Enduring Voices—Arunachal Pradesh, India

The Enduring Voices team made its third expedition to Arunachal Pradesh, India in November 2010. The team consisted of Dr. K. David Harrison (National Geographic), Dr. Ganesh Murmu (Ranchi University) and Jeremy Fahringer (Enduring Voices project manager), accompanied by National Geographic Magazine photographer Lynn Johnson.

We continued our documentation of Koro, a Tibeto-Burman language that is also endangered, having an estimated 600-800 speakers. Until recently, Koro was a “hidden” language, not acknowledged in the scientific literature or by local and national political structures as being a distinct language. It has been identified in all prior sources as being a dialect of Hruso Aka, the language spoken by the more dominant local community. Our work establishes Koro as a distinct tongue.

The Koro language reflects a rich material culture and local biodiversity. Our team collected several thousand words, including names for parts of traditional bamboo houses, names for different types of beads, names for local fish, plants and other species that are used for nutrition or medicines. Koro elders related origin myths, stories about tiger hunting, and songs. We accompanied Koro experts to the rice fields, on walks in the jungle, and to other locations where they discussed and we videotaped culturally important topics. We also were able to witness for the first time the written use of Koro (which is primarily an oral language). Our team recorded more than 5 hours of video, 2.5 hours of audio and took about 2100 photographs and 200 pages of notes.

Going door to door in five villages, we also collected information on the locations, ages, and degrees of fluency of speakers. This allowed us to assess the current state of endangerment of the language.

One young Koro man, Anthony Degio, age 23, told us about his desire to see the Koro language revitalized:

As far as the Koro language is concerned… It is a saying that loss of culture is loss of identity. That means if we lose our culture, then certainly we are losing our identity. So, we must continue our Koro language, continue our traditional customs and languages and follow our forefathers’ teachings.

The Enduring Voices team will return to India in 2011 to continue working with the Koro community on language documentation and revitalization.

* We thank the following language consultants: In Palizi village Anthony Degio (Koro), Sange Degio (Koro), Ramda Degio (Koro, Aka), Khandu Degio (Aka), Kumshi Parisow (Aka), Shigi Nimasow (Aka), Biga Nimasow (Aka), in Bana 3km / Yangse Lawa Degio (Koro), Mabo Yame (Koro), Abamu Degio, Moreng Degio, Sankole Degio; in Kadeya village Katia Yame (Koro), Nuklu Dore (Koro); in Kajö village Loma Richo, Nerpo, Chagɨm Miji, Yaro Richo, Pema Degio; in Kichang village Para Yame.
1. Ramda Degio (right) and Sange Degio (center) talk about Koro rice harvesting practices while Jeremy Fahringer (left) films. Near Palizi, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh
Photo: K. David Harrison

2. Sange Degio, 26 (center), is interviewed about Koro harvest terminology by Ganesh Murmu (left), and K. David Harrison (right). Palizi, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh. Photo: Jeremy Fahringer

4. Abamu Degio (left) watches a recording of herself singing a traditional Koro song with Anthony Degio (center) and K. David Harrison (right). Yangse / Bana 3km, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh. Photo: Jeremy Fahringer
5. Documenting Koro ethnobotanical knowledge. Yangse / Bana 3km, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh. Photo: Jeremy Fahringer

The new Enduring Voices YouTube channel, with a video of Anthony Degio discussing Koro names for medicinal plants. www.youtube.com/enduringvoices