

Digital Himalaya

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As I walked up the Kali Gandaki river valley from the Mustang district headquarters of Jomsom to the ethnically Tibetan village of Lubra, located in a remote side canyon, the portable Panasonic DVD player and its extra 12-hour battery weighed heavy in my backpack. On my mind were equally weighty questions about how the digitized 16mm film shot in Lubra by anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf in 1962, which I was planning to show during my visit, would be received. I had been coming to Lubra regularly for the last eight years and was close to many of the village residents, but nevertheless I was anxious about this first experiment in returning cultural property through the Digital Himalaya Project. Would people be interested in the film? Would the cultural taboo of displaying images of the deceased make the showing of old film offensive? Would villagers be angry that they had not seen the film until now?

By Sara Shneiderman

After arriving in the small village of fifteen houses, I sent around word calling the villagers to a community film showing in the village *gompa* (Buddhist temple) for the next afternoon. 'You don't have to worry, everyone will show up – perhaps even early!' reassured a local friend when I expressed my concern that people would not be interested. 'They've never seen a film in their own village before, and certainly not one of the village itself. It will be the most exciting thing happening all winter.' Lubra remains without electricity or phone access, and although many of its young and able-bodied residents spend the cold months of the year as traders elsewhere, children and the elderly are left behind to weather the bitter Himalayan winter.

It was in fact this latter group, the village elders, whom I sought most eagerly for my audience. They were most likely to remember the individual characters and events shown in the 1962 film. To my satisfaction, as the time for the film-showing approached, a group of around 25 people, including five over the age of sixty, gathered in the *gompa* courtyard. I set up the portable DVD player on a ledge inside, where the wooden windows could be closed to create a temporary cinema atmosphere. Upon giving a brief introduction to our project and noting the date of the film from Lubra, 1962, I chose not to provide any additional contextual information about the silent footage, hoping instead to elicit viewers' comments about both the content and form of the film.

As I pressed 'play', a hush fell over the group and they crowded closer around the small screen. Fade-in to a group of local women dancing in a circle wearing their ritual finery. No response from the audience. A few village scenes, everyday activities like goat-herding and hair-combing flashed across the screen. Not a word. Two minutes of the five-minute film clip gone, and I was beginning to worry. Cut to an image of what appears to be an argument, with a group of villagers silently shouting at each other in black and white.

Suddenly a deep belly laugh erupted from the senior lama of the village, a jovial man of around sixty-two. 'That was the argument about my cousin's wedding! I know those people! Look, look!' he commanded the other villagers, pointing a dirty finger right up against the faces on the small screen. With the silence broken by such a respected community member, everyone began chattering excitedly. 'That's my grandmother Chimi Dolkar!' shouted one old woman. 'No, it's not, it's my husband's aunt Palsang!' After the initial disorientation of seeing moving film of the village for the first time, it all began to fall into place for the viewers, and the race was on to identify each individual appearing in the film.

'I can't believe it, it's as if our lifespan is doubled,' exclaimed Rinchen Lhamo, a sixty-five-year-old woman who had been present during the events that Haimendorf filmed. 'Now that we have this machine we can meet people we never thought we'd see again.' I asked whether this contravened the taboo on displaying images of the deceased. 'Not at all,'



A still from the 1962 cine reel taken by professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf showing local women dancing in their finery.

she chuckled, 'this is different from a photograph, which only reminds us of death. Here they are alive, so there is no problem.' An interesting indigenous summary of the power of moving image.

As the afternoon wore on, we watched the five-minute film clip again and again. Each time, we paused on different sections, and the villagers debated the identity of each individual. Many people there could find an aunt or an uncle, and a few older villagers even recognized their own parents. Small children were called in to 'meet' the grandparents they had never known. After extensive discussion, the details of the argument at the wedding captured in the film emerged, as did other important information that expanded upon Haimendorf's own field notes from that day. In particular, it

became clear that several of the early scenes in the film were not actually from Lubra, but from the neighbouring district of Dolpo. Apparently Haimendorf had spliced these scenes together without making a note of their different sources. In addition, the four villagers who could actually recall Haimendorf's visit all concurred that the women's dance early in the film was not in fact a natural part of the wedding ritual, but rather a feat of anthropological engineering: Haimendorf had asked all of the village women to put on their finest clothes and dance so he could film them.

By twilight we had watched the film at least thirty times, and people began to drift away to do their evening work. Exhausted but happy, I packed up the DVD player and returned to my host family's house. As I was enjoying a glass of warm local spirit, two of the older women who had been at the film showing all afternoon walked through the door and asked for a personal showing. Clearly the film held more than a passing fascination for the villagers, and could be usefully integrated into the existing structure of cultural memory. We spent the evening talking further about the film and its possibilities. Late in the evening, as the fire was dying low, Rinchen Wangmo asked whether I could leave the DVD and the magical 'machine' in the village with them. 'Not until the village gets electricity. As it is, the battery will last only a few more hours, and then it will be over.' She nodded and set off for home with a pensive look on her face.

The next morning, as I was preparing to leave, her son offered to accompany me on the two-hour walk to the district headquarters. In his hand was a petition to the Chief District Officer to re-examine the possibilities for electrifying the village – among the twenty or so villages in the immediate region, Lubra is the only one that remains dark. 'We asked before,' he said, 'but the effort was half-hearted. This film has given us a new reason to try.' ◀

Sara Shneiderman, MA is a PhD student in Anthropology at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. She has been working in the Himalayas for five years, particularly in Nepal and north-east India. ss364@cornell.edu



Sara Shneiderman introducing the Digital Himalaya project to the villagers of Lubra, December 2002.