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[Two Traditional Languages Evade Extinction With the Internet](#)

NewsWatch

Posted by [Guest Blogger](#) in [Explorers Journal](#) on September 23, 2014

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By [K. David Harrison](#)

We live in an age of endless information. It is an age where knowledge can be preserved and accessed as never before. With major global languages dominating the internet, however, smaller languages may be left out, or even pushed down a pathway towards extinction. Remote communities such as the Yokoim and Panim people of Papua New Guinea, though they have little or no internet access, are eager to cross the digital divide and engage a global audience by sharing their languages on the world wide web.

To support those efforts, the National Geographic Enduring Voices project has just launched two new “Talking Dictionaries” for [Yokoim](#) and [Panim](#), two small and endangered languages making their internet debut in 2014.



Nick Waikai, Yokoim speaker and councilman of Manjamai village, is interviewed by K. David Harrison. (Photo by Chris Rainier)

Yokoim is spoken by under 2,000 people in three small villages in the Karawari River basin of Papua New Guinea. Locals travel only by dugout canoe, while outsiders fly in by small planes that land on a dirt airstrip cleared out in the jungle. Though most children in the Yokoim community prefer to speak Tok Pisin, the national language, a proud speaker named Luis Kolisi composes and sings original songs in the language. Video recordings of [Luis' songs](#) provide a way for his unwritten language to be shared on the internet. Nick Waikai, the headman of Manjamai village, told our research team of a mythical hero named Waka who brought survival skills to his people. As the tale goes, Waka was captured by river spirits and taken to live underwater for a month. In that time the spirits schooled human Waka in all manner of skills such as canoe making, hunting, and bow and arrow making. Waka then returned to the world of the living, and taught his people the new skills.

Panim is spoken by under 400 people in a single village (also called Panim) near the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea, and is highly endangered. When linguists Greg Anderson and David Harrison visited the village on a Saturday in August 2009, almost the entire village population was busy attending Seventh Day Adventist church services. One man, Lihot Wagadu, who was not at church sat down with the linguists and shared some of his language.



Yokoim speaker Felix Andi records words for the Yokoim Talking Dictionary with Greg Anderson and David Harrison. (Photo by Chris Rainier)

The new talking dictionaries contain the first available recordings of [Yokoim](#) and [Panim](#). As these are unwritten languages, the dictionaries use the International Phonetic Alphabet, a system used by linguists to represent the sounds of any language. It is a true milestone as these languages cross the digital divide and establish their very first internet presence.

The fact that Yokoim and Panim, likely never before heard outside of remote villages in PNG, can now reach a global audience, shows a positive value of globalization. By learning about such far-flung and remote cultures, we may learn to value them and perhaps contribute to their survival.



David Harrison shows Yokoim speaker Nick Waikai the video playback of his water spirit myth. (Photo by Chris Rainier)



Yokoim speaker Luis Kolisi helps linguist Greg Anderson record Ivino Sabakui, a speaker of Womut language. Wamburmas Village, PNG. (Photo by David Harrison)

Some words from Panim and Yokoim:

Panim

na'ag - egg; small

babalit - butterfly

kuku dugwa - to carry a child on one's shoulder

ehega - to carry something on one's head

isamega - to boil something with the skin on

There are also distinct Panim terms for wind from the sea, east wind, wind from the bush, west wind, south wind, and north wind.

Yokoim

alin - yesterday; tomorrow

sawija - shell money

pundzun - sago trunk

sanbo - black and white pig

samburun - partly black pig

kamdan - fish-carrying basket

kaban - three-pronged fish spear

pajnbɪn mɪnan - pronged canoe paddle for men

akunbun mɪnan - leaf-shaped women's canoe paddle



Yokoim speaker Nick Waikai in ceremonial body paint and feathers. (Photo by Chris Rainier)

This work is the result of the Enduring Voices Project, a joint effort between the National Geographic Society and the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. The 2009 research expedition and later follow-up

trips were funded by National Geographic. Project linguists include Greg Anderson, David Harrison, Don Daniels, Madeleine Booth, and Jeremy Fahringer. Indigenous consultants include: (Panim) Segena Som, Deb Molem, Lihot Wagadu; (Yokoim) Luis Kolisi, Nick Waikay, Merilyn Waikay, Felix Andi. National Geographic Fellow Chris Rainier photographed the [expedition](#).

Keywords: [endangered languages](#), [Enduring Voices](#), [K. David Harrison](#), [Papua New Guinea](#) [\(2\)](#)

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