated since a war between Ecuador and Peru nearly 60 years ago. The journey can take a month when the river is low and up to three months during a flood. It was only a couple of months ago that someone gave the Zaparo a small motor-boat. Diplomatic contacts would also have to be made to enable the Ecuadorian Zaparo to journey into disputed territory.

"We're Ecuadorians," says Manari, "but once upon a time the Zaparo were a single people living in a single forest. So we're not used to getting permission to cross borders or search for our people."

The plan is for a group of four children, already chosen, to go and meet the shamans on the Peruvian side who will teach them their methods. This is crucial if the community is to survive, because when the last shaman died three years ago, the Zaparo lost their only source of knowledge about their traditions, the healing power of plants and the secrets of the jungle. "Since my father died, there's been no one to look after us, and many people are ill and dying," says Manari.

Traditional knowledge and the remedies of shamans can only be handed down through language. Preserving the Zaparo language is more than just a cultural matter. The physical survival of the community itself is at stake. And the plan to save it is a race against time because only five very old people still speak Zaparo and they live several days' journey from each other. One of them is Sasiko Takiauri, who was born about 70 years ago on the banks of the Conambo. "In those days," he says, "everyone spoke Zaparo. I didn't learn Quechua until I was 18."

The story of Zaparo is similar to that of other indigenous languages in the Ecuadorian-Peruvian region. Zaparo forms part of the Zaparoan linguistic group, together with Arabela, Iquito and Taushniro, and is related to other languages that have already disappeared (Konambo, Gae and Andoa). It gave way to Quechua relatively recently. It was about 60 years ago, according to Sasiko, that the Zaparo began identifying with the culture of the Quechua Indians through frequent trading with the Quechua village of Sarayacu.

These days, Sasiko's grandchildren and great-grandchildren who live in the Zaparo villages of Llanchama, Cocha, Jandia Yacu and Mazaramu, are taught Quechua and Spanish under a bilingual curriculum decreed by the government. The teachers, secondary school graduates who do not originate from the villages where they teach, are paid $4 a month and openly say they will leave the region as soon as they can. Most of their pupils do not speak Spanish and learn Quechua almost entirely in oral form.

"We don't like asking for help," says Manari, "but since there are now only a few of us left, we're afraid it's the end of the road." Meanwhile, the old folk, led by Sasiko, are once again giving children names in the vernacular—such as Newa, Toaro, Mukutzagua (Partridge, Parrot, Oriole)—to show the world the Zaparo have not died out. ■

My language, my valued possession
My language, my object of affection
My language, my precious adornment.

From a Maori poster (New Zealand)

Zaparo Indians pictured in a book by the 19th-century Italian explorer Gaetano Osculati.

© Gaetano Osculati and Mythical Amazonia, a documentary produced by URIHI, Milan

nauta@speed.net.ec
Postal address of OPIP :
Organización de Pueblos Indígenas del Pastaza
General Villamil s/n y Teniente Hugo Ortiz
Puyo, Equateur

1 War of words

Can English be dethroned?

Roland J.-L. Breton

Major languages other than English are spoken by over half the people on the planet. What can be done to give them more clout

© Philippe Franchini, Paris

There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me.

New Testament, I Corinthians, XIV, 10 and 11

Back in 1919, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson managed to have the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War between Germany and the Allies, written in English as well as French. Since then, English has taken root in diplomacy and gradually in economic relations and the media. The language now seems set to have a monopoly as the worldwide medium of communication.

As the 21st century begins, faster economic globalization is going hand in hand with the growing use of English. More and more people are being encouraged to use or send messages in English rather than in their own language. Many do not mind. They see this as part of the unavoidable trend towards worldwide uniformity and a means whereby a growing number of people can communicate directly with each other.

From this point of view, the spread of English may be seen as a positive development which saves resources and makes cultural exchange easier. After all, it might be said, the advance of English is not aimed at killing off local languages but is simply a means of reaching a wider audience.

Perhaps. But accepting that as the last word ignores the deep-rooted ties between individual freedom and political power, between the linguistic, social and economic mechanisms which in every society underpin relations between people and groups and between culture and communities. A person makes a mark through his or her ability to use the most useful language or languages. And over several generations, the most useful language eliminates the others.

Cultural imperialism is much more subtle than economic imperialism, which is itself less tangible and visible than political and military imperialism, whose excesses are obvious and easy to denounce. It would be wrong to say that the world domination of English is something deliberately organized and supported by the Anglo-Saxon powers, hand in glove with political initiatives or the penetration of the world economy by their transnational firms. The "language war" has very seldom been regarded as a war and has never, anywhere, been declared.

The military, diplomatic, political and economic strategies of the major powers can be studied and criticized, but linguistic strategies seem to be inconspicuous and tacit, even innocent or non-existent. The history of the past century has obliged many powers to take a more modest attitude to language, but has it taught them to stand up to domination by a single language?

Many years after the founding in 1945 of the Arab League, whose current 22 member states have 250 million people, the countries which share a French linguistic heritage broke new ground by creating a joint policy. In order to promote linguistic, economic and political co-operation, they set up the International Organization of French-Speaking Countries, which (like the Commonwealth) embraces more than 50 countries with over 500 million inhabitants.

Since 1991, there have been conferences of Dutch-speakers from eight or more communities ▶

Geolinguist and emeritus professor at the University of Paris VIII

representing some 40 million people, as well as Ibero-American summits, which every two years bring together more than 20 countries (350 million inhabitants). Turkish-speaking summits have been held biennially since 1992, with delegates from six independent countries (120 million people) of Europe, Central Asia and small ethnic communities elsewhere. Since 1996, the Association of Portuguese-speaking countries has brought together people from seven countries (200 million people).

Pockets of resistance

Will unco-ordinated resistance by the world's most widely-used languages be enough to cope with the threat of cultural uniformity? Perhaps not, since each language has its own geographical sphere in which it is used with varying degrees of competence. If you add up the number of speakers of the world's dozen most-used languages, you come up with a figure of more than three billion—half of humanity—which easily surpasses the two billion for whom English is more or less the official language (the Commonwealth and the United States). Backed by a concerted strategy, these major languages would surely make headway in international institutions.

It is not just the future of the world's major languages that is at stake. Further down the scale are 100 or so tongues officially recognized by governments or sub-national regions, such as the constitutional languages of India and the languages of the Russian nationalities. These languages have their place and a right to defend it.At the bottom of the scale are thousands of sometimes struggling languages variously called native, minority, communal or ethnic tongues. Most are in danger of disappearing. They are spoken by some 300 million people.

Will minor languages die out, as some predict? Yes, because the best way to kill off a language is to teach another one.The monopoly that about 100 national languages have on education makes it inevitable that languages not taught in schools will be confined to the home and to folklore and eventually be pushed out of nurturing cultural environments.

Language murder or "linguicide", whether it is carried out intentionally or not, is one of the basic tools of ethnocide, of the deculturation of peoples which has always been perpetrated by colonization and is still the semi-official aim of governments which do not recognize the rights of their native ethnic minorities. As local languages are increasingly excluded from education systems, "linguicide" is speeding up.

The language issue in the 21st century raises two questions. How can widely-used or national languages resist the encroachment of English? And how can minority languages in danger of extinction be saved and gain access to development? ■

The trials of a Gikuyu writer

Mwangi wa Mutahi

Kenyan novelist Mwangi wa Mutahi is now an ardent defender of his native language but he was once as hostile to it as some of his own teachers

© Mwangi wa Mutahi

I was born into a peasant family in 1963, the year Kenya gained independence. My sole language, as a child, was Gikuyu. It was the language in which we sang songs, narrated stories, exchanged riddles or merely chatted, while around us adults conversed in proverb-loaded exchanges. To the best of my recollection, Gikuyu, spoken by about 22 per cent of the Kenyan population, was the only language we were taught during the first three years at school, although I had learnt the English alphabet in nursery school. In our fourth year, English was reintroduced, and we had to bid farewell to Gikuyu. From there on, speaking or writing in our mother tongue was forbidden by school rules. Speaking it exposed us to beating and punishment, and in some cases temporary expulsion. The resentment with which Gikuyu and other African languages were treated in my school was almost universal in Kenyan primary schools. In the mind of my educators, African languages were not actually languages but primitive vernaculars.

For a while, before and after my college studies, I taught in secondary school, an experience which gave me the opportunity to show my own attitudes towards African languages.Would I be able to nurture Gikuyu in my students, or would I worship foreign languages

Mwangi wa Mutahi's novel Ngoima is distributed worldwide by Mau Mau Research Center, P. O. Box 190048, South Richmond Hill Station, Jamaica, New York 11435, USA.

while despising my own? Not surprisingly, I turned out to be as good a disciple of the colonial heritage as my fellow teachers who worked hard to enforce the school rules. I found myself beating and punishing students whenever and wherever they attempted to speak in their mother tongue. Like many before me, I found myself adopting the colonial doctrine according to which speaking and learning African languages stunt the student's ability to learn. And because the national examinations were in English, students were easily convinced that they needed to master this language in order to excel.

Decades after acquiring political independence, the colonial system of education remains intact. No significant policy changes in the teaching of Kenya's languages—the country counts about 40—have been made. With the exception of Kiswahili, proclaimed by the late leader Jomo Kenyatta as an official language along with English, the government tends to look upon local languages as a threat to national unity. Emphasis is still put on excelling in English-language examinations, and plenty of African educators uphold this system. It is the route to prestige, to potential studies and jobs, locally and abroad.

Writer's block

For me, the turning point came at the age of 32, when I sat down to write my first novel. At the time I was living in the United States, working as a research scientist. In writing *Ngoima*, I wished to portray the independent Kenyan government in its true neo-colonial colours. I wanted to write for an audience of peasants, workers and dispossessed people. My story exposes issues of corruption and neglect in the health care system through a woman who runs into complications during her pregnancy.

I began writing in English, but after the first two paragraphs I realized that the message that I wanted to deliver, in my mind, was in Gikuyu. This language that I had grown up speaking at home was more deeply rooted in my mind than I had thought. As the story unfolded and I tried to write dialogue, I stumbled again. Was it not false to have my two main characters, both peasant farmers, speak in English? Both were at home in the Gikuyu language and culture. By this time, the writing of *Ngoima* was at a standstill.

Several months later, without having picked up the manuscript again, I had the opportunity to return home to Kenya, where I spent time among the kind of people I knew when I was growing up. In a mysterious manner, this visit home rekindled my writing of *Ngoima*. It was as if I had the opportunity of conversing in person with my two fictional characters. At the beginning of 1997, I started *Ngoima* again, this time in Gikuyu. My thoughts were so clear that in two months I had completed the first draft of the novel.

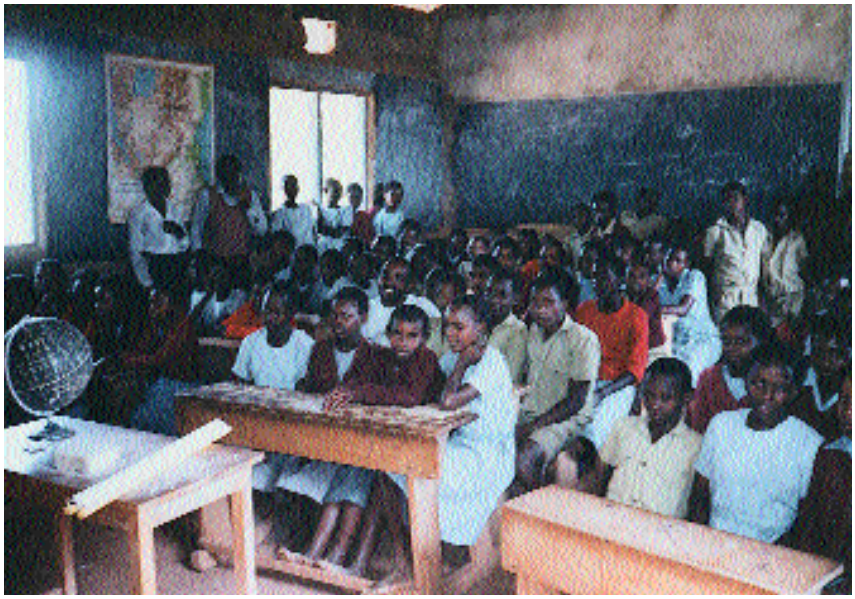
Gikuyu's written development has been stunted because there are not enough people writing in it. New words, terms and spellings have lagged behind other more widely spoken tongues. I ran into these difficulties throughout the writing of my novel but found inspiration in two other writers (Gakaara and Ngugi) who had chosen to write in Gikuyu before me. My book started selling in February 1999. My father, a peasant whose reading for most of his life had been confined to the Bible and hymns, told me that reading the book had been an "educational experience" for him. In following the characters' lives, he had also gained a better understanding of some of the social and economic issues facing his community.

A way to empowerment

The way *Ngoima* has been received is a small testimony that African languages are well and truly alive, even though publishers rarely accept manuscripts in them and English continues to be equated with national and international recognition. Although intellectuals and writers have taken a firm stand in defence of all Kenyan languages, their real bedrock of support is found amongst peasants and workers. They are the ones who have kept the languages alive and evolving. They are also the ones who are in dire need of reading materials in their mother tongue.

Our language is shedding tears all over because its own children are deserting it,
leaving it alone with its heavy burden.

From a Wolof poem by Useyno Gey Cosaan (Senegal)



© Mwangi wa Mutahi

Almost 40 years after independence, Kiswahili is the only African language taught in Kenyan schools, where exams are held in English. Above, the primary school attended by Mwangi wa Mutahi.

Writers and scholars from all regions of Africa gathered in Eritrea last January for a timely conference entitled "Against all Odds: African languages and literatures in the 21st century." It was the first conference of its kind on African soil, and was held in a country that has incorporated nine languages into its education and development agenda. I realized that we no longer have to fear that these languages are going to die, but rather push for ways in which they can be more widely spoken, read and translated. To some, writing in our own language is a betrayal of the elite system. I now see it as the way to break with neocolonial mentalities and empower the African people. Listening to writers in African languages from all over the continent was an inspiration to continue writing in Gikuyu, and I am now back home, busy at work on my new novel. ■

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Berber's shining star

Jasmina Sopova

Algerian singer Idir, an icon of Berber culture, uses his talent and guitar to fight for recognition of his mother tongue

"Txilek elli yi n taburt a vava invba / ccencen tizebgatin im a yelli ghriba" ("Please, father Inouba, open the door / Oh Ghriba girl, jingle your bracelets").

This refrain from a Kabyle song, "A Vava Inouva," rang out around the world in the early 1970s. Only 10 million or so Berbers, scattered over the Sahara and North Africa, could understand the words, but the song became an international hit.

Its young Algerian author, Hamid Cheriet, took the stage name of Idir ("he shall live" in Kabyle). "At a time when many epidemics were raging, new-born babies were called Idir to ward off bad luck," he says. "I chose it as a tribute to my culture, which I felt was threatened."

The Berber people, who mostly live in the mountains of Morocco and Algeria, speak Shawiya, Shilha, Kabyle, Mzab, Rifain, Tachelhit, Tuareg, Targi and Tarifit—all dialects of Tamazight, their native tongue, which is only recognized as a national language in Niger and Mali. In other places, Berber culture is ignored or even banned.

"They give me an Algerian passport, but I have to get permission to speak my own language," says Idir who, like the great Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, speaks up for "those who have no voice."

It never occurred to him to write in French, the language of the colonizer in which he did all his schooling, right up to a Ph.D in geology. Nor would he write in Arabic, which was taught as a second language in Algeria at the time.

"If I hadn't left my village, I'd never have spoken a word of Arabic," he says. "French and Arabic would allow me to get my message over to a wider audience, but I wouldn't know how to go about it or what to say."

Kabyle is a language of feelings and storytelling that flows naturally in poetry. It is also the language Idir has chosen to use. "To sing in Kabyle is a militant act, a way of expressing my rebellion, to say that I exist," he says. "If I'd had another profession, I would have found other ways to express the same demands."

There is no higher form of belonging to a people than to write in its language.

Heinrich Böll, German writer (1917-1985)

© Christian Ducasse/Gamma, Paris

Three languages for Algeria

The young Hamid Cheriet stumbled on singing by accident. He was born in 1955 in Aït Lahcêne, a remote mountain village in Kabylia. When he was nine, he went with his parents, sister and two brothers to Algiers. He attended a school run by Jesuits,where "being Kabyle meant you were part of some kind of dirty rebellion."

His natural sciences teacher taught him to strum a guitar. The future geologist started writing songs when he was 16 and warmed to the Kabyle singers. In 1973, he was asked to stand in at the last minute for the famous singer Nouara, who was unable to sing live on the Kabyle radio station in Algiers the lullaby he had written for her.

Idir was an immediate success. In 1975, he came to Paris to sign a contract with Pathé-Marconi and stayed in France. Ever since, this child of the Aurès mountains has celebrated Berber culture through music, thus extending a movement launched in the 1940s by major Algerian writers such as Jean Amrouche, Mouloud Mammeri, Mouloud Feraoun and Kateb Yacine.These pioneers had to use French to defend the Berber language if they were to get a hearing.As Amrouche put it:"I think and write in French, but I weep in Kabyle."

These days, Idir can go further than that. He advocates three languages for Algeria—Arab, Berber and French. "I want Algeria to take into account those who live on its land, who love the country and want to build it whatever their origin, language or religion," he says. "Islam shouldn't be

UNESCO Courier Journalist

an official religion. Religion is for believers, not governments. Arabic shouldn't have a special status just because it's the holy language of the Koran—especially classical Arabic, a sanitized tongue ordinary people can't understand. No language is more worthy than another, even if Berber is the oldest in terms of years. Fate has put these languages on this land and they must remain there."

Straddling two cultures

But for the time being, the Kabyle radio station that opened in 1948 is still the only media outlet in Algeria that uses Berber. It is also "the only one monitored by a censorship board," says Idir. Another French colonial legacy enables "you to get credits in Berber towards your baccalaureate graduation exam if you want." But the language is not part of the national curriculum. Since his election in April 1999, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has ruled out officially recognizing Berber, except after a referendum that Kabyles fear might backfire.

"It's a very dangerous idea. If such a vote took place, the result might well be 'no'," says Idir. "And if people say 'no' and reject a part of themselves, it would mean there's nothing we can do together. Except for a few fanatics, Berbers have never wanted independence." Their main demand is to be recognized as Berbers in their own country. "As a Kabyle, I want to be an Algerian through and through, not just partially, as I am today," he says.

A member of a minority group both in Algeria and in France, Idir has chosen to straddle cultures. "Identities", the title of his latest album, released by Sony at the end of last year,is far from bland.Singing with him are Ireland's Karen Matheson,Geoffrey Oryema from Uganda, Bretons Gilles Servat and Dan Ar Braz, the French-Galician Manu Chao, the French groups Gnawa Diffusion and Zebda (of Arab and Berber origins), all of them representatives of small cultures. He says they have allowed him to show that his own minority culture can be part of the wider world. ■

A Basque writer leaps into translation

"Euskera, ialgi adi kanpora" ("Basque language, step forward!"). Bernard Atxaga couldn't agree more with these words from a 16th-century Basque song.

Euskera—the Basque language—is spoken by some 600,000 people in the Spanish Basque country and Navarra, and another 80,000 in the Pyrénées Orientales department of southwestern France. Its origins are unknown, but it has probably existed for over 4,000 years.

Euskera's development was severely stunted during Spain's 40-year Franco dictatorship. Then came a major recovery. Euskera became a shared literary language, won recognition in 1979 as a joint official language with Spanish, and has been promoted through teaching.

Basque literature has also been flowering in the hands of a group of dedicated writers. One of them,Bernardo Atxaga, 48, who won the Spanish National Fiction Prize in 1989 for *Obabakoak*, is the first writer in the Basque language to achieve an international reputation.

Did the crackdown on Euskera during the Franco era really happen, or is it a myth?

It definitely happened, but it's also true that Euskera wasn't doing so well before the Civil War. Only a society that can afford to have doctors on call on Sundays, as it were, can afford to be concerned about saving its language. Before the war, the Basque country was confronted with terrible economic problems. Saving the language was a miracle only intellectuals and priests could have performed. My own case is typical, in a way. My grandfather and great-grandfather were carpenters. They had plenty of other things to worry about than preserving the language. I had a different kind of education from theirs, and it led me to ask why I was losing the use of a language that I had inherited. Political repression was fierce when I was a child. My brothers and I were beaten at school if we were caught speaking Euskera, the language we spoke at home. We knew we risked punishment if we spoke Basque in public.

With the coming of democracy, Basque autonomy and laws covering language, the situation changed totally within a few years. Today Basque is a compulsory school subject. What do you think about this?

English is compulsory too. This is a very complex issue. How far does a state have the right to ▶

◗ Among Bernardo Atxaga's works published in English are Lone Man (Harvill,1996) and Obabakoak (Vintage, 1993)

lay down the law in education? At present, all states do so. The education ministry plays a very important role in all countries, and the area of freedom in this sphere is very small. That being said, people who live in the Basque country and don't want to know anything about our language and culture aren't worthy of respect.

Do you think Euskera is used too much as a political pawn?

I really don't think so. I don't see how half a million people can cause much mischief for 35 million Spanish-speakers. On the contrary, I think there's been a lot of unfairness on the part of the majority group. National newspapers never print anything positive about our language. I think that's unjust.

I see translation as a physical leap. And the leap from Basque to Spanish is enormous

© L. Monier/Gamma, Paris

The unification of Euskera around an agreed version of the language continues to provoke controversy. Do you think standardization was necessary to enable Euskera to survive?

No language in the world can develop if it is fundamentally divided. All languages spin off variants, but at the same time they seek the common basis without which no language can perform its higher functions. You can't write books about architecture in pidgin, you have to use standard English, which is better qualified to express what you want to say. Among English-speakers, each community develops its own accent, its own way of using the language. You can be for or against this but, as a language teacher I know used to tell his Chicano students: "You can speak Spanglish if you like, but if you want to study law, you'll have to write in English." All languages that develop tend towards simplification. The same friend told me that language is nowhere more complex than in a village. In Chicago or New York, English is a lot simpler than it is in a remote village in Ireland.

You're completely bilingual. Why do you always write first in Euskera?

In literary terms, I'm used to thinking in Euskera. My stories or poems come to me in Euskera. It's my personal language, the one I use to jot down ideas in my notebooks, whether I'm in Stockholm or Madrid. I've become used to doing that. It's not much to do with ideology, it's just the way I work. Some writers need to go into a monastery and stay there for a few months without setting foot outside. My writing ritual involves writing first in Basque. I've come to the conclusion that it isn't very important. I might just as well write in some other language.

But you insist on translating your own work.

Some languages are quite close to each other, they're like tracings that match when you put one on top of another. This is the case with Catalan and Spanish. I see translation as a physical leap, and the jump from Catalan to Spanish is like stepping off the pavement onto the road. With Basque, the leap is enormous. And leaving it to a translator is a risky business. My translations are usually the work of several hands. Close friends of mine produce a rough draft and I extract a final version from it. It's very hard to explain what it's like being a bilingual writer. Sitting down to translate one's own work is a mind-bending experience. Every time I do it, the gap between the two texts seems to widen.

Yet your books are translated into other languages from Spanish. Isn't that a bit of a cop-out?

Not at all, because I believe that language is always part of a person's way of life, and for me Spanish is also a first language. There are two first languages in my life and luckily I can express myself just as well in both.

Do you consider yourself a nationalist?

I rather like Spain. I'm not in favour of political independence. I don't think Spain's a bad society or a bad country. You can be part of it and have a critical eye. ■

Interview by Lucia Iglesias Kuntz,
UNESCO Courier journalist

Language is power. . . . Language can be used as a means of changing reality.

Adrienne Rich, U.S. writer (1929-)

2| Concordant voices

In praise of multilingualism

We ought to promote trilingualism and save 'small languages' by teaching them, says linguist Joseph Poth

Is there a link between language policy and the culture of peace?

Yes, they're directly connected. When a minority mother tongue comes under attack, its users feel uncomfortable and experience an inner conflict. And when people aren't at peace with themselves, they can't be at peace with others. Languages are still the only tools which allow us to communicate—to relate to and understand each other—whether by writing, speaking or through the Internet. This idea of focusing on languages as instruments of dialogue to tackle intolerance and violence has been the driving force behind UNESCO's Linguapax programme (see box page 30) for more than 15 years.

Isn't the international community very slow in getting to grips with the language question?

It's coming round to it. Sixty-nine countries presented a draft resolution to the United Nations General Assembly in December 1999 to promote respect for multilingualism. UNESCO's General Conference has just passed four resolutions backing language diversity and multilingual education. The European Union and the Council of Europe are planning a European Year of Languages in 2001 with UNESCO backing. This is a good example of international co-operation because it involves all languages, not just European ones. It will also mark the start of many other projects around the world.

A language is always in danger when it isn't part of the school curriculum

Whoever is not acquainted with foreign languages knows nothing of his own.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, German writer (1749-1832)

How do you explain this about-turn?

For several years now, the language question has been high on the world education agenda. UNESCO member states are increasingly asking us to help solve very complicated language problems and issues. Europe, along with Asia and Latin America, has realized that the third millennium will be an era of co-operation and and confederation and that the need to preserve identities will have to be balanced with the demands of communication.

What's the chief aim of international language policy?

To promote trilingualism in every society. This is a goal some countries achieved a long time ago. Luxemburg, for example. If you tell Luxemburgers they can "afford the luxury" of having three languages because they're rich, they'll tell you they're rich precisely because they're rooted in trilingualism.

What are these three languages we have to learn?

Our mother tongue, obviously, a "neighbour" language and an international language. UNESCO's language policy replaces the standard idea of a "foreign" language with the notion of a neighbour language, a language spoken just over the border. We most often go to war against our neighbours, so we have to learn their language, discover their needs and ambitions and know their culture and values.

Minority languages are meanwhile steadily disappearing. How can they be saved?

A language is always in danger when it isn't part of the school curriculum. Once it's given the status of a teaching language, even for just part of the curriculum, a whole "rescue apparatus" is created and the language becomes alive again and is saved.

Is monolingualism a handicap?

It's always a great disadvantage. It means you only see the world through the inevitably limited dimension of a single language, even if it's a world language. It's also a factor of domination because people who can afford to stay monolingual live in countries that have overwhelming political, economic and military power. And it adds to "linguistic insecurity", a new concept which reflects a very old truth. Even at UNESCO, we see it regularly at international gatherings. Delegates who speak minority languages often don't speak up. They have very good ideas but don't dare to express them because they feel uncomfortable using UNESCO's official languages. People whose mother tongue is an international one are very privileged. It's quite unfair. ■

Head of UNESCO's Languages Division

Interview by Araceli Ortiz de Urbina, UNESCO Courier journalist

Defenders of diversity

Movements supporting linguistic diversity are building up the pressure for an international agreement on language rights

Linguapax

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UNESCO's work in the field of languages began to take off in the mid-1980s. A key step was the launch of the Linguapax project in 1986. This was designed "to associate the teaching of languages with the promotion of international understanding and peace," says Félix Marti, head of UNESCO's Advisory Committee for Linguistic Pluralism and Multilingual Education, which was set up in 1998.

In the last 15 years, Linguapax has provided technical back-up for a number of national and regional projects, including the rebuilding of Cambodia's educational system around the Khmer language. This involved producing two million school textbooks in Khmer and training a team of Cambodian teachers and editors. Linguapax has also set up an inter-university network co-ordinated by the University of Mons (Belgium) to promote the project and its methods, and is working on a report on the world's languages (see below).

Protecting linguistic diversity and encouraging multilingual education are two closely-related goals. To promote the former, Linguapax has put together guides and manuals for teachers and policy-makers in countries, especially in Africa, that want to incorporate local languages into their education system. A new project, called Pericles, will promote the learning of neighbouring languages by encouraging young people from adjacent countries to work together to preserve shared natural and cultural heritage sites. A project currently at an experimental stage in the border region where Luxemburg, France and Germany meet is designed to be applied internationally wherever there is a desire to boost regional co-operation or in areas recovering from wars.

There is international awareness about the need to protect the non-tangible heritage of humanity such as languages but there is no legal instrument to back it up. "Unfortunately there's no international agreement referring specifically to linguistic rights," says Marti. "It's a very sensitive subject, but it is up to UNESCO to draft an international instrument to protect them which could be adopted by most countries."

Report on the World's Languages

"What is the name of your language? Is it used in written form? Where is it spoken? What are its geographical frontiers?" These and many other questions feature in a UNESCO world language survey begun in 1997. The answers to them, along with input from research institutes, specialists and bibliographical sources, will go into the first edition of a *UNESCO Report on the World's Languages*, to be published in 2001.

The report will provide a new working tool to help protect the linguistic heritage of humanity. It will comprise relevant and objective information about the status, use and evolution of the world's languages. As well as filling an information gap, the report has the more ambitious goal of proposing solutions and possible action to further the rescue and development of languages in danger of dying out.

The first International Mother Language Day

http://webworld.unesco.org/imld

At the suggestion of UNESCO member states, the Organization's General Conference in November 1999 proclaimed an International Mother Language Day, which was marked for the first time on 21 February 2000 by a ceremony at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

NGOs for linguistic pluralism

The defence of languages, their variety and pluralism is winning increasingly wide international support, especially through the work of non-governmental organizations. Below, a sample of activities in this field.

Terralingua

P.O.Box 122,
Hancock,
Michigan 49930-0122
United States
http://cougar.ucdavis.edu/nas/terralin/

Terralingua, a nongovernmental organization set up in 1996, believes that preservation of the physical and the intangible heritage of humanity are two sides of the same coin, because their fates are intertwined and they are threatened by the same socio-economic factors. Everything that is done to protect the lands, languages and cultures of indigenous peoples is vital for safeguarding the planet's diversity, because although these people comprise only five per cent of the world's population they speak 57 per cent of its languages and inhabit regions where biological diversity is greatest.

The Terralingua website, which has a wealth of information and links to other organizations with the same goals, is open to all kinds of contributions, from proverbs and poems in any language to money donations to the Endangered Language Fund, whose watchword is "When a language is gone, it is gone forever".

Linguasphere

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Observatory
www.linguasphere.org

Linguasphere Observatory is an independent, non-profit transnational research body which published in February 2000 the first edition of the *Register of the World's Languages and Speech Communities*. The first-ever detailed catalogue of the world's languages and dialects, the *Register* provides a global linguistic panorama at the dawn of the 21st century.

SIL International
www.sil.org

The Summer Institute of Linguistics, based in Dallas, Texas, has been studying, promoting and recording the world's least-known languages, especially those which have no system of writing, for more than half a century.

FIPLV
www.cet.univ-paris5.fr/fiplv2000/prof.html

The International Federation of Teachers of Living Languages, founded in 1931 in Paris, is an NGO recognized by UNESCO and the Council of Europe. It encourages the teaching and learning of living languages to facilitate communication, understanding, co-operation and friendship between all the world's peoples.

Language rights
www.linguistic-declaration.org

The Follow-up Committee for a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights champions the principle of equal rights for all language communities. It calls for the adoption of a universal declaration of linguistic rights, including the right to be taught and to communicate with official bodies in the language of one's community.

Surfing on a sea of languages

A mass of information about languages can be found on the Internet, which is increasingly used as a working tool by students, translators and teachers. They can find sites from which they can download for free the characters of currently used alphabets, such as Cyrillic, Mandarin or Hebrew, alphabets that have died out, such as Egyptian hieroglyphics, and even invented languages such as that created by J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the epic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, not to mention sites offering exercises in English or Spanish.

Surfers can also access the terminology database of the European Union's translation service. Titled *Eurodicautom*, it is a kind of super-dictionary with more than 5.5 million entries in 12 European languages.

But in the battle for multilingualism, the Internet is a double-edged sword, since most of its contents are only in English. The 1999-2000 edition of UNESCO's *World Communication and Information Report* quotes from surveys done by the Internet Society and by Euromarketing to the effect that 58% of Internet users are English-speakers. After them, far behind, come those who speak Spanish (8.7%), German (8.6%), Japanese (7.9%) and French (3.7%).

In terms of the number of web pages, the domination of English is even greater—at 81%, followed by German (4%), Japanese, French and the Scandinavian languages (2% each) and Spanish (1%). The world's other languages account for barely 8% of the Net's web pages.

Eurodicautom:
http://eurodic.ip.lu/cgi-bin/edicbin/EuroDicWWW.pl
Lessons and exercises in Spanish
Cervantes Virtual Centre: http://cvc.cervantes.es/

Shuara, a language that refused to die

Marcos Almeida

The Shuar people of the Ecuadorian Amazon have turned their language into a powerful tool to safeguard their autonomy and cultural identity

The Shuar are an indigenous people of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Long known to the outside world as the Jivaro, their tough, independent character and their legendary technique of shrinking human heads have been described by many travellers and missionaries. They proudly claim that they have never been conquered. Now these one-time hunters and gatherers, who turned to rearing cattle, growing citrus fruit or practicing traditional horticulture deep in the Amazonian forest, have taken a route into the modern world that enables them to keep their language and culture.

Salesian Catholic priests who came to the region to convert the indigenous people to Christianity witnessed the land seizures, settler brutality and other injustices of which the Shuar were victims. They answered their appeal for help by strengthening the cohesion of Shuar society and culture so that they could meet the challenges of rampant greed and modernization.

In 1964, the priests helped the Shuar to shape their destiny by setting up the Federation of Shuar Centres, the first autonomous organization of its kind in Latin America. A precursor of the indigenous Indian movement which became an important political force in Ecuador in the 1990s, the federation became to all intents and purposes a Shuar state within the Ecuadorian state. Its mandate covered everything from land distribution to the administration of health and education services.

Bilingual schooling by radio

The main agent of this limited autonomous integration was the Bi-cultural Shuar Radio Education System (SERBISH). Radio proved to be the most suitable means of communication in the inaccessible region of dense forests and impenetrable mountains where the Shuar live. A radio education scheme using Shuara and Spanish began in 1968 and four years later officially became the backbone of the bilingual schools which had recently been set up.

The chief purpose of bilingual and bicultural education was to teach people Spanish so they could demand equal treatment as Ecuadorian citizens and to enable Shuara to become a vibrant modern language. Shuar families were enthusiastic from the start about a system which did not require them to send their children away to austere Salesian boarding schools where they would be cut off from their environment and culture. Making bilingualism acceptable meant Shuar children no longer needed to be ashamed of speaking their own language.

SERBISH started out with 33 schools. Within two years it was broadcasting to 120 and numbers have been rising ever since. Today, it reaches four provinces of eastern Ecuador, and provides education for about 7,500 children—out of a Shuar population of 70,000—in 297 schools teaching from primary to the end of the secondary level.

Linguistic pioneers

The ministry of education has authorized the work of "tele-auxiliaries", Shuar teachers paid by the government or local volunteers who receive a wage for helping children to listen and learn from the radio programmes while the teacher attends to pupils at another grade.

The school system comprises a national curriculum which prepares children for official exams in Spanish and another which teaches a course in Shuar language and culture. At first, the courses kept close to the national curriculum, including its religious bias due to the Salesians' influence. Today coursework focuses more on the traditional Shuar world-view, and includes components on folklore, craft techniques and local plant and animal life as well as lessons to prepare children for modern life. In addition to a secondary school diploma in Intercultural Bilingual Education (EIB) and in chemistry and biology, SERBISH has for the past year offered one in farming technology, including sustainable use of resources.

The Shuar are rightly proud of being pioneers, not just in Ecuador but worldwide, and are not deterred by the current serious problems of their country, crushed by heavy foreign debt, massive financial crisis and a plan to make the U.S. dollar the national currency which may have grave consequences for the poorest Ecuadorians.

The Shuar Federation's radio equipment has not been updated since the 1960s, which means reception is poor in some remote communities. Agreements were signed last year with foreign aid institutions including Germany's GTZ, which topped up the meagre funding from the Ecuadorian ministry of education. Many teachers, who earn just over $40 a month, cannot travel to the remotest communities, which can only be reached by small plane.

But it will take more than that to discourage the

It would not be a good thing for the Mixe language to disappear, because it represents our culture. We have inherited it from our ancestors. If it were to be lost, nothing would be left from the past and our brothers would not know each other.

Mixe speaker (Mexico)

Journalist based in Quito, Ecuador

For a person to feel at ease in today's world, it is essential that to enter it they should not be forced to abandon the language of their identity.

Amin Maalouf, Lebanese writer (1949-)

© Fundación Omaere, Puyo, Ecuador

A Shuar couple outside the door of their dwelling.

determined Shuar. Relying on their organizational strength,they now have some very ambitious projects, incljuding one for an educational television station, for which they are seeking foreign technical assistance and funding.

In the search for an alternative to modernization imposed from above, the Shuar have managed to reduce semi-illiteracy to seven per cent and total illiteracy to two per cent.With the self-confidence his people are famous for, Guillermo Sensu, head of EIB for Morona-Santiago province, declares his faith in the future."I can assure you we're going to fight for our rights to education," he says.

In Ecuador, where a third of the population speaks one or more indigenous languages, people had to wait until the new 1998 Constitution for formal recognition that "For the indigenous peoples, Quechua, Shuara and other ancient languages are officially used."

French linguist Louis-Jean Calvet notes that Shuar linguistic policy is atypical because it is completely independent of the state."As a policy for a minority, decided by them and applied by them,it shows how the expansion of the world's steadily-growing language empires is not inevitable and that it is possible to fight to be different in a world that's

India: bursting at the linguistic seams

Amitav Choudhry

India is one of the world's leading multilingual countries, but today many of its minority languages are facing extinction as majority languages gain ground

India, with a population of around one billion people, is often regarded as a model of harmonious linguistic coexistence within a single state. It has two official languages (Hindi and English), 18 major languages Scheduled in the Indian Constitution, and 418 "listed"languages, each spoken by 10,000 people or more. All-India Radio broadcasts in 24 languages and in 146 dialects; newspapers are published in at least 34 languages; 67 languages are used in primary education, and 80 in literacy work.The constitution guarantees all citizens the right to "conserve" their language, and all religious or linguistic minorities have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

But organizing multilingualism in a land whose multilingual tradition goes back several thousand years is no easy matter. The Indian Union today ▶

Head of Linguistic Research Unit,Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta

consists of 26 states and six Union territories, a number of which were formed in 1956 on a unilingual basis to reduce the number of linguistic minorities by bringing together people who speak a common language. But the official languages adopted by the states and territories are not necessarily spoken by all their respective populations; not one of them is completely monolingual.

English, a social status symbol

This structure has encouraged the development of some languages at the expense of others. There are, for instance, over 1,600 languages known as mother tongues, the great majority of which have no official status and therefore lack protection. Further complexity is added by the fact that every language community consists of at least three interlanguages. Hindi alone has 48 variants. In this country where nationhood is a recent phenomenon, language has become a focal point of socio-political action. Unsurprisingly, language policy has always been a subject of debate and controversy between politicians, educators and planners.

Today in the official domain there is a strict hierarchy of Indian languages. At the top are Hindi and English. Next come the official languages of the states and territories, followed by languages which, although not used for administrative purposes, are spoken by more than a million people. Hundreds of others at the foot of the ladder are monitored by a Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities who only has advisory powers and cannot force state governments to follow his recommendations. Some state governments are optimistically hoping that minority languages within their jurisdiction will die out before they get a chance to be used in education.

Meanwhile, English is gaining ground. In 1949 constitutional provision was made for parliamentary business to be transacted in Hindi or in English but that after 15 years only Hindi should be used. However, after this time had elapsed, Hindi was just as much a foreign language as English for two-thirds of the population. Regarded as a "neutral" language for wider communication, and the language of technology, modernity and development, English is also a social status symbol. The resultant Anglomania is detrimental not only to the growth of Indian languages but also to the "normal" development of Indian society. It sometimes reaches grotesque proportions. Politicians who decry the use of English sometimes send their children to the best schools in which English is the medium of instruction.

It is up to the intellectual elites of minority communities to promote their mother tongues. Often bi- or trilingual, they must initiate projects to keep out the neo-colonial intruder, give a new impetus to dying languages and adapt them to the modern world. ■

Preservation is what we do to berries in jam jars and salmon in cans. . . . Books and recordings can preserve languages, but only people and communities can keep them alive.

Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, historians of the Tlingit oral tradition (Alaska)

A literacy class for Indian women, accompanied by their children.

© Howard Davies/Panos Pictures, London

Users are choosers

Jean-Louis Calvet

States rarely manage to force people to use a language against their will. The fate of languages ultimately depends on their speakers' needs

Just as ecology depicts the world as a series of interlocking parts ranging from the single cell to the ecosphere, the planet's languages can be presented as a system based on gravity. Today the keystone of that system is English, a "hypercentral" language around which a dozen "supercentral" languages gravitate. Between 100 and 200 "central" languages, linked to the supercentral ones through bilingual speakers, are in their turn surrounded by 4,000-5,000 "peripheral" languages.

These languages do not all have the same weight, the same vigour or the same prospects. The future of the vast majority is in doubt, and more and more efforts are being made to preserve them. Languages, like baby seals or whales, are regarded as endangered species (see pages 18 and 19).

But anxiety is not only focusing on the "peripheral" languages. Concern is also being expressed about the widely-spoken hyper or super-central languages, including English and French. In the United States, organizations such as US English, US First and Save Our Schools are campaigning for English to be recognized as the country's sole official language in face of growing bilingualism due to substantial Hispanic immigration. In France, the 1994 "Toubon Law" was an attempt to regulate the use of French by resisting the use of words borrowed from other languages.

The myth of language purity

Language purity is a myth which leads only to stagnation. The Latin that Cicero spoke is perhaps a pure language, but nobody speaks it any more. Today different versions of Latin that have developed over the centuries are used. They include Italian, Spanish, Romanian, French and Catalan.

This myth, this desire to protect, illustrates a thoughtless fear of change, of borrowing words and expressions from other languages. It is as if only stability could somehow guarantee identity. How far can or should policies to protect languages go? Is it possible to keep alive language forms abandoned by their users, sustaining them by a kind of drip-feed or other forms of intensive medication?

Some language policies have been successful. In Turkey in the early part of the 20th century, Kemal Atatürk used authoritarian methods to reform the spelling of Turkish, and struck out of the Turkish dictionary words borrowed from Arabic and Farsi. Indonesia has adopted a unifying language, Bahasa. In other countries, things have been less straightforward. Arabization in Algeria is still confronted by major obstacles, and the attempt by the late Guinean president Sekou Touré to make his country officially multilingual was a total failure.

"Language war": a convenient metaphor

A language policy can only work if it is attuned to the way in which a society is evolving. Only rarely can a language or reform be imposed on people against their will. Is it possible to defend (or save) a language whose speakers don't want it any more? The issue is not the language itself but the importance attached to it by its speakers. A language policy cannot ignore them.

A language disappears not only because it is dominated by another, but also—and perhaps above all—because people decide to abandon it and do not pass it on to their children. The term "language war" is a convenient metaphor, but languages themselves cannot wage war on each other. It is people who struggle, fight or agree with each other. We can follow their conflictual relationships by looking at the relationship between their languages.

Linguists are always sorry when a language dies out, but languages are not museum pieces. They belong to the people who speak them and constantly change and adapt to their needs. They are there to serve people and not vice-versa. The evolution of language forms and the relationships between them is an ongoing process, and while some die, others are born, sometimes before our eyes.

Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of Yugoslavia, new countries have appeared and new languages are making themselves heard—Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian, for example, which until recently were considered to be a single language, Serbo-Croat. The speakers of these languages are affirming their identity by stressing and increasing the difference between them, though this only amounts to a few dozen words. Likewise, the division of Czechoslovakia ▶

Professor of social linguistics at the University of the Sorbonne, in Paris, and author of a score of books, which have been translated into a dozen languages. His works published in English include Roland Barthes, A Biography (1995).

into the Czech Republic and Slovakia has pushed the Czech and Slovak languages further apart.

In francophone Africa, local forms of the official language, French, are emerging. Slightly different variants of French are spoken in Senegal, Gabon, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire.

These differences, slight though they are so far, perhaps herald a break-up of French, which may become a kind of mother tongue for a new generation of speakers, just as Latin is the mother of the Romance languages. The same goes for English, Arabic and Spanish. The Spanish spoken in Madrid is not quite the same as that spoken in Buenos Aires, and there are differences between London English and Bombay English. The Arabic of Rabat is not at all the same as that spoken in Riyadh.

The function of languages influences their form. The languages used for trade in the markets of African capitals are gradually becoming different from their vernacular forms. The Wolof spoken in Dakar is no longer the Wolof that rural people speak, and the Bambara heard in Bamako is not the same as that spoken in Ségou, 230 kilometres away.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in various situations, Creole languages developed as a linguistic solution to the communication problem faced by slaves speaking different languages when they were taken to the Indian Ocean islands or to the Caribbean. Using European tongues such as English, French or Portuguese as a basis, they created languages which today are different. A Mauritian, a Haitian and a Guyanese cannot understand each other, even though their languages have a common ancestor—French. Perhaps the children of immigrants will one day speak, along with the language of their host country, a Germanicized version of Turkish, say, or a Frenchified Arabic.

An ever-changing language map

English may not escape this process. Its world domination today is indisputable and will probably last for a while. But history shows that the more a language spreads geographically, the more variations it generates,so what happened to Latin may happen to English.

This being the case, the world language map is clearly going to change over the next few centuries. Many languages currently spoken by only a few people are dying out and new ones are appearing or will appear. This means that in the gravitational model described above, languages and their functions will evolve. The hypercentral and supercentral languages may change, and some peripheral languages may become central (and vice-versa). Like history itself, the history of languages does not stand still. It moves on, constantly changing and being shaped by the practices of users. ■

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Time changes everything. There is no reason why language should escape that universal law.

Ferdinand de Saussure, Swiss linguist (1857-1913)

© Philippe Franchini, Paris

DNA IN THE DOCK

Martine Jacot

Genetic fingerprinting provides virtually flawless proof and is helping to identify criminals and free people jailed for crimes they did not commit. But does it violate basic human rights?

Police and judges in Western countries all agree that the arrival of genetic testing in their daily lives is a far more revolutionary development than the introduction of fingerprinting at the end of the 19th century. It is now just about impossible to say a criminal has "disappeared without leaving any trace," even if he or she wore gloves.

Forensic science has made a great leap forward since 1985,when British scientist Alex Jeffreys discovered a new way of identifying people genetically through their DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the molecule at the core of each living cell. It is now possible to draw up a person's genetic identity card within five or six hours at minimal cost[1] working from infinitesimal pieces of evidence,[2] such as a minute speck of blood, a single hair, a trace of saliva left on a cigarette butt, a stamp, a glass or a toothbrush,from sweat on clothing or, more important, a tiny drop of a rapist's sperm. However despite this "proof", we should remember that just because a person's "traces"have been found at the scene of a crime, it does not necessarily mean they are guilty.

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In a Strasbourg (France) laboratory, a speck of blood for genetic analysis is taken from a boot.

Death row prisoners cleared

Except in the case of identical twins, the structure of a person's DNA is unique. About 10 per cent of DNA contains chromosomes. The rest of it, whose purpose is unknown, is "non-coding" DNA which provides no information about health or genetic abnormalities, at least not yet, and is partly made up of identical sequences. It is these "repeat units"that are analysed to compile a person's genetic profile, which takes the form of a series of figures. These data are like bar codes which can be easily stored as a computer file. This is a positive development, say many Western criminologists and the families of crime victims. Defenders of civil liberties who predict new Orwellian nightmares, beg to differ.

An Afro-American called A.B. Butler is one of those whose life was saved by DNA testing. He was freed in January 1999 after 16 years in prison in Tyler, Texas, and his 99-year jail sentence for kidnapping and raping a young white woman in 1983 was quashed. As soon as he heard about DNA tests, he asked to be given one, knowing that the police had kept a sample of the rapist's sperm. Three laboratories confirmed that his genetic fingerprint was not that of the rapist.

Since the FBI began testing people's DNA in 1989, at least 54 prisoners serving long sentences, mostly for rape, have been declared innocent in the United States. The defence of 35 of them was handled by the law school at New York's Yeshiva University as part of the Innocence Project (IP) launched in 1992 by Prof. Barry Scheck. The project's goal is to make DNA tests routine when evidence has been kept in the case of prisoners who claim to be innocent but cannot afford a good lawyer. The stakes are high. Six of the prisoners freed by the efforts of the students and teachers involved in the project were on death row.

Building databases

"Genetic testing can also help find the real criminal more quickly," says Scheck. "It can help solve old crimes that have puzzled everyone and save a tremendous amount of time and money in an investigation. It can also help curb serial killers or compulsive rapists," who could be identified before they commit more crimes. Such "advances"pre- ▶

1.The cost of a producing a basic genetic profile from a good-quality sample has fallen sharply in recent years, to about $50 in the United States and Britain and around $80 in France, for example.

2. Provided all the evidence is carefully collected at the scene of the crime and then kept at the right temperature and analysed by reliable laboratories.

UNESCO Courier journalist

suppose the existence of ways to compare the genetic profile of someone being sought and the profile of a suspect. This means building a database of genetic fingerprints. In the absence of such databases, police in the Western world investigating serious crimes proceed by trial and error,analysing DNA from entire villages and neighbourhoods.

Police in Britain,who were pioneers in the field, created such a database in 1995 "backed by women's groups who supported technology that could identify rapists quickly," says Peter Martin,a former chief of Scotland Yard's laboratories. "When it was then found that rapists often already had a record of petty crime," the database was expanded.

An identikit picture from a piece of chewing gum

In Britain, anyone arrested or suspected of a crime can be asked to provide a saliva sample to compile their DNA identity card. The database currently has the "bar codes" of about 700,000 people, and in 10 years time five million of the country's 58.6 million people are expected to be in it. In five years, the database has enabled thousands of matches or "cold hits" to be made that Martin says have led to the identification of more than 260 murderers, 400 rapists and 2,500 burglars.

Police everywhere are naturally keen to gather all the information they can. Some are now dreaming of being able to make an identikit picture of a criminal just from a piece of chewing gum found near the scene of the crime. Current analysis done on non-coding DNA by the PCR[3] method enables the sex of a person to be determined but not the age or colour of hair or eyes. But it will be possible in the future, scientists say. Some human rights defence organizations say such cataloguing must stop immediately and deplore the inadequacy of safeguards to protect individual liberties.

The fiercest debate about this issue is raging in the United States around the FBI's launch in October 1998 of a national database, Codis, which combines biological and computer processes to link up databases in each of the 50 U.S.states. The FBI says it has 260,000 files on people that have already helped pinpoint the authors of more than 200 crimes, though so far only sex offences and violent crimes.

Resistance to the compilation of such databases has focused on one key question. Should a sample for a DNA test be taken from someone without their permission? The law in Western countries is not always clear on this but the principle has been accepted—in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, France and the U.S.—that a sample of blood or saliva can be taken on the orders of a judge or a police officer in the course of an investigation.

'When there's an investigation among the inhabitants of a village after a crime, sample-taking should be voluntary, yet a refusal (to allow a DNA test) can be interpreted as grounds for suspicion.'

But the line between police requirements and individual liberties is still a very hazy one. "When there's an investigation among the inhabitants of a village after a crime, sample-taking should be voluntary," says Jean Michaud, a member of the French National Ethics Committee, "yet a refusal (to allow a DNA test) can be interpreted as grounds for suspicion."

Many police admit however that a person's DNA can always be analysed from their confiscated toothbrush or their coffee cup without them knowing, which does not directly violate their "physical person" or their "human dignity", concepts recognized in laws on bioethics that have been passed in many Western countries. Such "unfair methods" are clearly condemned in theory but not explicitly by law.

Constitutional protection

In the United States, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a law in 1997 allowing the archiving of data on convicted criminals with retroactive effect. All prison inmates in the state were therefore "asked" to give a blood sample, ostensibly for the "statistical" reason that many prisoners commit new crimes after their release.But some refused, citing—on the advice of their lawyers—the fourth amendment to the U.S. constitution which protects citizens against "unreasonable searches and seizures".A Boston court set a precedent in August 1998 by ruling in their favour and giving the opinion that taking DNA samples without permission was a clear violation of human rights.

"Why don't we make a database of all poor people?" asked one of the prisoners' lawyers, Benjamin Keehn. "Are they also more likely to commit crimes? Where do you stop?" The protest against such moves, which has spread to other states,is organized by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Freedom Network, which has 250,000 members. The ACLU appealed before the National Commission on the Future of DNA Evidence, a 19-member body of distinguished experts set up at the request of President Bill Clinton, against the extension of the federal Codis system to any person who was arrested.

ACLU's associate director, Barry Steinhardt, said it would mean "equating arrest with guilt" and would give "police officers, rather than judges and juries, the power to force persons to provide the state with evidence that harbours many of their most intimate secrets and those of

A GENETIC DATABASE FOR EUROPE'S POLICE

In 1997, the European Union Council of Ministers* "invited member states to consider establishing national DNA databases" and "exchange DNA analysis results" as a way of making "a significant contribution" to criminal investigations, provided it was "limited to exchanging data from the non-coding part of the DNA molecule, which can be assumed not to contain information about specific hereditary qualities.

"It is up to each member state," the Council said, "to decide on the conditions under which, and the offences regarding which, the DNA analysis results may be stored in a national database. The taking of DNA material for the purpose of storing DNA analysis results should be subject to safeguards designed to protect the physical integrity of the person concerned."

It added that "creation of a European DNA database should be considered as a second step once the conditions for the exchange of the DNA analysis results are realized." ■

* http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/fr/lif/dat/1997/fr

3. Polymerase Chain Reaction, or genetic amplification, which became routine in the late 1980s,is the fastest, cheapest and most accurate method. It requires less DNA than the earlier RFLP (Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism) method, which is no longer used in Western countries. It is now possible,by looking at a specific marker on sex chromosomes, to identify a person's sex by PCR.

© F. Demange/Gamma, Paris

Genetic bar codes on a luminogram.

their blood relatives."

Another set of vital questions arises from this debate. Who owns the DNA used to establish a person's genetic ID—the person concerned, the laboratory which did the test, or the police? Should the sample be destroyed or kept, and if kept, for how long? The "bar codes" in the files may for the moment be of little use to snoopers, but the "original" DNA samples contain chromosomes and therefore a mass of genetic information about the person and their relatives,since the 23 pairs of chromosomes we all have are passed down half and half from each of our parents.

Who can guarantee that the DNA samples held in the police databases and laboratories will not one day be analysed by nosy people working for, say, life insurance companies to find out if someone is likely to develop this or that disease? Germany, Austria, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands have all removed this risk by ordering the destruction of the samples once the ID has been established. Other countries allow police and labs to keep them—forever in Britain, for 40 years in France's planned database and for various periods in different U.S. states. The excuse is usually that the sample might need to be examined again in the future.

A Pandora's box

Especially in the last group of countries, non-governmental organizations and ethics committees have criticized the growth of "small genetic databases" collected by laboratories with government authorization and by private firms acting in accordance with the law.

Steinhardt points to a survey carried out by the American Management Association which found that six per cent of employers were already using genetic tests as part of job-hiring procedures without the knowledge of the candidates. The Pentagon, he told the U.S. commission,currently has samples from three million of its present and former employees in a database originally set up to help identify soldiers killed in the Viet Nam War.

'Why don't we make a database of all poor people? Are they also more likely to commit crimes? Where do you stop?'

"Once the genetic information is collected and banked, pressures will mount to use it for other purposes than those for which it was gathered," he said. "In fact, on several occasions, the FBI has already requested access to this data for purposes of criminal investigations."

Prof. Philip Reilly, a member of the commission, agrees. "There is a proliferation of databases with DNA in all sorts of areas in our society which theoretically could be linked one way or another." He also notes that "we already collected in 1999 blood from 99.8 per cent of the babies born in the United States and we are storing it without their consent. We also subject it to DNA analysis in some cases."

The U.S. commission finally recommended that details of the 15 million people arrested in the U.S. every year not be archived at federal level. ACLU says it will fight the establishment of any genetic database, which it regards as a Pandora's box. It is also contesting in court a recent Massachusetts law which authorizes disclosure of details from the police genetic database for undefined "humanitarian purposes".

The easier science makes it to compile genetic profiles from DNA, the more urgent it becomes to have effective safeguards against the possible misuse[4] of the genetic

4.Article 7 of the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome, adopted by UNESCO in 1997, says that "the confidentiality of genetic information associated with an an identifiable person" must be protected.

AFRICAN MUSEUMS ON A MEET-THE-PEOPLE MISSION

Cynthia Guttman

Plagued by low visitor attendance, African museums are breaking out of their rigid colonial moulds and courting local communities

Since he started teaching aspiring curators in the early 1980s, Emmanuel Nnakenyi Arinze has advocated a hands-on approach that even comes with a dress code. "I tell my students that 'the African curator does not come to work in a tie because you are going to be working with your hands, on objects that are dirty, in storage, in galleries or outside, or with children who will pour ink over you.' "

It's a small detail that nonetheless points towards deeper currents of change running through African museums as curators and their colleagues seek to define a model that makes sense for Africans today. The process, initiated in piecemeal fashion in the 1980s, received a galvanizing thrust forward after Mali's Alpha Oumar Konaré, the first African to preside the International Council of Museums, sounded the alarm by declaring in 1991 that "it is time, high time . . . to kill the Western model of museum in Africa."

A crisis had been brewing for years. Besides acute cutbacks in financing and training, excessive bureaucracy and political interference in museum leadership, the most glaring sign of trouble was simply that African people, just about everywhere, were shunning their museums. In many cases, they were discarded as "places for tourists or museums for whites" as Alexis Adandé, director of the West African Museums Programme puts it.

All museums, even those founded after independence, were forced to address the crisis. Across the continent, directors have started to shake up their institutions, develop more outward-looking attitudes and tune into the lives and concerns of local people. This starts with a novel approach to exhibitions that involves consulting communities from the outset—not only to spark their interest, but also because they own objects deemed of higher symbolic value in their eyes than those gathering dust in museum showcases.

In Bulawayo (Zimbabwe), the local community was asked to bring in old photographs for display in the local art gallery. "The exhibition proved very popular as it rekindled past memories of people's lifestyles," recalls Francis Musonda, chairman of SADCAMM, an association which groups museums from the southern Africa region.

In an experimental-style exhibition in Ouidah (Benin) in 1985, families were encouraged to display objects relating to local festivals and family heritage. The exhibit, staged with artifacts ranging from portraits and masks to statuettes representing female divinities—which until then had been passed down within the same families for several generations—was warmly greeted by the population who for the most part were viewing these precious pieces for the first time. It created such interest that a small family museum was eventually opened in the city.

Appealing to an elite

In Nigeria, Arinze, who has held a number of prominent positions in the field of museum development, organized a crowd-drawing exhibition on drums, during which musicians from selected villages were invited to a city museum to share their know-how and traditions with visitors. "People in our communities must be part of the process of exhibiting objects that come from them. We should give them a chance to talk to us about those objects and how they want to see them shown to a wider audience," he says. "When an object is put here in isolation from its true meaning, communities feel distanced from it and slightly offended."

All these types of initiatives enhance communities' pride in their heritage and stimulate awareness about the value of safeguarding objects, while often shedding new light on local history. They break the Western stereotype of a museum as a place where people come to look at objects on display. With some rare exceptions—such as Niamey's "arts and crafts" style concept with architectural models linked to the country's ethnic groups, parks explaining the country's fauna and flora, and pavilions presenting different dress styles and customs—African museums were created to satisfy the curiosity of an elite, almost to the total exclusion of the locals. Despite post-independence efforts to make them vehicles for encouraging nationalism

UNESCO Courier journalist

A mobile museum visits a Botswana school.

© Hervé Dez/CRMC, Paris

The royal palace museum at Porto Novo (Benin).

and fostering unity, the fact remains that collections were constituted by foreign powers, and mostly for their interest alone.

"The great problem for ethnographic-style museums is to think about new ways of using objects which for the most part have 'died'," explains Adandé, referring to the intricate 'living' relationship between an object, such as a mask, and the role it plays in a given cultural context. In the case of the palace-museum in Abomey (Benin), artifacts belonging to rulers of the former 17th-century kingdom are brought out during ritual ceremonies linked to the cult of ancestors. These objects are "charged" to regain their sacred power, and at the end of the ceremony rendered inanimate, since a fully charged object cannot be left on show for viewing by the average visitor. But this type of initiative is not feasible when objects have been collected in one part of the country for display in another.

But museum directors are still faced with the question of bringing meaning back into collections constituted during colonial times. "Should these objects be returned to populations to create local museums or be used for educational purposes, especially for youth from cities?" asks Adandé.

Shaje'a Tshiluila, president of AFRICOM, a pan-African organization of museums, insists that the continent's museums have a critical role to play in valorizing traditional knowledge that can serve Africa's development. "If the definition of a museum is to collect, preserve and transmit, this can be applied to a very broad range of concerns, from learning about different styles of conflict resolution to identifying the health practices of different ethnic groups," she affirms.

Reaching a youthful audience

Pointing to conflicts that have torn so many African countries apart in the past decade, Tshiluila insists on the potential of museums to bring about greater understanding between ethnic groups. In this regard, Tanzania's Village Museum has drawn attention well beyond its borders. In 1994, the museum launched an annual event during which one or two ethnic groups (out of about 140) show their culture to others. They build or rehabilitate traditional houses, explain to visitors the purpose of various cultural artifacts used, organize seminars about their history and culture, and share food and music. Because they are involved in the event from its inception, communities are given the chance to reflect upon what they value most about their heritage, and to find the most stimulating ways of presenting it to others.

The idea of getting messages across can extend to a broad range of concerns, from health or agriculture techniques to urbanization. In Swaziland for example, curator Rosemary Andrade has opened up the doors of the national museum to exhibitions on HIV-Aids prevention, in partnership with local NGOs. On another occasion, noticing the talents of Mozambican refugees at recycling materials, she staged an exhibition showcasing their skills, to promote greater tolerance between these recent arrivals and the locals.

It could be argued that every exhibition is an educational endeavour, but if there is one audience that museums feel they have to reach, it is children and youth. "Museums and heritage sites provide an education resource that has been devastatingly underutilized by teachers, education departments, universities, NGOs and museums themselves," says Dammon Rice, head of the Museum Ambassador Programme in South Africa. This initiative trains young people to teach their peers about museums in the Cape Town area by giving presentations in schools and running museum tours.

A number of other museums now organize workshops for teachers, who are encouraged to link issues in the curriculum with collections in the museum. In Benin, the national heritage school runs training aimed at increasing the ability of museum educators across the continent to design programmes for schools and local communities.

The Botswana national museum, although ▶

created after independence, was among the first to realize that its prime role was educational. "Even though we started from scratch when we built our own museum, we realized that we could be doing much more to let people know that we existed. And we wanted to catch people at an early age, in primary school," explains the museum's director Tickey Pule.

In one of the longest running outreach programmes in Africa, known as the Zebra on Wheels, staff from the national museum set out once a term with a van filled with artifacts to organize daylong exhibits in rural schools, along with talks and slideshows and movies on the country's environment and cultural heritage. Besides bringing the museum to the village, the programme exposes children to crafts and customs from different parts of Botswana, fostering a sense of national pride.

Encouraging children to take pride in their heritage is an investment that curators know has long-term payoffs. In Zimbabwe, a programme involving school students aims to limit vandalism around archaeological sites. In Tsodiolo, Botswana, on a site where there are over 1,000 rock paintings locals are involved in the opening of a museum and are being trained as guides. They are also sharing with museum professionals their knowledge of this ancient site, which is up for world heritage status nomination.

A museum without walls

This process however, has to be nurtured, especially when it comes to turning sites into cultural attractions. "It takes a lot of time to strike up a dialogue with communities, especially rural ones. In fact, it's always what people don't say that is important," says Malagasy museum director and archaeologist Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa. For the past several years, he has been working with villagers on a 14th-century fortified site that is still considered sacred. His aim: to create a "museum without walls or collections"—an itinerary around the site, the village, the surrounding rice fields and an adjacent "sacred" forest harbouring rare plant species that have remained untouched for centuries. He would like to see children from the city visit the site as part of their school programme, be guided through it by the villagers and encourage the revival of lost craft techniques.

Given the number of venerated cultural and historical sites around the island—and throughout Africa—there is potential for this kind of approach to flourish, provided communities feel they have a hold on the process. "All too often this type of operation dies off within six months because an outsider turns up with the money, and when it runs out, the project dies." Rakotoarisoa cautions against making calculations based largely on the economic viability of such projects, expressing reticence over some of the World Bank's cost-benefit approaches to exploiting cultural heritage. The risk, he warns, is that culture will only be on show for outsiders—just as it was when

STUDENTS BOOST A MUSEUM'S WORKFORCE

Zoe Titus

In Namibia, high schools have become key actors in documenting scientific collections

Namibia's national museum was the first on the continent to leap into the Internet age: visitors can walk through a virtual collection of rock art, search an online database of collections or find out about ongoing programmes. Even more engaging are efforts to hook up the country's schools to the Net and heighten environmental awareness, via an annual contest held for the first time in 1999.

The rule: students give the museum a helping hand by computerizing handwritten data on its insect collection, the fifth largest in Africa. In return, their schools win computers and Internet access. "We have over 1.5 million insects in our entomology collection, 70,000 handwritten insect catalogue records, and the usual excuses—no staff, no money and no technical resources," says the museum's Joris Komen, the driving force behind the project. Museums in developing countries often have problems obtaining data on their biodiversity because many insect specimens are kept in foreign museums, and most records are still handwritten. "Instead of going along the tried and failed path of seeking foreign donor support to fill our third-world museum with foreign consultants, expertise and resources, we took it upon ourselves to motivate our local corporate community to support us indirectly by giving them a chance to be socially responsible," continues Komen.

A ripple effect

In less than a year, organizers of the contest raised some $200,000 in computer equipment, services, media, advertising and prizes, mostly from the private sector. A team of supporters and volunteers—many from technical colleges—reconfigured the donated computers for the schools involved. The Insect@thon 1999 contest involved 92 students from 16 schools throughout Namibia, including one for children with learning disabilities. Transport was organized to a technology training centre in Windhoek, and in just two days, the students, aged between 11 and 19, had computerized 20,897 insect inventory records using an innovative child-friendly capture screen designed by the museum on which they had to fill in eleven different data fields. Despite minimal technical skills, students scored a remarkably low 13 per cent error margin. Participants received a string of prizes, from books and cd-roms to radio cassette players.

The contest has had a ripple effect and led to the launch of SchoolNet Namibia, a network among schools, telecommunications and electricity service providers, the business community and other stakeholders to promote Internet development. At present, only 28 per cent of Namibia's 1,600 schools have a telephone connection, and only a handful are online. Money allowing, the museum intends to take the model to Zimbabwe and Zambia. Meanwhile, the contest's winning team, which entered the highest number of records, will visit Sweden in May 2000 for two weeks—to computerize handwritten Namibian insect records held by several museums there. ■

Journalist with *The Namibian*

● **The National Museum of Namibia**
www.natmus.cul.na

MEDIA SELF-CONTROL, THE SOUTH'S NEW OPTION

Jean Huteau

As part of a growing trend in the developing world, press councils are encouraging responsible journalism and press freedom

Since the early 1990s, pluralism and independence have become new watchwords for media in developing countries. Regimes that had been authoritarian, in some cases since independence, have genuinely committed themselves to freedom of the press. Constitutions and laws have been amended, codes of conduct drawn up and press councils established.

But these developments have not taken place everywhere, and their results have not always been conclusive. However, a number of countries have managed in the last few years to create a free press in extremely difficult circumstances and set up a model self-regulatory structure. One of them is South Africa (see box opposite page).

The symbolic date of change was November 9 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down. In central and eastern Europe, the explosion of press freedom was such that in some countries journalists had to pick up the job as they went along because there were not enough professionals to teach them.

An explosion of press freedom

But the shock wave rolled beyond the borders of the former Warsaw Pact countries. Developing countries in Africa and Asia under one-party rule underwent a similar transformation, triggering the same kind of media explosion, albeit in a range of different situations.

The context in Africa is one of civil wars, international conflicts and even genocide, for which some media, such as the notorious "hate radios", bear direct and crushing responsibility. In Rwanda and Burundi, virtually all the media are under government control. Fighting is still going on in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where 84 journalists have been imprisoned, media outlets have been taken over or shut down, newspapers burned and their offices looted.

Africa, Asia and Latin America have also seen countless unwarranted libel actions, censorship, harassment, arrests and killings of journalists. Over the last 10 years, 58 journalists have been murdered in Algeria and 44 in Colombia. Ethiopia has jailed more journalists than almost any other country in the world.

But this tragic decade also saw encouraging changes. UNESCO helped to point the way forward in 1988 when it produced a new communications strategy based on independence and pluralism. The collapse of the Soviet bloc deprived developing countries of a point of reference and backing. Since independence, many of these countries had adopted the model of the one-party state, which was seen as the only way to generate the energy needed to tackle economic backwardness.

The 1990 summit of French-speaking states at La Baule, in France, called on the countries of francophone Africa to introduce more democracy. The English-speaking states of the Commonwealth, meeting in Harare (Zimbabwe), the following year, followed suit and resolved to expel countries which did not comply. This was what happened to Nigeria, Africa's biggest country, then under military rule.

In May 1991, the Windhoek Declaration, drawn up after a UNESCO seminar and later approved by UNESCO's Executive Board, said that an "independent, pluralistic and free press" was vital for "democracy and economic development". The death knell had sounded for the notion of the media controlled by a one-party state to promote national development. Similar declarations were made ▶

Drawing © Pancho, Le Monde, Paris

Former editor-in-chief of the French news agency Agence France-Presse and co-author, with Henri Pigeat, of a book on media ethics to be published by UNESCO later this year.

in respect of every continent by conferences in Alma Ata (Kazakhstan), Santiago (Chile), Sana'a (Yemen) and Sofia (Bulgaria).

Laws and constitutions were amended in Benin and Mozambique in 1990, Burkina Faso (1991), Madagascar, Ghana and Kenya (1992), Nigeria (1993), Cameroon and post-apartheid South Africa (1996) and Thailand (1997). In Cameroon, public pressure forced the government to enact press freedom measures in 1991 as a prelude to free elections and the abolition of censorship the following year.

Watchdogs against bias and inaccuracy

In countries that are sometimes having their first taste of freedom, excesses and errors seem almost inevitable, including press violations of privacy, libel and calumny, outrageous behaviour and unwarranted intrusion. Some new journalists lack experience and training. The issue of responsibility, which no free media outlet can dodge, soon arises.

Côte d'Ivoire, which had been marked since independence in 1960 by censorship and self-censorship, is a good example. The explosion of freedom spawned about 80 political parties and a hundred or so newspapers and other publications. Two years later, only a dozen of the 40 daily papers were still appearing and the government-controlled press had the upper hand. But the media had become a forum for debate.

After the media explosion, the press was criticized for "lack of training and professional responsibility, triviality, ill will, over-zealousness, ignorance and political and religious pressure." The press mixed politics with intrusion into private life, sometimes descending into the gutter. This led to a vicious circle whereby the authorities used media excesses as a pretext to strike at the newly-free media by arresting and jailing journalists. Many private individuals sued the press.

Côte d'Ivoire's government and journalists' trade unions decided to intervene in September 1995 by drawing up a code of conduct and establishing a press council modelled on those in Germany and Quebec; one half of the members are publishers, the other half journalists. This gave birth to the Press Freedom and Professional Ethics Monitor (OLPED). On World Press Freedom Day in 1999, the World Association of Newspapers and the French-based non-governmental organization Reporters Sans Frontières noted that there were "genuinely independent" press organs in Côte d'Ivoire and that journalists could work safely.

Adopting a code of conduct and setting up an independent press council to monitor its application and hear complaints from the public are the first two self-regulatory measures taken in developing countries to head off government intervention and regulation which would bring unforeseeable restrictions. In the developing world, mechanisms of this kind also educate the public and promote press freedom.

A trend is now underway. Press councils were set up in South Korea, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Indonesia in the years after 1960. In the 1990s, a dozen more appeared—in the Philippines and Mozambique in 1991, Ghana (1992), Nigeria (1992 ; revived in 1999), Fiji (1993), Côte d'Ivoire (1994), Senegal (1996), and Peru, Thailand, South Africa and Tanzania (1997).

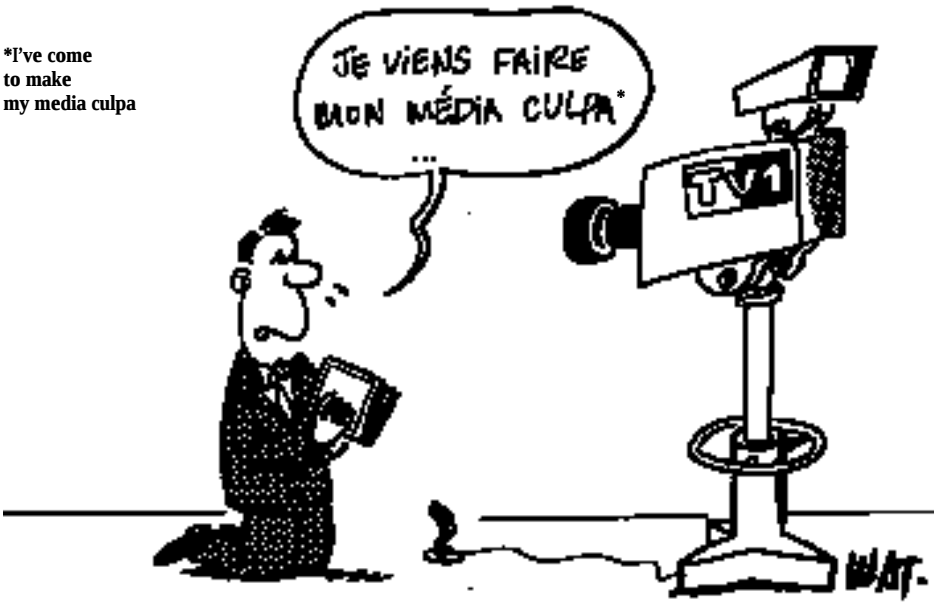
Indian communications expert K.S. Venkateswaran thinks that "an effective press council can ensure that the reader is not short-changed by unscrupulous or shoddy journalistic practices. The council can give him a platform from which to

1. Panos Institute, *Médias et déontologie en Afrique de l'Ouest*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1996, p.45.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXAMPLE

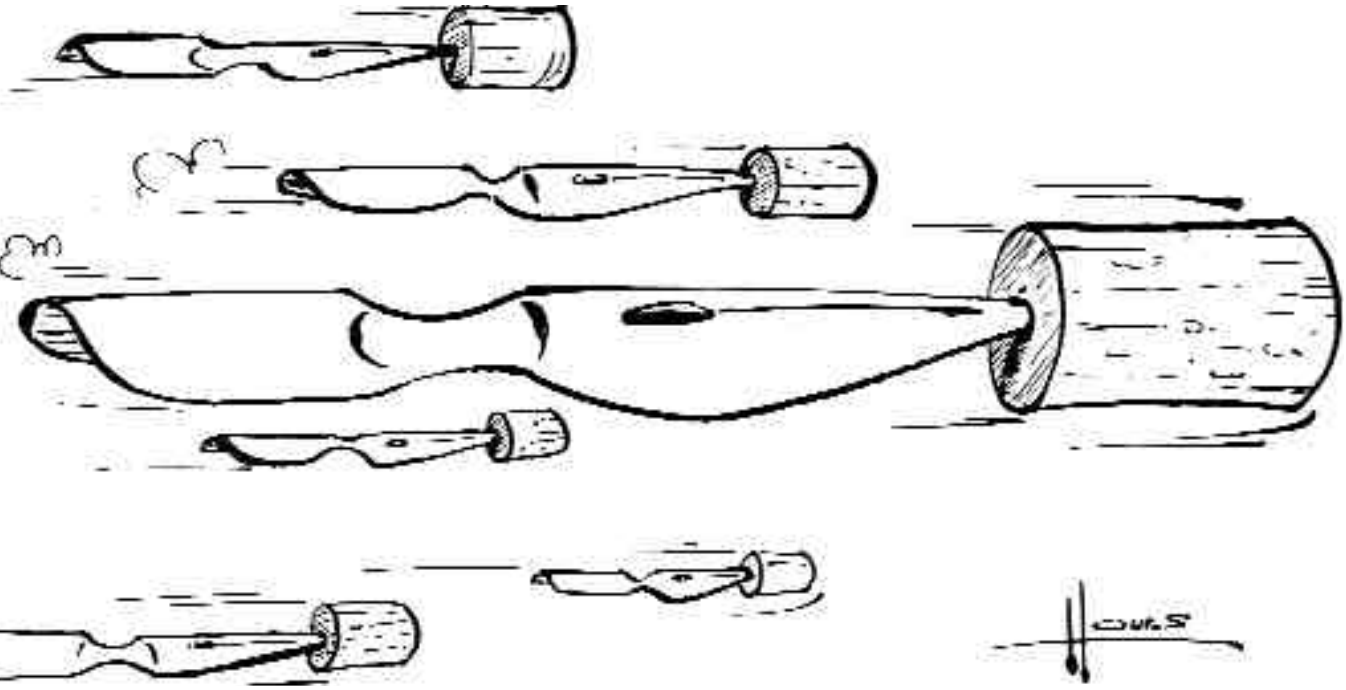
The media regulation and self-regulation mechanisms in South Africa consist of:

- A press ombudsman and an appeal panel set up in 1997 by journalists and publishers' associations. The panel is composed of publishers, journalists, and members of the public, who are in the majority. It is funded by the newspaper publishers association (www.inc.co.za/online/ombudsman). Its power is limited to publishing reprimands and corrections which the ombudsman or the panel consider necessary. Complaints against the press are lodged by private individuals or institutions first with the ombudsman, who will try to settle the matter. If this fails, the complaint becomes a formal one. The complainant can appeal against the ombudsman's decisions to the appeal panel. At each stage, discussions between the conflicting parties are held.
- The Broadcasting Monitoring and Complaints Committee (BMCC), made up of four members from the legal profession and the media and chaired by a working or retired judge. The committee reports to the Independent Broadcasting Authority, an audio-visual regulatory body set up by law in 1993. The law which created the authority provides for rectifications (broadcast on radio and TV), publication paid for by the guilty party, injunctions, fines and temporary or permanent suspension of broadcasting licences. The committee examines violations of the codes of conduct for news and advertising which are part of the law and also violations of the terms of the licence-holders' contracts.
- The Advertising Standards Authority, which monitors advertising and complaints about it.
- The Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCCSA), set up in 1993 by the National Broadcasters' Association, is an independent regulatory body grouping private and community radio stations, as well as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the public service media entity. Its powers are limited to publication of its decisions. It receives complaints from the public about violations of the radio and TV code of conduct it has drawn up. It has to try mediation before giving its verdict. ■



***I've come to make my media culpa**

Drawing © WAT



Drawing © Hours, Perols

ventilate his grievances against biased, inaccurate or inadequate reporting on matters of legitimate public interest."

He points out that a council can act more quickly and more cheaply than the courts in cases where "for example, the government or a public sector undertaking is alleged to discriminate unfairly against certain newspapers in, say, the allocation of advertising or newsprint (as often happens in many developing countries)."

When Algeria set up an information council in 1990—an institution that could be criticized on the grounds that half the members were government representatives and the other half journalists—it was an unprecedented step towards freedom of expression in the Arab world.When the country got caught up in a spiral of repression in 1994, the council was dissolved. Nigeria's press council was a casualty of dictatorship but was revived after free elections in 1999.

When Morocco began political reform, a journalistic code of conduct was adopted and there were calls for a press council. But the most liberal example of self-regulation is South Africa, which set up a system in 1997 (see box) clearly based on the Swedish model, the oldest and one of the most respected in Europe.

In Asia, a seminar organized in 1996 by the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) in Singapore and Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University revealed that in most Asian countries press councils were not protecting the local media against attacks on press freedom or offering ordinary citizens the means to counter abuses by the media. Since then, however, AMIC has offered many courses and written material about laws and self-regulation mechanisms. A press council has been set up in Thailand and Indonesia's press law was recently amended. A big effort is also being made in this area by the Asia Press Foundation, which includes 15 or so media institutes in the region.

The need for codes of conduct is bound to increase with the world media boom. However wide the North-South gap may be, nothing suggests that the growth of the media in developing countries—though too slow and inadequate—is going to stop. Despite often tragic obstacles, wars and economic inequality, media expansion will continue, even in developing countries. In two big democracies, Brazil and India, the circulation of the daily press grew by 24 per cent and 47 per cent respectively between 1993 and 1997. Such advances involve setting up or strengthening regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms.

A framework for independence

As soon as a national press achieves a significant level of organization and influence, the issue of its responsibility inevitably arises. Experience has shown that a press like South Africa's, despite the country's colonial past and history of discrimination, has inherited certain structures which were helpful when it came to devise a self-regulatory mechanism. It was the same in India where, taking a cue from the British press, the media played an important part in the achievement of national independence. Pakistan, which turned away from such structures, has had a lot more difficulty establishing an independent press.

In developing countries where structures of this kind exist, journalism has a promising future. A framework for independence and pluralism has now been defined. While it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that great obstacles lie ahead, the encouraging progress made so far must be welcomed. ■

2. Venkateswaran, K.S.(dir). *Media Monitors in Asia*, Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC),Singapore,1996. p.2.

WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

http://www.unesco.org/webworld/webprize/

Cyberculture, art and literature blend successfully in two new sites. Nirvanet, a creation by a Brussels-based team of international web designers, is a multicultural, multilingual presentation of cultures and places around the world through art, music and video. From the University of Chile, a team of students and professors have set up their own multilingual site dedicated to the poet Vicente Huidobro, bringing him within everyone's reach through imaginative design. These sites have been awarded UNESCO's top web prizes. Three other sites, on world music, women's literature and Mozart, also won honourable mentions. They may all be accessed from the above address. ■

ENKI BILAL: A JOURNEY TO THE END OF TIME

In comics, books and movies, a Yugoslav-born French artist visits the future to put the past in perspective and wields humour as a weapon against horror

Memory is a recurrent theme in your work and the leitmotif of your latest book, co-written with the French novelist Dan Franck. Its title is *Un siècle d'amour*–a century of love–but it's really about a century of terror.

The creative process is based on memory. Artists are a compound of memory and sensibility. How could they talk about humanity and the world without delving into history and drawing on memory—their own and the memory of society and of nature? Memory can be more or less prominent in an artist's work. But even when it's scarcely perceptible, it's always the raw material of art.

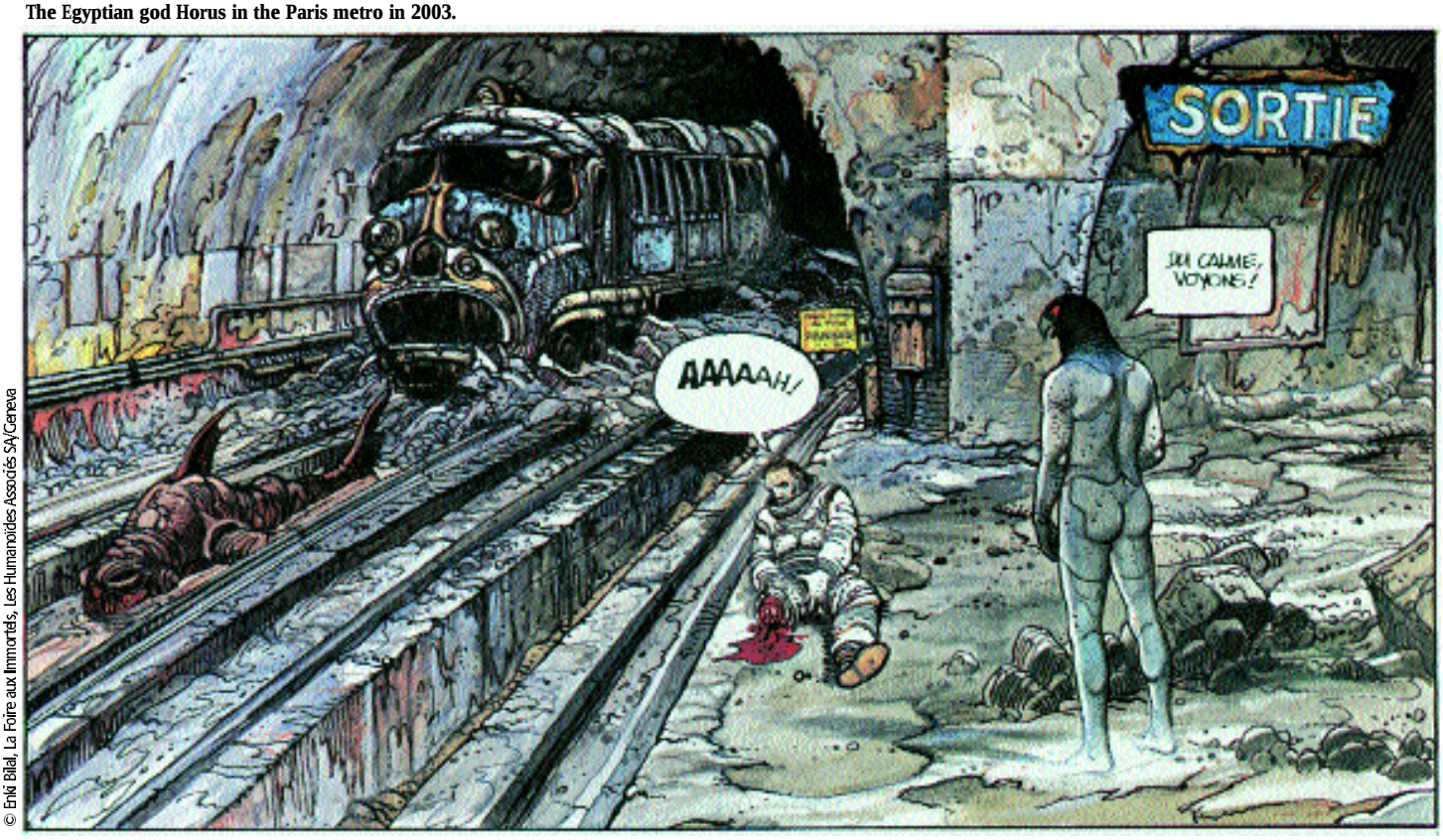
How do you differentiate between history and memory?

Let's take the case of *Un siècle d'amour*. It isn't a book about history, even though it starts in 1914, ends in 1999 and moves from Guernica to the Holocaust, Hiroshima and events in Africa—fairly classic chapters of history. Each episode evokes the experiences of a woman caught up in the torment of war. Dan wrote the stories of these 13 witnesses, victims and heroines of our times. I painted their portraits. But the book is not very accurate historically. It starts in Sarajevo 1914 and ends in Saravejo 1999 and not—as respect for chronology would have required—with events in Kosovo, decisive though these were for this book. Readers should see this as a deliberate act of infidelity to history rather than an attempt to misrepresent it. Sarajevo, a multi-ethnic, multicultural city sacrificed to horror, has come to symbolize the memory of this murderous century.

In *Le Sommeil du monstre* ("The Sleeping Monster"), an animated film based on the war in Sarajevo that you wrote and drew, you flash forward to 2026 to observe today's world. Why did you use this technique?

It's very odd, but when I depict a brutal scene, I feel deeply uneasy if I set it in the present. If I situate it 20 or 30 years later, however, I enjoy the creative process. The horrible pictures from Africa and Chechnya that you see everywhere in the media bring us information (I won't get involved in the debate about its quality) in

The Egyptian god Horus in the Paris metro in 2003.



real time. Such images come to us via two vehicles of reality, photography and reporting. They are part of a language that is quite different from the artist's.

So there is a feeling of personal uneasiness as well as a desire to step back from reality, to be disconnected from it. But this doesn't keep me from returning to the real world. I visit the future to come back to the past and the present.

These three dimensions of time often overlap in your books. The first scene in *Le Sommeil du monstre*, for example, takes place in an old New York yellow cab transformed into a flying machine. This kind of contemporary detail ensures that readers don't feel totally immersed in a science fiction world.

I don't want them to be.What's more, I find the term science fiction slightly irritating. I am against all kinds of labels, codifications and classifications in literature. I don't think there's a hard-and-fast boundary between the worlds of Jules Verne, George Orwell and H.P. Lovecraft and those of Baudelaire, Kafka and Poe. I think the boundaries between genres are fading away. More and more authors are weaving the future into their works, whether they are writing novels or philosophy. That said, I have loved science fiction since I was a teenager. Science fiction enabled me to observe the world in its cosmic dimension, to have a global vision of the Earth which influences the questions I ask about the existence of other life forms and about the human condition.

Religion can become very dangerous, especially if it develops into a sect mentality. All kinds of excesses are on the cards in this rapidly changing world which doesn't have much idea about where it's going

What worries you most about today's world?

Without falling into the trap of "knee-jerk ecology", I must say that I am afraid for our planet. It is becoming weaker all the time. I have a sense of terrible waste. We have taken too much out of the Earth, we have heedlessly consumed its resources and caused irreparable harm.

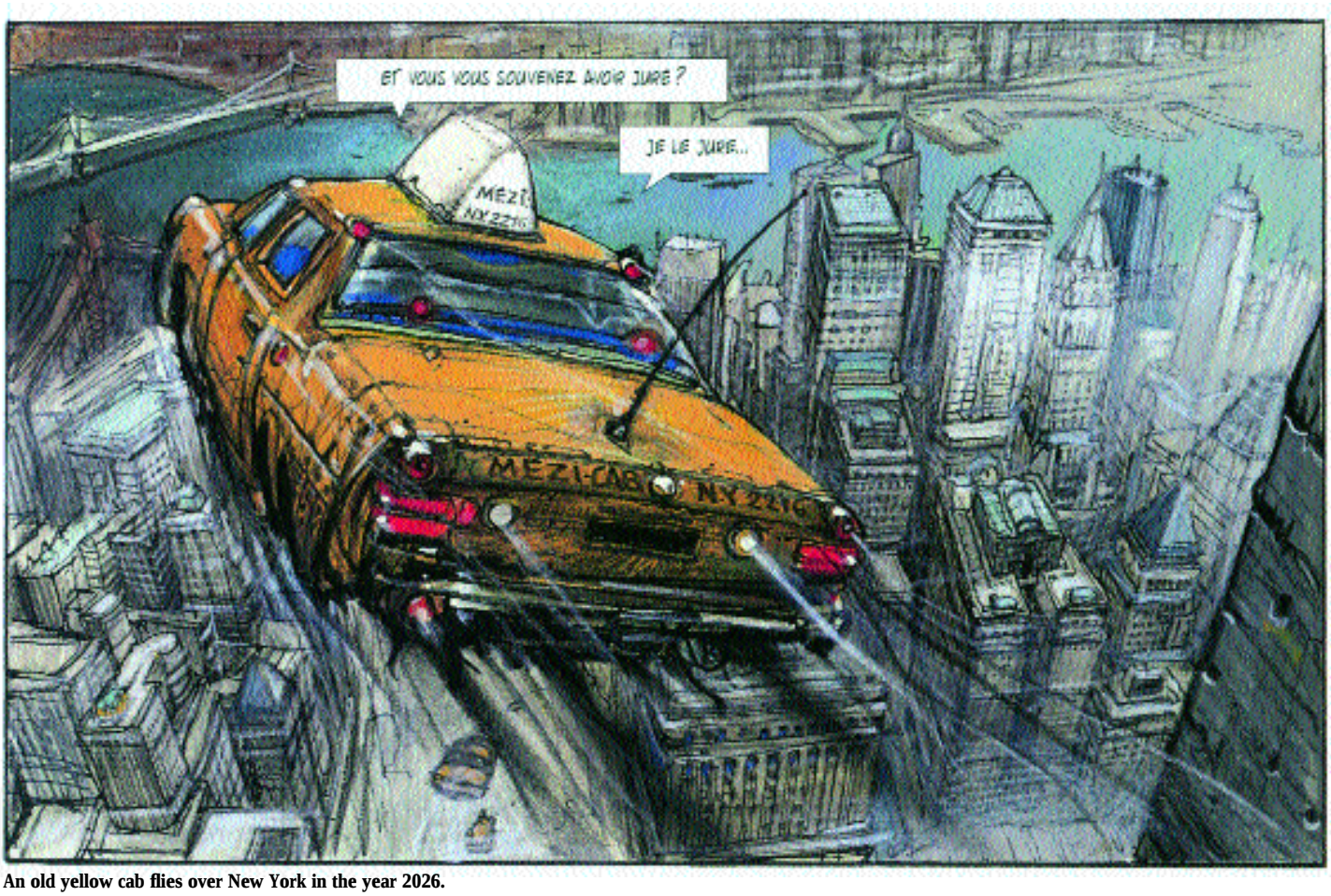
Religious fundamentalism also alarms me.Imagine "Talibanism" on a world scale! It's terrifying. Religion can become very dangerous, especially if it develops into a sect mentality. All kinds of excesses are on the cards in this rapidly changing world which doesn't have much idea about where it's going. It's both exciting and frightening not to know what the future holds in store. Twenty years ago, when the world was divided into two camps, everything was simple, almost simplistic. Our side was good, the other was evil. We knew where the enemy was. That's the world we grew up in. We were shaped in its mould. Then, all of a sudden,everything fell apart. The change was so swift and so abrupt that it took us unawares. Our minds weren't ready for it. The war in Yugoslavia proves the point. It was almost a nineteenth-century war. It was archaic. And "archaicists" are the ones who caused it. ▶

© Emmanuel Scorcelletti/Gamma, Paris

A PROLIFIC ARTIST

Enki Bilal was born in Belgrade (Yugoslavia) in 1951 and went with his parents to live in Paris in 1960. He began his career as a comic strip artist at the age of 19 on the magazine *Pilote*. In 1987, he won the best book award at the annual comic strip festival held at Angoulême in southwest France. Bilal has produced some 20 books and directed two films.

Published by Les Humanoïdes Associés:
☛ Albums from the Nikopol trilogy:
La Foire aux Immortels, 1980 (*Gods in Chaos, 1987*)
La Femme piège, 1986 (*The Woman Trap*, 1988)
Froid Equateur, 1992
La Trilogie Nikopol (complete edition),1995
Other albums:
Mémoires d'outre-espace, 1978 (*Outer States*, 1990)
Crux Universalis, 1982 (out of print)
Mémoires d'autres temps, 1996
L'Etat des stocks 1971-1986 (re-published in 1999)
Le Sommeil du Monstre, 1999
☛ With Pierre Christin:
La Croisière des oubliés, 1975
Le Vaisseau de pierre, 1976
La Ville qui n'existait pas, 1977 (*The Town That Didn't Exist*, 1989)
Les Phalanges de l'Ordre Noir, 1979 (*The Ranks of the Black Order*, 1989)
Partie de chasse (completed in 1990)
Coeurs sanglants, 1988
Après le Mur (collective work), 1990
☛ With Jean-Pierre Dionnet:
Exterminateur 17, 1979 (*Exterminator 17*, 1986)
Published by Dargaud:
☛ With Jean-Pierre Thévenet:
Images pour un film ("La vie est un roman", by Alain Resnais), 1983
Published by Autrement:
☛ With Pierre Christin:
Los Angeles, L'Etoile oubliée de Laurie Blum, 1984
☛ With Patrick Cauvin:
Hors Jeu, 1987
Published by Christian Desbois:
Bleu sang, 1994
☛ With Dan Franck, Fabienne Renault and Isi Véléris:
Tykho Moon–Livre d'un film, 1996
Published by Futuropolis:
Appel des étoiles, 1975 (expanded version: *Le Bol maudit*, 1982)
Paris sera toujours Paris, 1981 (collective work)
Die Mauer, 1982 (drawings)
☛ With Grange, Tardi and Pichard:
Grange bleue, 1985
☛ All English titles published by Catalan Communications, New York
Filmography
Bunker Palace Hôtel, 1989
Tykho Moon, 1997. ■



An old yellow cab flies over New York in the year 2026.

Nike, the main hero of *Le Sommeil du monstre*, battles the "Obscurantis Order", a kind of sect headed by "three new, self-proclaimed charismatic leaders". Is that a veiled allusion to the three leaders who brought about the break-up of Yugoslavia, Serbia's Milosevic, Croatia's Tudjman and Bosnia's Izetbegovic?

The idea for the "Obscurantis Order" arose from fundamentalism, but readers are free to make their own interpretations. That's the point of the book: everyone can make of it what they will. There's nothing to stop people making a connection with the three war leaders you mentioned, who were fully tolerated and cynically accepted by Europe. Better things could have been done. Europe should have intervened as soon as the rise of nationalism began in 1987. Not necessarily militarily—a carrot-and-stick approach could have been used by saying, "Hey, Europe is under construction, don't miss the boat." At that time, Yugoslavia was better placed than any other East European country to join the European Union.

How did you feel about the war that ravaged the country where you were born?

It hit me like a smack in the face. I've lived in France since 1960, but I was born in Belgrade. My father was from Herzegovina and my mother came from Czechoslovakia at the age of two. I spent the first nine years of my life in Yugoslavia. I was born a Yugoslav or, if you like, a "Yugoslovak"—that's what I was called by Alain Resnais, the director of *La vie est un roman*, a film for which I designed the sets.

I loved that country. Split, Dubrovnik, Sarajevo, Belgrade. I went back as soon as I could,even though it was to relive childhood memories more than anything else. Then I was sucked into the terrible reality of the war. But at the same time, I remained on the outside. A good thirty years had gone by since I left, I was an observer, above the fray, I didn't take any strong positions.

It was painful. I felt as if I was caught in the grip of this history, yet at the same time I tried to stay detached in order to understand what was going on. I'm not sure I succeeded. Some situations are irrational. I saw French intellectuals taking positions that sometimes seemed grotesque. I mistrusted these opinions, even if their basis was sound, even if they reflected a kind of generosity.

In short, it was a very hard time, but obviously nowhere near as hard as it was for the people on the spot. I experienced and exorcised my anxiety in my own way, with *Le Sommeil du monstre*.

The world of that comic book is sombre and dominated by cold colours. But humour keeps on breaking through, even at the most tragic moments. For example, you write, "A rocket slammed through a wing of the hospital, causing three casualties, including an innocent Sony television set that was switched off".

That is part of the inexplicable relationship between the author and his work. I need humour, of course. It defuses certain situations. It adds a light touch to stories that would otherwise be utterly turgid.

On the opening page of *La Foire aux immortels*, you quote this passage from the writings of Choublanc, the Fascist governor of Paris in 2023: "Immortality is a form of dictatorship of life over death. As a dictator, and someone who is alive, all that's left for me is to become immortal. And I will! Even if I die in the process!"

That is a completely way-out comic book in which Egyptian gods play the game Monopoly in a flying pyramid that has run out of fuel and hovers over Paris. In it I describe the quest for immortality in its most ludicrous forms. Choublanc, who believes memory and history are

outdated concepts, will do anything in his power to achieve immortality. At the same time, Alcide Nikopol, a deserter launched into outer space in a flying refrigerator in 1992, falls out of the sky deep-frozen! This wretched mortal is rescued by the god Horus, who wants to use his body to settle his scores with the other Egyptian deities. Thirty years have gone by. Paris has changed a lot. Alcide is totally lost. His memory gradually comes back and, with it, Baudelaire's poems, which he recites all through the events that take place. The first one describes death at its most repellent.

I don't like death. I'm terrified of it and I'm always thinking about it in a somewhat abstract way. I've come to terms with it as best I can. We might as well laugh about it, don't you think?

The monstrous dictator's name is Choublanc, which means a loser in French. Is that because he is doomed to fail? Is there any symbolism in the names you give your characters?

It's very odd. Both names and titles come to me automatically. I don't know how it happens or where they come from. But I do know that I'm incapable of writing a book or making a film without knowing the title beforehand. It comes out of the blue. There's nothing premeditated about it. When I started the story about Choublanc, I didn't even know how it was going to develop. I already have the title of my next book, which is a follow-up to *Le Sommeil du monstre*. It's *32 décembre*—"December 32". When I started writing *32 décembre*, I didn't even known what the expression meant. Now, one of the book's aims is to find a meaning for its title.

Why did you name the head of the "Obscurantis Order" Warhole? Your female characters, painted in a dominant colour, owe something to Andy Warhol.

There's a pun in Warhole. There's a gaping hole over Nike's head in the hospital at Sarajevo. But it's also a deliberate allusion to Andy Warhol. Names can harbour a host of meanings. In the next book, you'll see that Warhole is also an artist. An artist of supreme evil. He has decided to turn evil into an art-form. His geopolitical strategy in the first book will be replaced by an artistic strategy.

You often name your characters after real people. Nike's last name is Hatzfeld, a journalist with the French daily *Libération* who was seriously wounded in Sarajevo in 1992. In *Froid Equateur*, you allude to the Albanian-born choreographer Angelin Preljocaj.

To me, news is the raw material for any projection into the future. I soak up news, and my story, which is set in the future, is packed with events from the present. And if my readers don't follow current political events, they are sometimes likely to get lost.

Anjelin is a rather special case. *Froid* ▶

"An artist needs to stand outside his time."

© Enki Bilal, Le Sommeil du Monstre, Les Humanoïdes Associés SA/Geneva, 1998

Equateur came out in 1992. Two years later,I designed the sets and costumes for his *Romeo and Juliet*. It was an exceptional and exciting encounter on two counts. Wide-eyed, I discovered the world of dance, which until then had been pretty much a closed book to me. At the same time I came to know a gifted artist who has since become a friend.

Doesn't the fact that both of you are from the Balkans explain *Romeo and Juliet's* success?

Of course it does. We have a shared Balkan sensibility. I was immediately won over by the way Anjelin wanted to stage *Romeo and Juliet*—his radical approach, the social setting of a drama that takes on political and even ethnic overtones. It was a deeply fulfilling experience which gave me an opportunity to serve not only the world's most beautiful love story but also an artist who uses dancers' bodies to externalize his ideas. For an illustrator,it's fascinating to see how bodies express themselves.

The heroine in your book *The Woman Trap* is called Jill Bioskop. Her last name means "cinema" in Serb. *Froid Equateur* begins and ends with scenes of a movie being made. Are you a film buff?

Movies have stimulated my imagination ever since I was a child.When I was a teenager, I was fascinated by an art form which I felt was both close to and parallel to what I dreamed of doing. Cinema held an extraordinary attraction, but at the same time it seemed inaccessible. So I started drawing, which for me was a way of making movies freely, alone at home.

Later, you directed two fiction films, *Bunker Palace Hotel and Tykho Moon*. Does film-making involve more constraints than creating comic strips?

The two activities are worlds apart. Cinema is nothing but constraints. When you create a comic book, you don't have to think about production costs, shooting locations, equipment and actors. Everything depends on the author, who is extraordinarily free. But inherent in that freedom is the danger of going off the rails. Illustrators have to harness their freedom all the time, keep it under control.

But the film industry is changing. New tools such as small digital cameras are enabling younger directors to make movies with low budgets and, above all, enjoy greater freedom than their predecessors. I think we're heading towards a bipolarization in cinema. On the one hand spectacular blockbusters, on the other a small-scale, almost underground cinema that is bound to be very interesting.

How does the world of your comic strips relate to that of your films?

It's the same world, the same preoccupations, the same atmosphere. I've been criticized for making "comic strip" films. That's completely ridiculous. What on earth is a "comic strip" film? This false perception may explain why my films haven't really been successful in France. In Japan, on the other hand, they met with exceptional acclaim, just like my books.

The comic strip had a chequered career before it achieved recognition as the ninth art. Are comic strip artists well thought of in the world of the arts?

Personally, I am in a very fortunate position.I get a lot of media attention,too much sometimes. I have to be careful.But in some quarters I still feel there is a certain contempt for graphic art in general. In some literary, publishing and even cinema circles, people still think words are on a higher plane than pictures.

All the same, in 1992 the editors of the French literary magazine *Lire* chose *Froid Equateur* as their "book of the year".

The choice was very badly received both in the literary world and the comic strip world.The press didn't talk about it. It was pretty funny.

It's odd, but the art world denigrates illustration and comic strips. A year ago, the French magazine *Beaux-Arts* published some stories about the comic strip festival held in the southwestern city of Angoulême. The lead article kicked off by warning readers that just because the editors were publishing a special section about comic strips it didn't necessarily mean they considered them to be art.

Not long before, *Beaux-Arts* had published a five-page piece about me. And now all of a sudden it was as if they regretted it. They didn't want to turn off their old subscribers. But at the same time, they wanted to attract younger readers. This is a pretty dishonest approach. But I'm hopeful. I think the people who think this way are, fortunately, doomed either to disappear or to change. ■

Interview by Jasmina Sopova,
UNESCO Courier journalist

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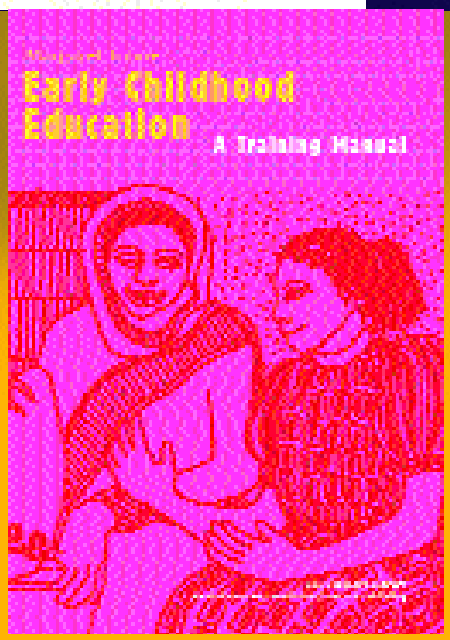

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