





Elders

Elders from the Doi Tung area gather for a photo. These Akha tell how the government took their land away and they have not planted rice for eleven years, an unthinkable event. Having lived in the area for 70 years they wonder how the Thais who are not native to the mountain areas can be so arrogant. Projects that claim to help the Akha are often no more than a deception. Ask the Akha.







The Akha In Laos

Report

Story and pictures by Paul Hunt
2 February 2003

At the top end of the Akha village of Puko, next to its small wooden school, stands a large swing with a rope tied at the apex of its four poles, which are fixed squarely in the ground. All traditional Akha villages have such a swing, usually erected on high ground near the edge of the jungle. Is it not symbolically reflective of life on earth within nature's balance, harmony and laws; moved, swayed and tossed by seasonal cycles; experiencing the pull of desires, and the push of reasons?

The Akha hill people of South-East Asia, similarly to other indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities, are being pushed to a critical extreme testing their will and ability to remain within their own cultural reference frame. Giant pushers - UN, state, NGO and private business interests - are shaking the four poles from the earth. The Akha are threatened with being taken for an enormous ride outside of their cultural reference frame by pushers of questionable development projects who set up fallacious frameworks of arrogant self-interest systems from within their sterile, air-conditioned, report-cluttered city offices.

Should we give ear to an Akha elder whose tried and tested wisdom passed down through many generations is in respectful harmony with the environment? Or should we accept, without thinking through, the official UN, state, NGO or corporate argument that the Akha would be better off with their environmental and village projects to "sustain" whose way of life?

Come, my friends! Who is taking who for a ride?

Who is seeking to frame, push, hood and control who? We know the interests making most of the



media noise, grabbing global control agendas with their jargons of covetousness. But do we listen to the poor, old, village elder's words of wisdom from a bamboo, wooden, thatch-roofed hut in a village on a jungle-covered hillside? Or is it the fat UNDP official who is given more weight? Whose language is more harmonised and sensitised to the environment in which they live? Does the Akha elder insist that the World Conservation Union official cul

tivate bananas in her office rather than row upon row, stack upon stack of dusty, dry, dehumanised reports?

Gates of Eden

Traditional Akha villages have two wooden gates, which symbolise the guarding of the village from evil or disturbing influences. However, in Puko and other Akha villages I visited in Laos their schools lack materials in the Akha language, while the national Lao language is taught and Thai language materials are also used. Matthew McDaniel's Akha Heritage Foundation is addressing this lack, and I distributed Akha books in several villages in Northern Laos in Late December 2002.

Language is the most precious human resource. Linguist R.M.W. Dixon writes, "Each language has a different phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic organisation from every other... By examining the ways meanings are organised in some little-known language, the linguist may... evolve some new mode of thinking that could help to deal with problems in the modern world (1997, p.116)... Every language encapsulates the world-view of its speakers - how they think, what they value, what they believe in, how they classify the world around them, how they order their lives. Once a language dies, a part of human culture is lost forever." (p.144)

According to Zepeda and Hill, "Each language still spoken is fundamental to the personal, social, and - a key word in the discourse of indigenous peoples - spiritual identity of its speakers. They know that without these languages they would be less than they are, and they are encouraged in the most urgent struggles to protect their linguistic heritage." (1991, p.135)

As I traveled on dirt tracks around the Akha villages of Muang Sing District by bicycle and on foot I especially noted the cultural expressions still kept fully alive: village swings, gates, women spinning cotton thread by hand and weaving cloth on manual looms. However, foreign manufactured building materials, packaged food products and clothes are bought by the Akha when they have sufficient money.

There is the pull of desire - children and parents



are eager to have the Akha books, writing materials, clothes, coins for the women's headdresses and money to buy things at Muang Sing's market, which is full of cheap products from across the border in China. There is also the push of reason - to clear more jungle for sugar cane plantations to earn money, to cut more trees for firewood and charcoal production, which the Chinese have interests in too.

Akha villages in Northern Laos are being pulled and pushed by these materialistic, economic forces

so alien to their traditional, self-sufficient way of life. However, their lofty swings, guardian gates, Akha zauh law, and language give the Akha people a distinctive way of seeing their place in the world, as well as to understand what temptations threaten to cut their life's thread and tear the fabric of their culture apart.

As external pressures push at their mountain villages and temptations pull at their traditional roots, so the spirit of freewill needs to be kindled to give light to see what is at stake here. One seeks the light of grace and revelation of law, not a UN, state, NGO, business or missionary dictate from selfish frames of reference, which attempt to lead the unwary into foreign, alien captivity and enslaved bondage to masters of grand delusions.

Could it be that Cain is killing Abel again in an attempt to enter Eden's gate by force? Can officials stomach the fact that a people can live free of, and better off without, their riddled arguments and faulty environmental management systems of control?

In the five-year strategic framework for the World Conservation Union's Programme in Lao PDR, 2001-2006, entitled "Conservation for Sustainable Livelihoods", it states: "Lao PDR has a wealth of natural resources - particularly forests, fresh water, and wildlife. On a per capita basis, water resources are the most abundant in Asia. Forest cover remains extensive, and is substantially higher than in surrounding countries. In terms of biodiversity, many habitats and ecosystems are of regional and global significance." Yet on the same page (p.3) it states:

"Lao PDR remains one of

the poorest countries in the world. In 1999, it was ranked 140th out of 170 countries on the UNDP's Human Development Index."

Could it be that western measures are to blame for disrupting indigenous people's livelihoods, and the rich environments they have traditionally taken care of because of their intimate reliance on them? However, there's no funding or prestigious office without an argument and framework for a "development project", is there?



The Akha Journal

Lao government representatives, and other officials, have “expressed particular concern about the role of shifting cultivation in deforestation, and emphasised the need to stabilise land-use patterns.” (p.17)

Such erroneous arguments lead to village relocation and disruption, which cause problems and poverty for the Akha moved to lower lands. Yet the official argument tries to blame the Akha by linking poverty to environmental degradation due to over-extraction of natural resources.

It is rather ironic that the same officials don't show as much concern about large-scale plantation cultivation, forestry monocultivation, dam and road building projects, which destroy and clear far vaster areas of natural jungle much faster and more permanently than Akha villages have done over many generations!

Who is causing the over-extraction and village poverty? Where is the hypocrisy? Who is shifting blame? Is not small-scale, varied crop rotation, and letting the jungle regenerate proven to have kept Akha hill country a richly diverse environment? Who needs officially sanctioned “development projects”? Is it not the resource-hungry, global-consumerism, greed cult with its fat priests of environmental control and sustainable growth who need to sustain their unsustainable, bad habits?

Cane Driven Out

The closely neighbouring Akha villages of Puko, Pakha and Lakham are located on the lower slopes of jungle-covered mountains now demarcated as the Nam Ha National Protected Area. Only a few Akha villages now remain within the “protected area”, and these are being incorporated into the UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project.

On a visit to Puko, Pakha and Lakham, on 28 December 2002, I was surprised to find large fields of sugar cane covering much of the land around these villages. The cane was being cut by Akha vil-



lagers, while others were clearing large swathes of virgin jungle higher up the slopes, presumably to grow more cane. It is obvious that these villages are being exploited for their land and labour in untraditional, unwise plantation cultivation. Pressure to grow cash crops is causing far greater and faster environmental destruction than wiser Akha tradition would allow. Their traditional slash-and-burn practices, often falsely criticised, clear small areas for self-sufficient food needs and allow jungle regeneration.

Who benefits from cash-crop, plantation cultivation? The villagers see meagre rewards for their hard labour, loss of land to grow the food they need, large-scale destruction of their environment, and loss of control over their own decision-making! Truck loads of sugar cane were being driven across the border into China. Business concerns and development officials no doubt are happy with this “development” - after all they are the exploiters, and not the exploited! Sustainable? Well, the NGOs

now have a piece of the action in making a “study” of this question. Of course, the resource-starved businessman and sustainable-growth official need their sustenance. Meanwhile the Akha are divested of land, labour, livelihood and Life!

On 25 December 2002, I visited the Akha villages of Nam Ded Mai and Nam Ded Kauw within two kilometers of the Chinese border. In the higher village of Nam Ded Kauw, located on a steep slope in the jungle-covered mountains, I was surprised to meet a large, official Chinese delegation to the village.

In all of the other 15 Akha villages I visited in Muang Sing District, wedged between China and Burma in Northern Laos, I was given a friendly welcome by villagers. However, the Chinese officials were less than pleased that a westerner had found them in this Akha village just outside their Chinese border! I was told and shown the way out of the village in no uncertain terms! The delegation came down the dirt track in several, new, 4WD vehicles about 15 minutes later.

There is much sensitivity and touchiness along the boundaries where states, organisations and interests practice the dark arts of covetousness. But can a gentle, free, hill people guard their gates against such Tojan horses? Can they find strength of spirit to turn down the gift horse? Can they see what is at stake and make a stand for their freedom, rather than succumbing to the captivity and bondage of foreign masters of deceit? Can they drive plantation slavery off their land and see to growing their own crops?

Heaven's Balance

Indigenous, ethnic minorities have woven a colourful pattern of peoples perhaps nowhere richer than in Laos. Lao PDR emerged as a socialist state in 1975, following decades of turmoil as ideologies sought to control the minds of people. However, the swing from local, traditional village decision-making to state management and control has gone too far for many, especially the Akha, people's good.

The Regional Environmental Technical Assistance (RETA 5771) report, entitled “Poverty Reduction & Environmental Management in Remote Greater Mekong Subregion Watersheds (Phase I)”, admits that the argument linking poverty alleviation to environmental mitigation is unproven in practice!

Concerning land tenure it states, “There is a general trend in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

area to move away from state ownership of land to varying forms of communal or private tenure... The favoured option of all GMS governments has been household-based tenure.”

The focus of debate on forest land has been the merits of state versus non-state tenure, and household versus community tenure. The community, or village, is the traditional base of the Akha way of life. Whereas private household tenure is more open to exploitation, disintegration of village communities, and cultural disruption. It is no surprise that officials and business interests favour private rather than communal land tenure.

Although official reports try to justify their pet projects, they do sometimes recognise the sensitivities their planned actions arouse in others. Lip service or handouts are thus given to placate concerns about disruption of ethnic minorities' cultural traditions, land tenure practices and livelihoods intimately harmonised with their environment.

UN, EU, state, NGO and business interests are working on a plethora of projects purporting to help poor villagers in Laos. Official reports and documents concerning the problems and methods festoon air-conditioned offices, while expensive vehicles emblazoned with UNDP, EU, state and NGO logos are seen on the streets of Vientiane and other main centers. Yet conditions in Akha villages generally go from worse to abysmal due to very insensitive implementation of “projects”.

Resettlement of villages must be voluntary, not disruptive, and must consider the Akha people's dependence on the land and natural environment for their livelihood. Such is recognised in UN Human Rights provisions. However, in the villages the realities are different. Perhaps this is partly due to the Akha, and other ethnic minorities, not understanding terms, such as “land tenure” and “rights”, which have their meanings couched within the invading cultural framework - like a Trojan horse. But do the global-agenda invaders stand to gain by explaining their terms to those they seek to displace and control?

The Akha population of Laos is about the same as that of Thailand at 70,000. However, there are differences in the Akha situation between these states. The Akha in Laos are issued with ID cards entitling them to state benefits such as basic medical treatment, whereas this is cause for concern in Thailand. Lao PDR put an end to missionary activities in the villages after 1975. Thus there is not the problem of village disruption and removal of

“orphan” children by overzealous missions as there is in Thailand. Military activity in the border regions is also generally absent in Laos, whereas on the Thai-Burma border it is a constant worry for Akha villages.

Although the situation appears rather better for the Akha in Laos than in Thailand, Laos is a poorer, weaker state and is prey to such Trojan horses as Chinese business interests, UNDP, EU and NGO projects, which take up as much of the slack as they can in pressuring and exploiting ethnic minorities.

We exhort the Akha in Laos, as well as in neighbouring states, to guard their own decision-making at their gates, keep their wise law, stay in balance on their swings of fortune, and continue to breathe life in their own language - in the spirit of freedom.

Assistance Without Strings Attached





Village Gates in Laos
NO missionaries are allowed
in Laos







Village Swing





Folklore For The Traveler The Landlord's Dream

The Keng Tung night was freezing cold, I got there late and the gate to the old western guest house was closed so I climbed the rickety picket gate as usual to wake the maid and get a room. I knocked on her window, glad they didn't have a big dog. The maid turned like she heard something, looked up, then rolled over and went back to sleep. I knocked again. She reluctantly got up into the freezing night and gave me the key to a creaking wooden room in the place.

In the morning when I came out into the lobby no other than my old Chinese landlord from Maesai sat there, welcoming and friendly. We talked briefly and I headed off for the market. Usually he was gruff, this time he had been kind and pleasant.

At the end of the day when I came in he was visible inside the lobby when I got there. This time the maid got up and I didn't have to climb the gate.

The landlord had a Chinese friend there and invited me to talk. As the evening rolled on his story, so very interesting, unveiled itself. He was born in Chiang Rai Thailand but in those years of the twenties the opium that the British had brought was still very big social business in Keng Tung. So his parents moved to Keng tung which was still full of opium dens for smoking.

Though the British had brought it, the Akha and many other tribes had learned to cultivate aggressively in the mountains of Shan State. At that time it was a Shan Kingdom. Yah fin, they called it. Best medicine going. Black, as many varieties and grades as any liquor, it got exported to Thailand, Malaysia to the rubber plantations where the workers required it, Singapore and further on to the US. Great stuff.

This now explained to me a great missing link in my work with the Akha. For years I had noticed that the old Chinaman's wife knew many of the Akha old men and women. I wondered why? Now I knew. It also explained why he had compassion on their children, taking in orphans. Never give up on life. The greatest next treasure is just around the corner. Bury your heartbreak. It happens and is there. Sometimes it is like making a bridge and then everything changes and we can not use it.

But then the the Japanese invaded Thailand and Burma from one side and parts of China from the other. So the old Chinaman moved to China's Yunnan province for six years where he went to Chinese school and learned to write Chinese.

"A great event occurred when the US dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan. It was a moment of joy for many under the brutal Japanese occupation, himself, because the Japanese military presence evaporated over night, troops just lucky to find their way home," the Chinaman told us.

And so did he, returning to Keng Tung. At that time the area was ruled by five Shan Princes. Not for long. As a part of Burma, Shan state was soon ruled from Yangon and the missionaries were made to leave. The United States had wanted to use Shan State as a proxy state for its problems with China. This was not to be. The drug running KMT was also asked to leave.

The Shan Prince of Keng Tung took his wealth and fled to Chiang Mai. One of the royal family, stayed and his son owned this guest house. They too had paid money to move their wealth from China to Burma.

Then Mao Tse Tung had come and many more of the Thai Yais in China fled to Burma also. Then they kept on going all the way down to Maesai and Thailand.

With the changes in Burma, the Landlord moved again, this time back to Maesai, Thailand. Which was peaceful, where he had lived for so many years when I finally came there and rented a room in his guest house. Room 28 and then room 61.

He felt that Americans were ignorant of what their government was or was not doing. Common knowledge it was to him that the US Government was really pissed off. But China with bigger plans held them back, "hands off". He chuckled about that.



Warring Beetles

Akha kids collect these horned beetles and have beetle fights over the attractive female at hand.

Nutrition

What its like to live with not enough food?

When you ask an Akha family what they generally eat each day when it would appear that they have nothing to eat, they claim they live fine on chili peppers, salt and rice. And they are not joking. Many a house has not an egg in one month. Relocations and brute force on the part of the Royal Thai Forestry Department (read SS) have impoverished them down to the lowest level of survival that one could imagine.

I go farming with the Akha often. I was initially frustrated with the fact that the girls first left the water behind, then the next day the pot, then the next day the food. They to a person however thought it was funny. And this was because not having any food was something that was common, not something that you got upset about. Not taking your food to the field was the same to them as having forgot and left your comb home or something like that. Day after day they eat greens and handfulls of rice if they have enough of that. And then when they don't they ration the rice to the children.

Relocated villages also lack in fruit trees and live-

stock. One way that the Ampur took care of this was that after relocating Akha villages into tiny little holes in the bottom lands they would then tell people that they could kill anyone else's livestock if they wandered. Course, since they compiled a village out of Lisu, Akha and Lahu, it wasn't hard to capitalize on these hard feelings, one tribe killing another person's livestock. The cristian villagers by far killing the most livestock.

A few days and eight water buffalo were dead, then a large sow, and so it went on.

To make matters worse there weren't enough vegetable seeds. And with garden patches far from the huts the vegetables were either plundered or eaten by animals before the owner could tend to them.

Once the harmony of the village has been destroyed rebuilding it artificially doesn't work so good.

In the communities I had been to the government aid was nearly non existent, with the only thing in evidence being a strip of concrete road here or there in the last years.

Pictured below, mustard greens, rice, rice soup and chilli powder mixed with salt. A meal for ten.





Vegetables

Mah Hkurh grows excellently between coffee on the ground or up into the trees on vines. They are an excellent vegetable cut up and boiled in soups, hard and green, with tiny soft spines.

Many fruits and foods that the Akha do have they can not afford to eat themselves but rather sell them to get the money they need for other necessities. The Thai school system for one, imposed on the Akha in many villages, requires all kinds of school uniforms, costing hundreds of baht per child, and often one set is not enough. The teachers want the parents to buy a couple different color sets for different days of the week, so that their buddies in the local garment industry can make out, totally without regard for the incredible burden this puts on the parents.

The Akha collect many different kinds of mushrooms, some they eat, some only the Thais eat. Road side stands in season will be covered with a colorful variety of mushrooms of all sizes and shapes. Mushrooms alone are testimony to the care the Akha take in protecting their forests.



Collectable Food

Forest nuts called “dturh seeh” are collected in the high mountains. Covered in a spiny husk that pierces the fingers painfully, they must be cleaned and then hauled back to the village. Many mountain locations were close to the border where the Akha had to be careful to collect quietly in order to avoid wayward soldiers from stealing their crop and more.

Mah deh is a squash with tough skin and meat which is chopped up and boiled. Adding sugar makes it into a sweet confection for all.

Hoh bauh is the rice pot made from wood that the Akha steam rice in each morning very early before the chickens even get up. Before dawn the bright coals cooking rice can be seen through the hut walls, smoke curling from the roof. These wooden rice pots have a hole in the bottom over which a bamboo screen is placed, allowing the heat and steam to come up through the rice but not allowing a grain of rice to escape. This large hoh bauh is for a very big family. Heavy, large grain Akha mountain rice is very nutritious.



Publishing

After many repairs and adjustments we were able to print two Akha books on an old press before it gave out. However we were able to show the potential for in house publishing and cost savings. Numerous Akha learned part of the process which we will continue with a replacement press that we are now raising money for.

If you would like to donate for this new high

speed press to help our publishing work, then please contact us.

Thus far we have distributed over 20,000 books to the Akha villages, from the Akha Journal to an alphabet book in Akha language. We have numerous other books to publish in Akha language on a regular basis. You may see part of our Akha Traditional Text Preservation Project on line at www.akha.org under the education section



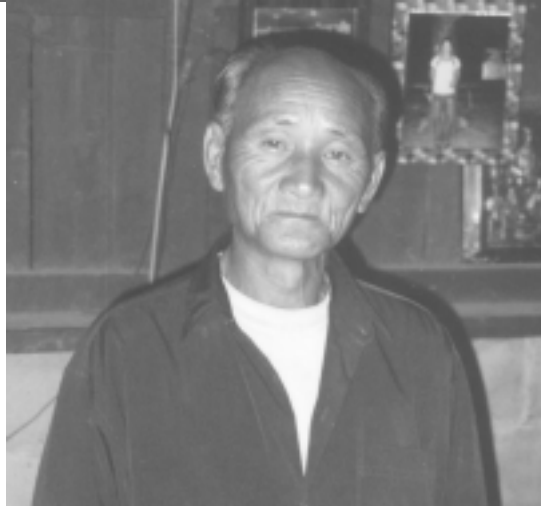
Books Delivered

20,000 Akha Children's alphabet books were delivered to 189 villages and additional locations. We were approximately 20,000 books short even then. In addition to delivering children's books we delivered copies of the Akha Journal so that the Akha could see the pictures.

Ah Baw Leeh Gaw from the Akha village Seeh Lang at Doi Tung, is a major contributor of oral history and editing.

Our next project is publishing of a book on Akha Geneologies, An Akha Reader that we are re-publishing, a children's work book, an Akha to English and English to Akha handbook as well as a book on Akha Traditional Medicine.

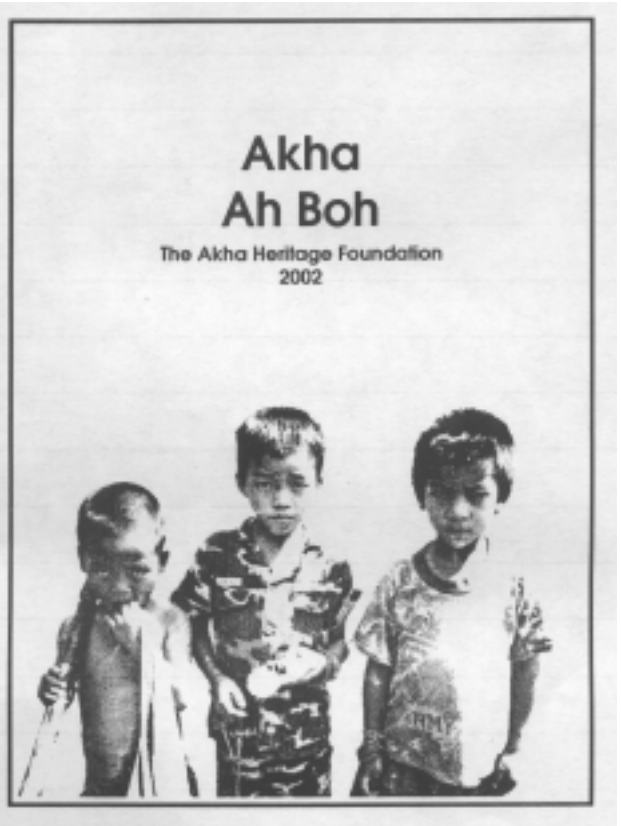
All books printed are also having a portion sent to the Akha men and women who are detained in numerous prisons throughout Thailand



The Akha Journal

Children's Books 20,000 Alphabet Books Go Out to 189 villages

For a month we just drove, to village after village, explaining how to use and distributing thousands of Akha Alphabet books. The enthusiasm was great to see, kids who had never before gotten anything getting a book of their own, in their own language, a non partisan script, no conversion necessary!









Many Books

Children and adults alike from many villages enjoy the Akha books and pictures. With some of the books we were able to supply pencils as well, a rare item in an Akha village.

For sure not the last word on books, this first delivery gave us a good idea of what the demand was in the villages and how long it would take. As it was we ran short of books and pencils.





More Books and Teachers

Many more books in Akha language are needed, as well as the training of Akha teachers. We seek donors both to help with printing press needs, fuel, paper, pencils and teacher training. We also welcome people to ride along and help us distribute books in the villages.

For the Akha alphabet book we were lacking 20,000 copies. An Akha reader, children's work book are to follow, with story and history books being worked on as well.



What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language?

Joshua Fishman

The first paper that I wrote in 1948 on native languages had to do with what is the impact of bilingualism on students. There were still parents then who were concerned that if their children learned another language it would ruin their English accent. If you would hear the tones of another languages every time they spoke English, how would they get a job and what would people think of them? Today, forty-five years later, we are still not “home” at convincing public opinion and the authorities that it is worth having all the languages we have today. Therefore, I want to start with this question, “What is lost when a language is lost?” It is amazing how people are uncomfortable about answering that question. I remember my mother always telling me, “When you start off a talk, make sure people know what the question is and ask a good question. A good question is worth everything.” And I would say to her, “Ma, you know, Americans, they start off a conference with a joke. You have to tell a joke for people to know that you’re about to speak?” She said, “Jokes? Ask a good question” That is an old Jewish tradition, if you have a good question, you have something worthwhile to worry about.

Attitudes toward language-loss depend on your perspective. When a language is lost, you might look at that from the perspective of the individual. Many individuals suppressed their language and paid the price for it in one way or another — that remaining, fumbling insecurity when you are not quite sure whether you have the metaphor right in the expression that you are going to use and you know the one that comes to mind is not from the language that you are speaking at the moment. So, there is an individual price, in every sense.

You can also speak from the point of view of the culture lost. The culture has lost its language. What is lost when the culture is so dislocated that it loses the language which is traditionally associated with it? That is a serious issue for Native Americans. We can ask it from the national point of view. What is lost by the country when the country loses its languages? We have had this very haphazard linguistic book-keeping where you pretend nothing is lost — except the language. It is just a little language. But, after all, a country is just the sum of all of its creative potential. What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are authentic to themselves, the capacity to pursue sensitiv-

ity, wisdom, and some kind of recognition that one has a purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages people to lose their direction in life?

Today, I would like to just talk about language loss from only one of these perspectives, the perspective of the culture. Because losing your language is, technically, an issue in the relationship between language and culture. What is the relationship between language and culture? Is it like the relationship of my handkerchief and my trousers: you can take it out and throw it away and put another handkerchief in? Or is there some kind of more substantive relationship between a language and culture? Even there, there are various perspectives. There is an “outsider,” often disciplinary, perspective as we anthropologists and linguists sit and think about it. When we consider the relationship between language and culture, it occurs to us as outsiders, not being members of those cultures, what the relationship might be and then we try to gather insightful comments, even from the outside. There is a kind of lexical or, I would say, an indexical relationship between language and culture. A language long associated with the culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate over-tones, the concerns, artifacts, values, and interests of that culture. That is an important characteristic of the relationship between language and culture, the indexical relationship.

It is not a perfect relationship. Every language grows; every culture changes. Some words hang on after they are no longer culturally active. “Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey.” Well, who knows what a tuffet is any more, and you can not find anybody who knows what curds and whey are any more without doing research. Those are frozen traces. Even if there is often a good relationship between the words of the language and the concerns of the culture, there are more important relationships between language and culture than the indexical one.

The most important relationship between language and culture that gets to the heart of what is lost when you lose a language is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. The culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other way. What would be left?

When you are talking about the language, most of what you are talking about is the culture. That is, you are losing all those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about.

There is another deep relationship between language and culture, the symbolic relationship. That is, the language stands for that whole culture. It represents it in the minds of the speakers and the minds of outsiders. It just stands for it and sums it up for them — the whole economy, religion, health care system, philosophy, all of that together is represented by the language. And, therefore, any time when we are at odds with some other culture, we begin to say snide things about the language. “Oh, it sounds so harsh. And it sounds so cruel” because we think its speakers are cruel or it sounds so poor or it sounds so primitive because we think they are primitive. The language symbolizes for us the whole relationship.

Actually I do not care much for this presentation of the outside view that I have made to you. It is a highly intellectualized abstraction. If you talk to people about what the language means to them, if you talk to members of the culture, they do not mention indexicality. They do not say anything about its symbolism for the whole ball of wax. They talk in totally different terms. And this tells you what they think they lose. They tell you some things about the sanctity of the language. Sanctity is not a little thing to throw around. At least, I have never felt so.

Now sometimes you do not exactly mean holy — holy, holy, holy. But nevertheless, when people tell you that there is a cultural view of how that language came about, that it came to be when the earth was created, when the worlds were created, when heaven and earth was created, when humanity was created, they are giving you what you might think of as a myth, but the importance of it is beyond its truth value. That is actually the definition of a myth — something that is so important that you hold on to it because it has an importance beyond its truth. They may have the view that it was created before the creation of the world, as white fire or black fire. Every time the Lord spoke out, it came out as white fire or black fire in their own ethnocultural letters. That may sound ridiculous to you, but it is a sense of sanctity. People tell you things like that; ordinary people in ordinary Native American groups will tell you things like that. They

will tell you things that have to do with the great Creator. They will tell you about the morality that is in the language. Morality is, after all, just sanctity in operation. The things you have to do to be good, to be a member in good standing, to meet your commitments to the creator. Some languages that are holy in themselves, and other languages have brought holy thoughts and holy dictums and holy commandments. People tell you metaphors of holiness. This is the most common thing, the most common expression of holiness that people tell you about their language. And that means they are going to lose the metaphor about the language being the soul of the people. The language being the mind of the people. The language being the spirit of the people. Those are just metaphors, but they are not innocent metaphors. There is something deeply holy implied, thereby, and that is what would be lost. That sense of a holy, a component of holiness that pervades people’s life the way the culture pervades their life, through the language.

Another dimension of what people tell you about when they tell you about language and culture is why they like their language, why they say it is important to them. They tell you about kinship. They tell you that their mother spoke the language to them, their father spoke the language, their brothers, the sisters, the uncles, the aunts, the whole community. All the ones who loved them spoke the language to them when they were children. Just before their mother died she spoke the language to them. All the endearments, all the nurturing, that is kinship is tied into a living organism of a community by people who know each other, and they know they belong together. That is what the old sociologists call “*gemeinschaft*.” We belong together. We have something in common. We are tied to each other through the language. That precious sense of community is not a thing to lose just as is the sense of holiness. Woe to the people who have lost the sense of holiness, where nothing matters, and woe to the people who have lost a commitment one to the other. And that is what people tell you about when they tell you about their language, and that is neither the anthropological nor any other exterior view of the relationship between language and culture. It is not an intellectualization, because it is so emotionally suffused and focused on the internal experience.

Another thing people tell you about their language is that they have a sense of responsibility for

it. They should do something for it. That is a rarer, but not altogether rare, aspect of what people tell you about their language. "I should do something. I should do more for it. I haven't done the right thing by it. I'm glad I'm working for it," as if there were a kind of a moral commitment here and a moral imperative. It is a value. It is kinship-related. And, if I am a decent person, I owe something to it for what it has given me — love and nurturance, connection.

These three things taken together, this sense of sanctity, this sense of kinship, and this sense of moral imperative, are not a bad componential analysis of positive ethnolinguistic consciousness. People are positively conscious of their language, without having taken a course in linguistics to spoil it for them, to intellectualize it for them. When they are positively ethnolinguistically conscious, they tell you deeply meaningful things to them. That is what they would lose if they lost the language. They would lose a member of the family, an article of faith, and a commitment in life. Those are not little things for people to lose or for a culture to lose.

And so, therefore, it is no surprise that the generalized topic of this conference, "reversing language shift" or "stabilizing indigenous languages," represents an ideal for literally millions of people on all continents. That is a good thing to realize. Small Native American communities might think that they are the only ones out there in the cold that have to worry about this. That is not so. There are millions upon millions of people around the world that are working for their language on all continents. In Europe, Irish, Basque, Catalan, and Frisian, just to name obvious cases, are threatened.

I remember when I was in Egypt, a Copt coming up to me and, realizing what I was interested in (people have to feel you are sympathetic before they tell you deeply painful things), told me how they were working on reviving Coptic and had made little books for their children in Coptic. He wondered if I wanted to see them. Coptic has not been spoken vernacularly for thousands of years and they were trying to revive it. I also had conversations recently with Afrikaans speakers. Now that South Africa has set apartheid aside, the language most likely to suffer is Afrikaans. English is going to be the link language. Nine or ten other African languages are going to be declared as national languages. The language that will probably come out holding the short end of the stick is the language of the previous regime, the language that has a symbolic association with apartheid. That is not the only

symbolic association you should have with it; however, Afrikaans is already losing status at all levels. In Asia and the Pacific those aboriginal and Australian languages that have survived are now having much "rescue work" being done on them. One example is Maori, an indigenous language of New Zealand. I recently met with a visitor from there who told me that there are now six hundred schools of a nursery-kindergarten, child-care nature to get children who are not Maori-speaking to be taken care of day after day by Maori-speaking older folks. There are now an increasing number of elementary schools where they are continuing Maori language instruction.

So on every inhabited continent, not just immigrant North America, people share concerns over indigenous languages. You can meet with representatives of the Greek church and of the Armenian church in the United States, and they will tell you about their efforts. They ask "Can you be Greek Orthodox without knowing Greek?" To them this is an American aberration; it never happened before in Greek history. "Can you be Armenian Orthodox without knowing Armenian?" Armenians have a saint associated with their language. That is how holy they feel Armenian is. The alphabet is of saintly, sanctified origin. But in America the question has arisen "Can you be Armenian without the language?" Spanish, which is a colonial language, has had much language loss associated with it, particularly in New York City. There is now an intergenerational study that confirms it, following up the same people and their children.

"Can you be Hispanic without speaking Spanish?" It is a new question to ask, and the truth is that everybody now has a nephew or a niece who does not speak any Spanish. Something is felt to be deeply wrong there, and the sense of loss is very deep.

So members of indigenous language communities wanting to revive languages, wanting to strengthen languages, wanting to further languages, are in good company. They are in the company of many people who have tried very hard to do somewhat similar and sometimes very similar things, and there are some successes to talk about, although on the whole, relatively speaking, it is not a good business to be in. It is never good, my mother told me, to be poor and old and sick. And it is never good to be a member of a small, weak, and economically poor culture. But we really cannot pick our mothers, and we cannot pick our cultures. If you work for your culture, you have a sense of gratification

that is at least a partial compensation. And this is being done to such an extent all over the world that I think it is high time we got together to share experiences, to share failures, because it is important to know about failures and to share successes. The successes keep us from burning out. And it is important to know the failures because if you do not know the failures then you repeat them. If you do not know that something has been tried time and time again and has not worked out, then you do it yourself because you do not know it has failed and it sounds good to you. There are a number of reasons I think it is important for us to start out realizing that language restoration is, at best, a very hard job.

There are many reasons why there are so many more failures than successes in stabilizing weak languages. First of all, whenever a weak culture is in competition with a strong culture, it is an unfair match. The odds are not encouraging for the weak.

They never are. Whatever mistakes are made, there is not enough margin for error to recover from them. It is like a poor man investing on the stock market. If you do not hit it off, you do not have anything to fall back on. Small weak cultures, surrounded by dominant cultures, dependent on a dominant culture, and dislocated by those very cultures, and yet needing those cultures, are not to be envied. They have undertaken to resist the biggest thing around, and frequently, they begin to do so when it is too late.

There is a kind of resistance to the very idea that something is happening to their language. "Oh, it'll pick up. Oh, it happened before. Oh, the younger generation will come around. When they get older, they'll start talking it." Doing it too late, can be too late in several ways. First of all, it can be too late biologically. That is, sometimes cultures "catch on" to that something should be done when there are no longer people around of child-bearing age. The older people around may even be talking the language, and enjoying it, and joking in it, telling stories in it, and doing all the traditional things in it, but they are not likely to have any more children. In terms of a kind of self-sustaining, inter-generational link, it is now too late for the usual things. You might still try something, but it is like freezing an embryo and then trying to bring it back a hundred years later.

There are some unusual things one can still try to do for a language that no longer has a natural generational flow, but, in most cases, it is too late

because those unusual things are really very unusual and really hard to do.

It is usually too late ideologically or, if you like, culturally, by then, because a new *modus vivendi* has been worked out. When languages die, people do not stop talking. Cultures do not fold up and silently steal off into the night. They go on and they talk the new language. They go on in the other language; they work out a new relationship between language and culture. The relationship is detachable; it is dislocated; it takes a lot of time; and it takes a lot of doing to once more have a traditionally associated language, having once lost one. Meanwhile, you have another language that has already entered the tent. People have said, "Well, we can be, whatever, Chippewa, Seneca, Blackfoot, whatever, we can be it in English." That is another language-culture relationship, and, because of that new relationship, it becomes very difficult to bring back and to strengthen the old language, which is already undergoing so many stresses.

Another reason why language restoration is relatively unsuccessful, with all the commitment that I have mentioned to you, despite all the sense of holiness, despite all the sense of kinship, despite all the sense of commitment, is because people do not know what to do. It is like fighting a disease without having an idea of what to do. People generally do not understand the difference between, for example, mother tongue acquisition, mother tongue use, and mother tongue transmission. They are not the same thing. So, they frequently settle for acquiring the language not as a mother tongue, but during the school experience. By then it is not the mother tongue, because they already have another mother tongue. And schools are not inter-generational language transmission agencies.

Schools just last a certain number of hours and a certain number of years and then, after that, they are over. How is the language learned there going to be transmitted to the next generation? So because of this confusion, having devoted a number of hours per week, per year, at school for a certain number of years, people frequently conclude, because the children are bright and pick up language, that they have done their bit.

But they have not started a system going that is self-renewing, which is self-replenishing because after school there are many years until that child has his or her children and could pass the language on. That is really a terribly important issue, to realize that the school itself is not going to transmit it

to the next generation because the society has not set up a transmission mechanism that picks up after school. School is a wonderful agency, and a crucial agency for particular aspects of language use, like literacy, versatility, or formality. But that is neither acquisition of the mother tongue nor transmission of the mother tongue. Finally, not knowing what to do and not having things like this clarified for them, people start altering all kinds of things simultaneously and that is about as desirable as taking all kinds of medicines simultaneously because you might hit upon one that might help you. But think about all the other things that are going on there that are expensive to do, which are disappointing when they do not work out.

So what to do is really a terribly important issue and what to do when is a very important issue. For example, you might have someone suggest, Listen, the most important newspaper in this country is The New York Times. Why do not we take out full-page ads in Navajo in The New York Times and that will show everybody that we've got a very decent language here. That should really clinch it. We are always using their language. Let them see our language when they open up their newspaper.

Well, it is just not the right thing to do. It is not a productive thing to do. The most productive thing to do really depends on the stage that you are at. Or the nature of the impairment or, if you like, the nature of the threat or the seriousness of the danger. Is the problem, for example, which is currently worrisome, that the mother tongue does not have recognition in the inter-ethnic work sphere? That is a problem among the Pennsylvania German (Pennsylvania Dutch) today. There is no more land to buy in Lancaster County. A good proportion of the youngsters marry and must go off to Kansas or some other place where there is still land, or they go to work in some factory in town. When they work at the factory in town, since they all know English anyway, they talk English to each other, not only to others working in the factory, and the elders are very concerned.

If that is the problem with the language, then you are in a certain stage of dislocation that is not very far from the transmission stage. Everybody may still be acquiring the language in the orthodox community as their mother tongue and using it in their regular services, but of the maybe four to five thousand languages in the world, the majority are not being used in the inter-ethnic work force. The majority even of those that are hale and hearty, so

you have to see that problem in perspective.

Is the problem that the mother tongue is neither used in the school nor in classroom education nor in literacy? Well, that is a more serious problem because literacy provides a community or it creates access to communication across time and space. It creates a community over time and space. We can talk to people who are no longer alive through literacy. We can talk to people not yet alive and far, far away through literacy. There is also a prestige factor when non-literate languages are in touch with literate languages, and the school is the literacy-conveying agency of this era. It was not always; it was not everywhere, but again I would like to assure you that most of the healthy languages of this world today are not (or not strongly) related to literacy and are not considered exceptionally school-worthy. That does not mean it is no problem because maybe it is a problem wherever you are. It definitely means there is support for acquiring literacy in some other language and that means you have got to be able to bear the strain between the language of literacy and the language of home, intimacy, love, and sanctity. You have to be able to bear that strain, that this one language, which is not yours, is the one of literacy and that one, which is yours, is not the language of literacy.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain minority languages when the print and non-print media are impinging on them more than ever before. If the lack of literacy in your language is a particular weakening factor, then literacy must be developed in your language. But it will not be transmitted to the next generation automatically. The funny thing about literacy, even in languages of zero literacy, is that every generation starts off with great literacy. Even though their parents are literate. I know there are two percent of parents who come from Harvard graduate schools, whose children start off literate even before kindergarten, but that is not yet a wide-spread phenomenon. Every generation as a rule starts off illiterate and has to be made literate from ground zero. That is not the way mother tongues work. Mother tongues are self-sustaining and a new generation does not wait until it goes to school to get its mother tongue. It usually gets its mother tongue at home in the community, in the neighborhood, among the loved ones — the ones shaping the identity of the child. And if that is what your language lacks, then that is a very serious problem indeed if you want to hand it on to another generation as a vernacular. But something