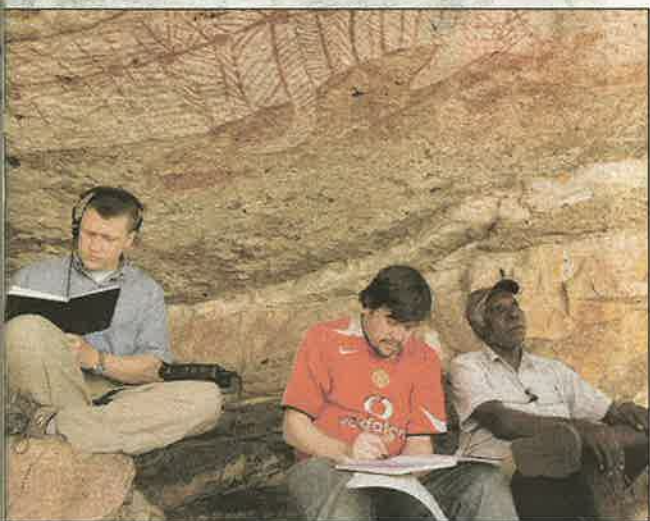
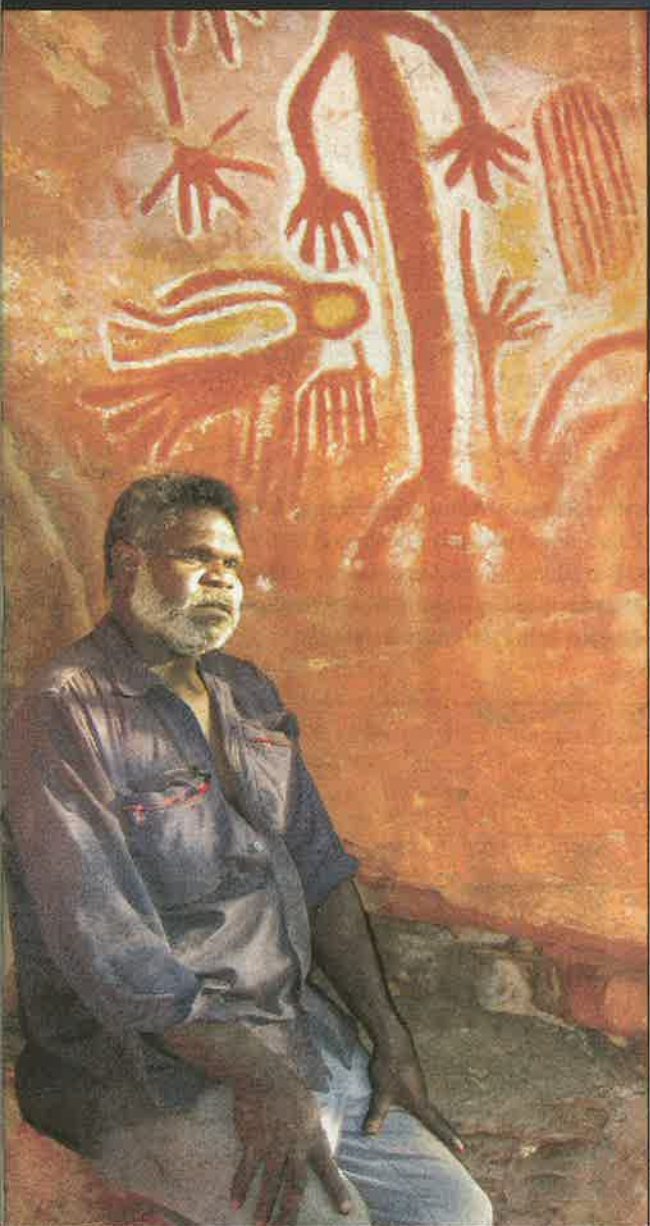
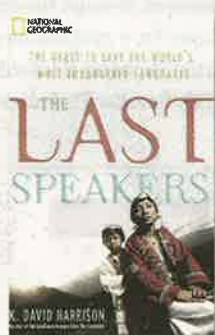


tongues IN PERIL

Jennifer Levin | For The New Mexican



K. David Harrison and Greg Anderson with Charlie Mangulda, the last known Amurdag speaker, Australia; photo Chris Rainier; top, Cyril Ninnal of the Yek Nangu clan, Australia; photo K. David Harrison



The Tofa people of Tofolaria are reindeer herders. Tofolaria is in Siberia and is accessible only by air or, if it is winter, by driving for days on a frozen river. The indigenous language is one of the least documented and most endangered languages in Siberia. Tofa is packed with words and phrases specific to reindeer herding, but it has largely given way to Russian, a language with no direct equivalent for the Tofa term *dönggür*, which means “male domesticated uncastrated rideable reindeer in its third year and first mating season, but not ready for mating.”

Linguist K. David Harrison documents and studies disappearing languages. He is particularly interested in how indigenous languages such as Tofa package knowledge about the natural world. His work as a linguist differs in major ways from that of such well-known linguists as Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker, who, as Harrison writes in *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World's Most Endangered Languages* (published by National Geographic), “view language in the technical, cognitive sense as consisting of basic elements” and are concerned with vocabulary and grammar. Harrison and his ilk are concerned with how language is a vehicle for knowledge and the long-term effect of the loss of that knowledge when a language disappears. While the Tofa can still discuss reindeer herding in Russian, they can no longer do so with the same efficiency and precision as before, which in turn could weaken their skills as herders and their ability to be self-reliant as a people who have for centuries lived entirely off the land.

In an email exchange with *Pasatiempo*, Harrison acknowledged that his way of working in linguistics is part science and part ideology. Dominant cultures push out smaller, indigenous languages because “languages are always politicized. Language is about

who we are as well as who's not one of us. People connect language to identity.” If you believe that cultural knowledge about the natural world has value for our collective future, then documenting and revitalizing dying languages will sound like a good idea. If, by contrast, you believe indigenous cultures and languages die off because they are no longer needed and even stand in the way of progress, then Harrison's work will contradict your worldview.

Harrison is an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College and a National Geographic Fellow. He is a scientist with the National Geographic's Endangered Voices Project, and in the book he writes about the travels his work entails as well as the experience of co-starring in *The Linguists*, a 2008 Sundance Channel documentary film that features his research partner, Greg Anderson. *The Last Speakers* is essentially an expanded exploration of the languages and topics covered in the film, with greater emphasis on last speakers and the knowledge they hold. It also relates Harrison's journey as a linguist and how he came to feel called to his work.

The child of Christian missionaries, Harrison was born at the Ermineskin Cree Nation in Alberta, Canada. Though he heard Cree at a young age, he didn't retain the language and claims to have been a “language bumpkin,” unable to absorb non-English tongues until his senior year of college when he spent a semester in Poland and discovered his talent for learning languages by immersion, which he believes is superior to traditional classroom instruction as a learning method. In his book, he points out that millions of American school children learn classroom Spanish and French, while bilingual students who come from Spanish-speaking homes are often intimidated or shamed into giving up their first language in favor of English.

He writes: “‘English Only’ is one of the most intellectually ruinous notions ever perpetuated upon American society, and one of the most historically naive. We have always been a multilingual society, even before we were a nation.”



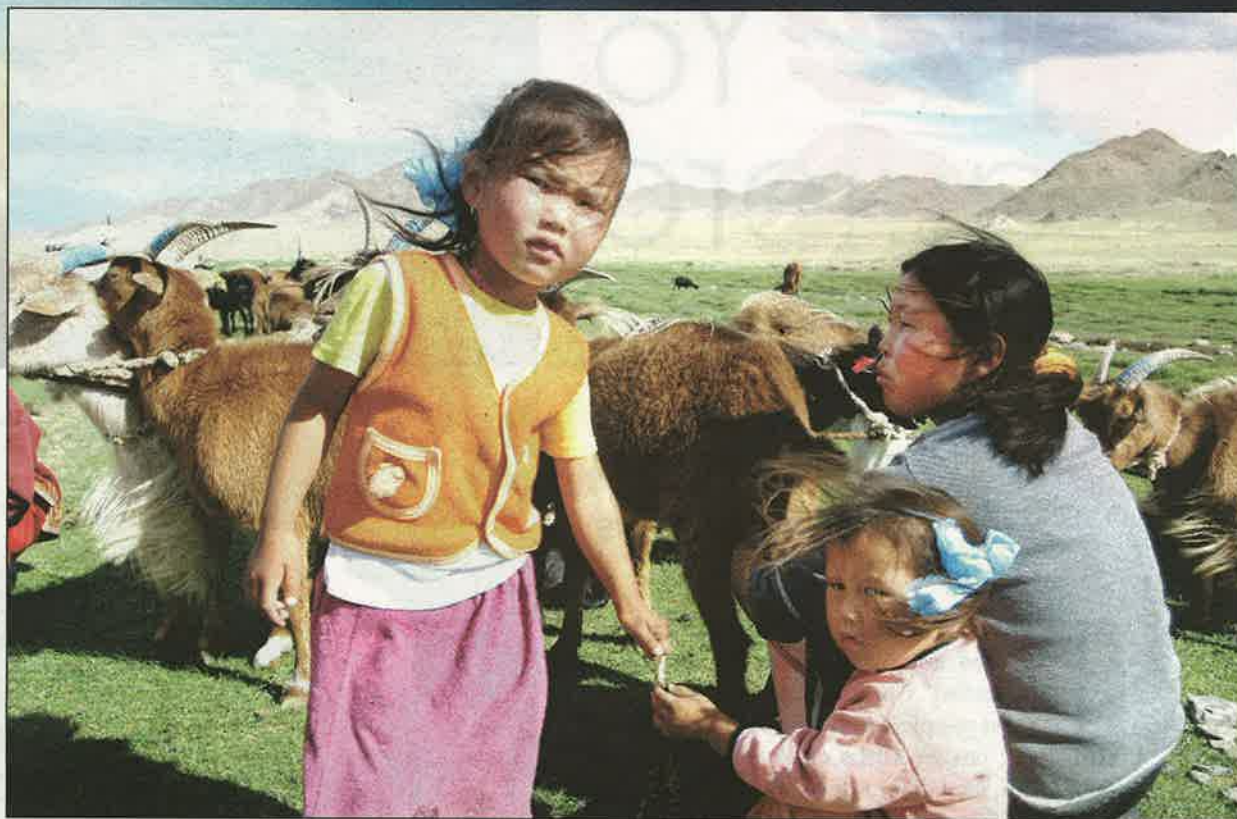
In the “tri-culture” of Santa Fe, it’s well known that neither English nor Spanish is the indigenous language, but in other areas of the United States, where American Indians suffered far more displacement, many contemporary residents are unaware that indigenous languages are spoken every day in private homes as well as through local place names that have been incorporated into the dominant culture. For instance, Wissahickon is a Lenape Indian word for the “catfish stream” that runs through Philadelphia, and the Mississippi River’s name is the Anglicized pronunciation of the Ojibwe word *misi-ziibi*, which means “Great River.”

“Whenever I give a public lecture in the United States,” Harrison said, “I ask if they know what the local indigenous language is of the place we’re sitting in. Most of the time, people don’t know what the indigenous language prior to colonization was.”

In Tuva, a tiny state in Mongolia, local rivers are so integral to the language that in order to say “go,” you must specify whether you mean upstream, downstream, or across from the closest river. Tuvans are yak herders and, like the reindeer-herding Tofa, have terminology specific to yaks, including genetic information used for breeding, such as color, body pattern, head marking, and personality. Tuvans, best known globally for their throat-singing, also sing to their yaks — not as entertainment but as a time-proven method of domestication.

“Living with Tuvans,” Harrison writes, “I learned that languages thus come to reflect local geography, not only in their vocabulary but also in more deeply structural ways, in their grammar. This knowledge is often accumulated over many centuries, and so geographic terms can represent an ancient layer of cultural knowledge encoded in a language.”

Harrison recently came to Santa Fe with the Endangered Voices Project to partner with the Indigenous Languages Institute on a workshop for activists from language hotspots around the globe; participants received advanced training on how to revitalize languages. Though he’s not an expert on



Monchaks of western Mongolia; photo Kelly J. Richardson; right, Nedmit, a speaker of the endangered Monchak language, with Harrison; photo Kelly J. Richardson; bottom right, Christina Yimasinant, a speaker of the endangered Karim language, Karawari region, Papua New Guinea; photo Chris Rainier; photos courtesy National Geographic

endangered languages of New Mexico, he said there are many of them and that some of the best examples of how to preserve language are coming out of American Indian communities. “One of the reasons we wanted to bring activists from around the world to Santa Fe was to introduce them to the Native American activists [of the institute] and show them their model.”

Many people hear about Harrison’s work and are inspired; after his 2007 appearance on *The Colbert Report*, his website, www.livingtongues.org, received enough hits to crash the site. Harrison said that even monolingual people can contribute to a multilingual world. All it takes is the belief that preserving language is necessary and vital. “Support the nonprofits through monetary donations or volunteer work,” he suggested, adding that Microsoft is making a big push to produce software in many languages, including endangered ones.

“Languages are not interchangeable, and there is a lot of evidence that being bilingual helps the brain,” he said. “There’s nothing to be feared from learning another language, but we all stand to lose something if languages go extinct.” ◀

