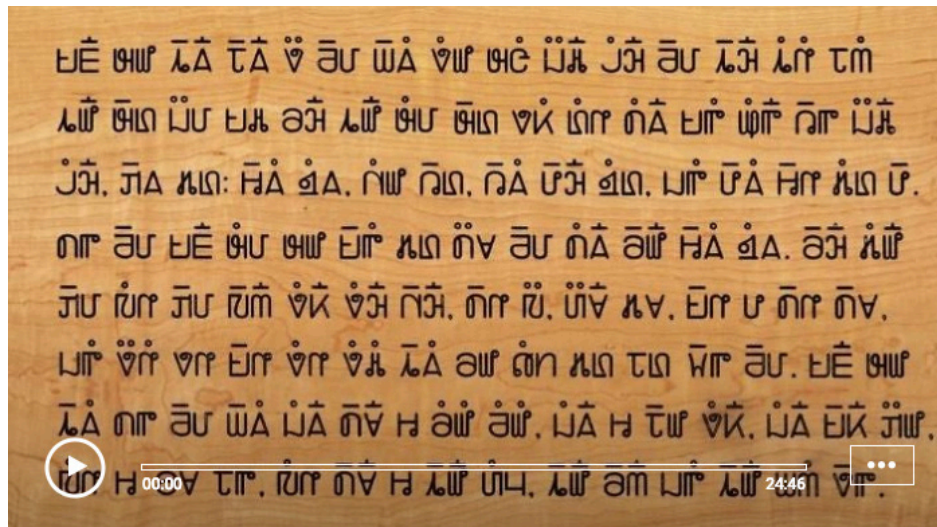


Alphabets at risk: Mapping the world's endangered alphabets



Phahauh Hmong is one of many alphabets at risk of disappearing by this century, says Timothy Brookes, founder of Endangered Alphabets

The world's alphabets are in danger of disappearing, says a researcher who has created an atlas to map our alphabets and bring attention to their plight.

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Nearly half the world's languages will have disappeared by the end of this century, says a UNESCO report. The organisation has designated 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Language - IYIL2019 to raise awareness of that fact.

But, another crucial component of language and how we record information may also be at global risk: alphabets.

The alphabets, scripts and writing systems we use to encode and record language gather less attention than the spoken languages themselves, but researcher Timothy Brookes says their disappearance would be a tragedy for human civilization.

As president of Endangered Alphabets, which catalogues the world's endangered scripts in an online atlas, Brookes became interested in the world's languages when he began carving them into wood.

"It actually began ten years ago when I started carving words in wood, and I started carving wood into signs for people to hang up, a member of my family to hang up outside their businesses or whatever."



Some of the scripts and alphabets of the world that are at risk of disappearing, says Timothy Brookes, Endangered Alphabets.

He started carving Chinese characters because he was fascinated by their beauty, then moved onto sayings and prayers in more obscure languages and scripts he found through Omniglot.com, where the world's writing systems are recorded. Finally, he began publicly exhibiting his carvings and decided that recording, cataloging and raising awareness of these alphabets was crucially important.

While UNESCO has done intensive research into the loss of indigenous languages, little information was gathered about endangered alphabets, so Brookes created the Endangered Alphabets initiative. Listing more than 100 alphabets deemed likely to be endangered, his online atlas of global writing systems and scripts tells a brief story around each language and where it is in the world.

According to Brookes' research, there are around 170 alphabets in the world and nearly 80 per cent of them are endangered. He says that most native languages in countries such as the US and Australia, where English is the language of the dominant culture, are extinct, and other dominant cultures risk the extinction of other languages and alphabets unless proper care is taken.



Online atlas of endangered alphabets that world's minorities and indigenous people are trying to preserve and revive their languages and scripts, Timothy Brookes, Endangered Alphabets

“When a minority or indigenous culture loses its sense of identity and purpose, then suicide rates go up, alcoholism and drug use goes up, child mortality goes up, education rate goes down, birth rate goes down,” says Brookes. “It’s not only a collective and personal loss, it is also a public health crisis and you see this crisis in Canada, it happened in the United States I believe it happened in Australia.”

The tide is turning around the world, though, says Brookes, who cites government initiatives as having an effect on the preservation of indigenous languages and alphabets.

Awareness and appreciation of Indigenous language is growing in Australia, while New Zealand even broadcasts some major programs in Maori.

The Filipino government also recently “introduced a bill to identify native languages and writing systems and set policies to protect, preserve and promote them and use whatever means to disseminate and to teach these languages in the education system,” says Brookes. Meanwhile Japanese government also recently recognized its Ainu Indigenous culture by introducing new laws to protect and preserve its native heritage.

Another example he cites is of Canadian road signs “that are also written in both English and in Inuktitut, the Canadian Innu’s script.”

“So all these incidents are a pretty encouraging sign,” says Brookes.

A spirit of inclusion and appreciation on the importance of those languages on the part of the dominant will also affect whether alphabets survive, Brookes says.

“If you openly celebrate and embrace diversity then you are likely to promote those individual cultures, their music – all those aspects,” says Brookes. “It really comes down to the dominant culture’s attitude toward minority cultures.”