

# The Endangered Alphabets Project

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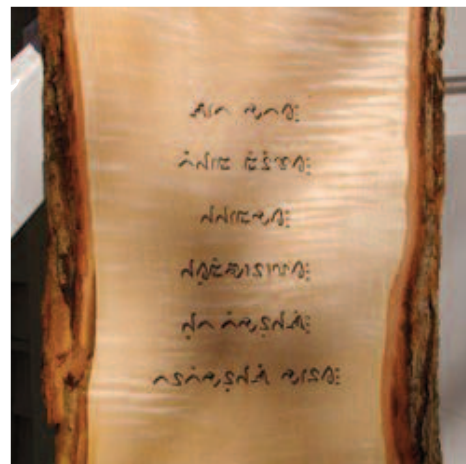
As you probably know, the world has between 6,000 and 7,000 languages, half of which may be extinct by the end of this century. Another and even more dramatic effect of this erosion of cultural diversity concerns the alphabets in which those languages are written.

Writing has become so dominated by a small number of global cultures that those 6,000-7,000 languages are written in fewer than 100 alphabets.

Moreover, at least a third of the world's remaining alphabets are endangered—no longer taught in schools, no longer used for commerce or government, understood only by a few elders, restricted to a few monasteries or used only in ceremonial documents, magic spells, or secret love letters.

The Endangered Alphabets Project, which I started in 2009 as an exhibition of fourteen carvings (on boards of spectacular Vermont curly maple) and a book, is the first-ever attempt to bring attention to this issue.

In each case, the text I've carved is the same—namely, Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted in 1948 at the foundation of the United Nations: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The irony, of course, is that many of these forms of writing are endangered precisely because human beings do not always act towards one another in that spirit.



Since 2009, the number of scripts I've carved has grown to more than 20, and I plan to take them on a World Tour: I want to go back to the countries where the writing systems originated and are now imperilled, to raise issues and questions about cultural preservation and language loss.

The original purpose still holds strong, and is what draws the most support from around the world. For me personally, though, the project is also an in-

vestigation of the nature of writing. For example: this evening I put a coat of polyurethane on a piece of Vermont hard maple that has two (literally) overlapping visual characteristics. One is the Balinese character for Om, an astonishing piece of graphic art that looks like a cat wearing a crown. The other is the ripple in the wood, which is so strong it looks like a three-dimensional hologram of the isobars of a monsoon.

In short, a human pattern is overlaid on a far older, natural pattern. And it strikes me that language is all about pattern recognition: we hear sounds or see symbols and recognize them, and thus ascribe meaning. No recognition, no meaning. That carving, then, suggests that we have inherited our understanding of pattern, and thus of language, from patterns as old as the planet, as old as physics, that rule everything around us. That one board spells out the history of the universe, and of our human attempt to ride out those stormy currents by establishing patterns of our own.

See and read more at <http://www.endangeredalphabets.com>.

