



Rescuing Almost-Lost Building-Blocks of Communication

May 2, 2019 by David Tereshchuk



ALL-TOO-ACCUSTOMED to the dangers of extinction? Well... we do know, many of us, about threatened species like Africa's black rhinoceros, the querulous-looking California Condor (pictured left), the Humpy Salmon of the northern Pacific, the tiny but beautiful Bird's-Foot Violet of the east and the mid-west, or the oddly-textured Amanita mushrooms of Texas (below right). But what of human languages that are endangered, and more specifically their alphabets, which can be extraordinarily eloquent visually as well as verbally?

I confess I knew little in detail – especially about threats to that basic element of a language that enables it to be written down for a continuing life, its actual lettering. Until, that is, I met Tim Brookes (below left).

Over the past ten years he's dedicated himself to seeking out little-known alphabets around the world that are in danger of dying out – or of being killed off, often by oppressive authorities. Perhaps more importantly, his mission then, having located them, is to work at preserving them. To that end he's founded the nonprofit Endangered Alphabets which is steadily – to employ maybe too obvious a phrase – making its mark.



"If something is important," Brookes points out, "we write it down. Yet 90% of the world's writing-systems are on the verge of vanishing – not granted official status, not taught in schools, discouraged and dismissed."

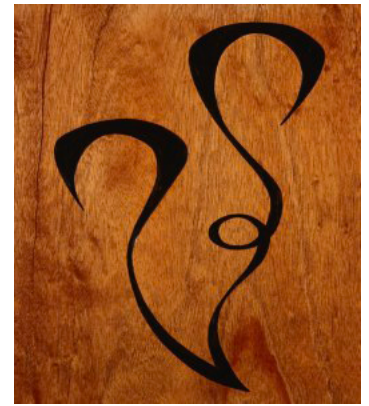
Hearing his indictment of callous destructiveness by officialdom, I'm prompted to recall the crude efforts by 19th Century English soldiers – thankfully unsuccessful in the long run – to stamp out Gaelic in Ireland ... a colonial process whose clumsy cruelty has been evocatively captured in Brian Friel's great play "Translations". Like many Friel plays, by the way, it is based in a village called Ballybeg, and that's an anglicization of the Gaelic Baile Beag ... but these italic characters I've typed here are merely the closest I can get to the actual Gaelic, using my computer's Latin keyboard. You get the point?

There doesn't have to be a malign government at work to threaten traditional scripts.

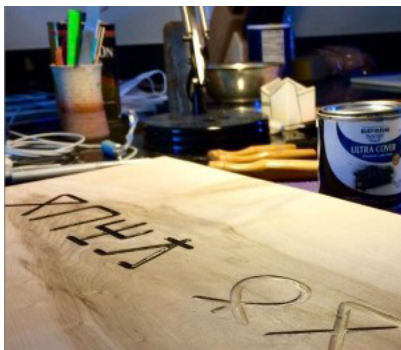
The global expansion in telecommunications – and even more the explosive digital revolution – have driven what Brookes calls “a new kind of cultural imperialism” into every corner of the world. “Almost everyone,” he says “has a screen or wants one, and there on every screen and every keyboard is the English language and the Latin alphabet – or one of the world's half-dozen other dominant writing-systems.”

And yet now Brookes senses a change, and mercifully some pushback:

“2019 is a remarkable time in the history of writing systems. In spite of creeping globalization, political oppression and economic inequalities, minority cultures are starting to revive interest in their traditional scripts. Calligraphy is turning writing into art; letters are turning up as ear-rings, words as pendants, proverbs as clothing designs. Individuals, groups, organizations and even governments are showing interest in preserving and protecting traditional writing-systems.”



The Cham script of SE Asia – this character resembles E in English



CARVING Work-in-Progress: Beria script from Sudan, saying ‘Save Our Language’

Brookes has long been a travel writer, so he has encountered many minority and marginalized languages in both their oral and written forms. But his work helping to preserve their alphabets has made him turn to another, quite different skillset – that of carving in wood. He raises funds for his alphabet-rescuing by making and selling examples of the lettering that he's painstakingly chiseled into hunks or boards of Vermont ‘Quilted’ Maple and other graceful timbers.

Among the people and alphabets that Brookes is supporting are the Marma, the Mro and Chakma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. They still speak their native languages, but nowadays very few of them can still read and write in their unique script. Brookes has partnered with local educator Maung Nyeu to create and publish schoolbooks – some as simple as coloring books and games for teaching children their letters.

One page from their pictorial dictionary displays various languages' words for ‘Frog’, in their respective cultures' scripts:

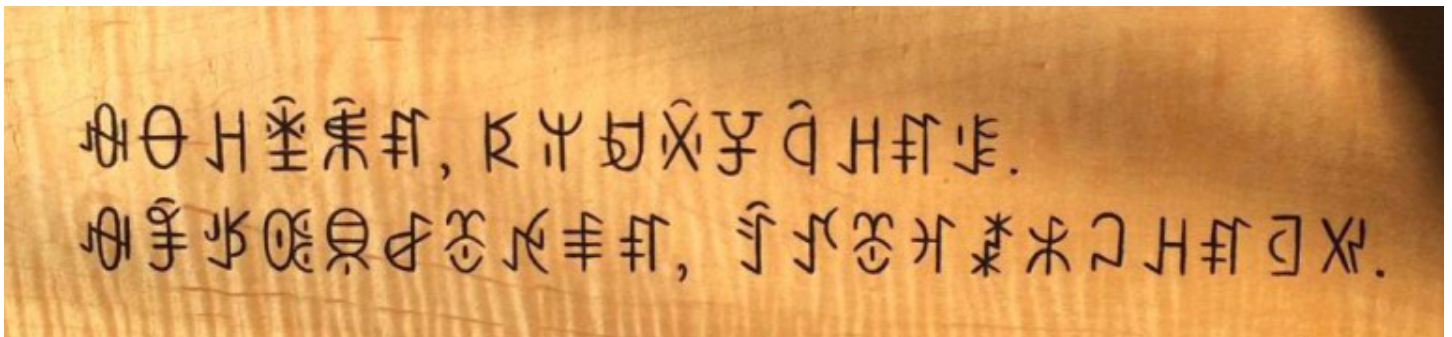


At top left, the word ‘Yongla’ is ‘frog’ in the Tripura language, which sadly has to be shown in the Latin alphabet because the Tripura people's script has already been lost. Clockwise around the frog illustration are translations into Marma, and then Mro. After the English word comes Bangla, the country's official language, and finally (at 9 o'clock), Chakma.

MUCH CLOSER TO HOME Brookes has been working with the Abenaki people who are indigenous to the shores of Lake Champlain, in Vermont, New York State, and in Canada. During this, the year that the United Nations has declared the International Year of Indigenous Languages, Vermont's State House in Montpelier has hosted an exhibition featuring Brookes' alphabet carvings including the Abenaki's characters (in this case on local cherry-wood). And as I write the Abenaki's art and artifacts have just been declared a permanent feature of the state legislature's home, and the display opened formally to public view yesterday, May Day.

I've of course mentioned only a few of the world's alphabets that are in danger. Brookes has created an interactive online map showing the locations of scores of them worldwide. Since "going live" digitally just last month, the Atlas has already scored nearly 70,000 page-views. It's impressively comprehensive – though, as Brookes is quick to point out, it's not exhaustive. Indeed the response from viewers so far has brought to his attention twenty more scripts that will have to be added to the Atlas.

You can support Brookes' work by buying examples of the carvings (which you can see in the Gallery at www.endangeredalphabets.com) or by becoming a 'sponsor' for one of the endangered alphabets in the Atlas, at www.endangeredalphabets.net/support-our-work/.



APT QUOTE: Article 1 of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights – in the script of northern China's Yi or Nuoso language, carved by Tim Brookes