Some 6500 languages are spoken around the world, and two-thirds of them are in danger of extinction. Among those threatened are such diverse and distinct idioms as Ob-Ugric in Northwest Siberia and Kurumba in South India. Linguistics Professor Elena Skribnik is working to catalogue and digitally document Ob-Ugric languages, while ethnologist Ulrich Demmer studies the language and customs of the Jēnu Kurumba. In their different ways, both scholars are engaged in an effort to preserve part of mankind’s cultural heritage.

The procession moves through the forest in single file. When it reaches the river, the priest picks leaves from the bushes. One young man climbs a tree, cuts off some branches and tosses them onto the ground below. Another gathers them up and offers them to the bystanders. The mourners accept the proferred leaves, thus establishing contact with the relative who died and was buried some weeks ago. Off to one side, a tall figure, obviously a European, observes the scene. The forest lies in the Nilgiri (Blue) Mountains of South India. The observer is Ulrich Demmer, Professor of Ethnology at LMU Munich. His research focuses on the Kurumba people, the autochthonous inhabitants of the Blue Mountains. The 12,000 Kurumba are divided into seven subgroups. Demmer is particularly interested in the tribe who call themselves “Jēnu” (also known as the “Honey Kurumba”), having studied their language, habits and culture for his doctoral thesis. The fact that he has been permitted to attend this ritual is a great honor and a token of the high degree of trust he enjoys among his hosts. The Kurumba came to accept him fully, he explains, when a child of his own was born in one of their modest huts at the edge of the forest.

The Jēnu Kurumba belong to the Adivasi, the aboriginal inhabitants of India. As hunter-gatherers they depend for their sustenance on what the forest provides, but this does not mean that they live in total isolation. Quite the contrary. The Jēnu Kurumba have been in contact with many ethnic groups on the subcontinent over the course of many centuries, trading honey and other natural products for textiles and utensils. Nevertheless, they have
managed to retain their own culture, and continue to follow their ancient rituals deep in the forest, far from the prying eyes of outsiders who would describe themselves as civilized. The Kurumba make their first appearance in the written record in Tamil literature around the time of Christ. The fact that they have been able to preserve their native ways for so long is largely due to the character of the surrounding Hindu culture. Hindu culture is extremely conservative, and its caste system forms an effective barrier to integration, explains Ulrich Demmer, but, in so doing, it allows others to retain their own identity. And this holds true for the Kurumba, who are not Hindus and do not belong to any caste. The Kurumba believe in the divine powers they attribute to their ancestors. Ethnologists therefore classify them as animists.

A good 5,500 kilometers North of the Kurumba homeland, the Khanty have lived for over a thousand years in the Siberian tundra and taiga forest. Only about 13,000 people still speak the language of the Ostyaks, as they were once called. Even fewer, about 3,000 individuals, still use the idiom of their close kin, the Mansi (formerly known as the Voguls). – Both languages are in imminent danger of extinction, but Elena Skribnik is doing all she can to stave off this fate. Skribnik is Professor of Finno-Ugric Linguistics at LMU Munich, and one of the very few experts on Ob-Ugric languages worldwide. The native peoples of Siberia, whose languages belong to the Finno-Ugric family, are her passion. Finno-Ugric includes not only Finnish, Hungarian and Estonian – which are only very remotely related to each other – but also Komi, Karelian, Udmurt and, of course, Khanty and Mansi. The speakers of these Ob-Ugric tongues live in Northwestern Siberia, between the Ural Mountains and the River Ob. Where they originally came from is not known. Their ancestors probably migrated from the steppes South of the Urals, but no archaeological evidence for this thesis has yet been found, says Elena Skribnik. However, their religious customs show features that suggest contact with the cult of Mithra, which developed in Early Antiquity far to the South, in Persia. Itinerant preachers spread the cult of Mithra – originally a guardian of contracts and then a Sun God – throughout Asia, and probably brought it to the Khanty and the Mansi also. At the time of the great migrations in the first millenium AD, the ancestors of today’s Hungarians split off from the group and moved Southwest, perhaps as far as the Black Sea coast, before turning westwards and conquering the Carpathian Basin in 896 AD. – Bitterly cold in winter, in summer stiflingly hot and swarming with mosquitos, the Siberian taiga and tundra are not suitable for farming. No one knows why the Khanty and the Mansi chose not to follow the future Hungarians, and moved in the opposite direction to settle in the Siberian swamps. Life in this region, now called Yugra, was hard then, and it still is. Hunting and fishing remained the major sources of sustenance well into the 20th century, until oil was discovered. And here, as elsewhere, the Black Gold turned out to be both a boon and a curse.

The Khanty and the Mansi share their habitat with indigenous peoples, who arrived long before them and depend for their livelihood mainly on their reindeer herds. The various
ethnic groups coexist peacefully enough, but there is little intermarriage. Animism and shamanism have survived up to the present in Yugra. Like their Kurumba counterparts, the Siberian shamans enter into contact with the ancestors, but they make use of the hallucinogenic mushroom Amanita muscarina (fly agaric). Kurumba shamans need no such devices but get into a state of trance through rapid body movement. Once contact with the dead or the ancestors has been made, the latter can speak to the bereaved through the shaman. The spirit of the dead person takes possession of the Kurumba shaman: he bemoans his fate and berates his relatives – not just verbally but by gesture and movement, gesticulating or standing with his arms hanging down by his side, limping slowly or striding about. But the bereaved are not intimidated by their ancestor’s diatribes. Accusations may be accepted, rejected or debated. The purpose of the lengthy and complex ritual is to redress the social equilibrium, which has inevitably been disturbed by the loss of their relative, explains Ulrich Demmer. The soul of the deceased must be mollified, and old accounts must be settled satisfactorily. Only then can the soul pass into the company of the ancestors in the underworld. But the passage is a difficult one. During the ceremony, a tabernacle is built for the soul of the dead person, and a clay vessel filled with water is placed inside. The soul can now dwell there and receives various offerings. When the soul seems willing to leave, each member of the bereaved family pours two drops of oil into the water. If the drops coalesce into one, this signals that the soul has agreed to go. Taking the clay pot and one other water-filled container – wherein the ancestor has taken its seat – with them, the mourners move in procession into the forest, making music as they go. Their destination is one specific tree. Here they erect a small stone, decorated with leaves from particular plants, which is moistened with water from each of the two vessels. The soul of the dead relative is now free to move into the underworld and join the ranks of the gods. The whole ritual amounts to a “rhetorical process of reconciliation with, and assent to membership in, the moral community”, explains Ulrich Demmer, “it involves
gesture, gift-giving, music and dance but primarily operates on a verbal plane. The Kurumba language differs greatly from the languages we are familiar with, for Kurumba is not an Indo-European language. The Indo-European family includes many of the languages spoken in India, but Persian, German, Greek, Slavic and Romance languages also belong to it. The language of the adivasi is Dravidian, and Dravidian languages were spoken in India long before the arrival of the Indo-Aryans. As in the case of the Uralic languages of Siberia, the origins of Dravidian are lost in the mists of time. The four major branches of Dravidian, of which Tamil is one, were already being written down in the first millennium BC. Kurumba, however, remained a purely spoken idiom until recently.

LOSING A WHOLE GENERATION OF NATIVE SPEAKERS

The Ob-Ugric languages too were long transmitted orally. In the 16th century, the Russians, led by the Cossack Jermak Timofeyevich, took control of Siberia. The Khanty and Mansi were able to retain their customs, language and culture because efforts to convert the area to Christianity remained superficial. It took a revolution in far-away Petrograd and the notion of equality to change all that. The Bolsheviks were committed to universal education as a human right. Under Stalin a network of state boarding schools was established, where pupils from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds were taught together — naturally through the medium of Russian. The children received virtually no instruction in their native languages. “The new approach to education tended to accelerate the decline of minority languages”, says Elena Skribnik. Moreover, the wish to retain one’s own speech and culture was regarded as reactionary by the Communists. The result was that a whole generation of native speakers was lost. Only the older Khanty and Mansi are still able to use their native idioms as their first language. And now, time is running out. This is why Elena Skribnik has taken on a highly ambitious project – the creation of a comprehensive digital archive that documents the two Ob-Ugric languages. In this way, the cultural heritage of the Ob-Ugrians can be saved for posterity, and the archived material can be used for teaching purposes.

“A language can only have a future, if the community that speaks it can also take care of it. We can only provide tools for the task, and educate native speakers as linguists”, she says. Of course, languages cannot be conserved like material objects in a museum. Above all, languages must be understood. And the smaller Finno-Ugric languages are very different in structure from the majority languages that surround them. Veronika Bauer, who is a member of Elena Skribnik’s research team, demonstrates this using an example taken from kinship terminology. “In the language of the Khanty, the word ‘yay’ refers to a male relative. It can be translated as: 1. the speaker’s father’s younger brother; 2. the speaker’s elder brother; 3. an elder brother’s sons, provided they are older than the speaker. Here, the notion of kinship cannot be defined solely in terms of the speaker’s generation or the generation that preceded or succeeded it. The word ‘yay’ refers to a male relative in the paternal line who is older than the speaker. This definition covers all the possibilities listed above.” The kinship system used by the Khanty and Mansi rests on a very different basis from the Russian and European system”, explains Elena Skribnik. This makes it impossible
to use the formally equivalent kinship terms from Russian or other European languages without falsifying the semantic content.”

Elena Skribnik initiated her project on Ob-Ugric Languages to ensure that they remain accessible for future generations. Together with her team in Munich and colleagues at the Universities of Szeged, Helsinki and Vienna, she is assembling a database of the Khanty and Mansi languages. The idea is to collect and store as many texts, images and sound recordings as possible. Getting hold of the available material is itself a laborious undertaking. Elena Skribnik laughs as she tells of the roundabout routes the researchers have often had to use. – And then the real work begins. Every text must be transcribed according to a standard procedure. This is the only way to make sure that every interested linguist can read and pronounce the words correctly. The next step is to assemble a glossary that explains important expressions – such as kinship terms – and “a multimedia thesaurus containing ethnological materials”. All texts are also translated into English and Russian. Dictionaries and grammars are planned for the four major dialects, together with a concordance with referenced citations.

Obviously, this all costs money, “about one million Euros in three years”. Fortunately, Elena Skribnik found a generous investor. Ob-Ugric Languages is one of only five projects supported by the ESF-funded European Collaborative Research Program EuroBABEL (Better Analyses Based on Endangered Languages). Ulrich Demmer also had to find the necessary financing for his work. His project is being funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. And he too is constructing a database, as part of a large-scale international program dedicated to the Documentation of Endangered Languages, coordinated by the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. The MPI commissions teams of linguists and ethnologists to document and process materials on endangered languages for multimedia presentation, with special emphasis on audiovisual recordings of spoken language. Without these data, it would be impossible to grasp the meaning of, for example, the rituals performed by the Kurumba upon the death of one of their number. On his next visit to the forests of South India, Ulrich Demmer will be accompanied by his Munich colleague
Professor Frank Heidemann. Heidemann is a specialist in visual anthropology, and he will record the ceremonies and interviews with the participants. – In their various ways, Elena Skribnik and Ulrich Demmer, together with their students and colleagues, are all engaged in conserving mankind’s cultural heritage for posterity.

Translated by Paul Hardy