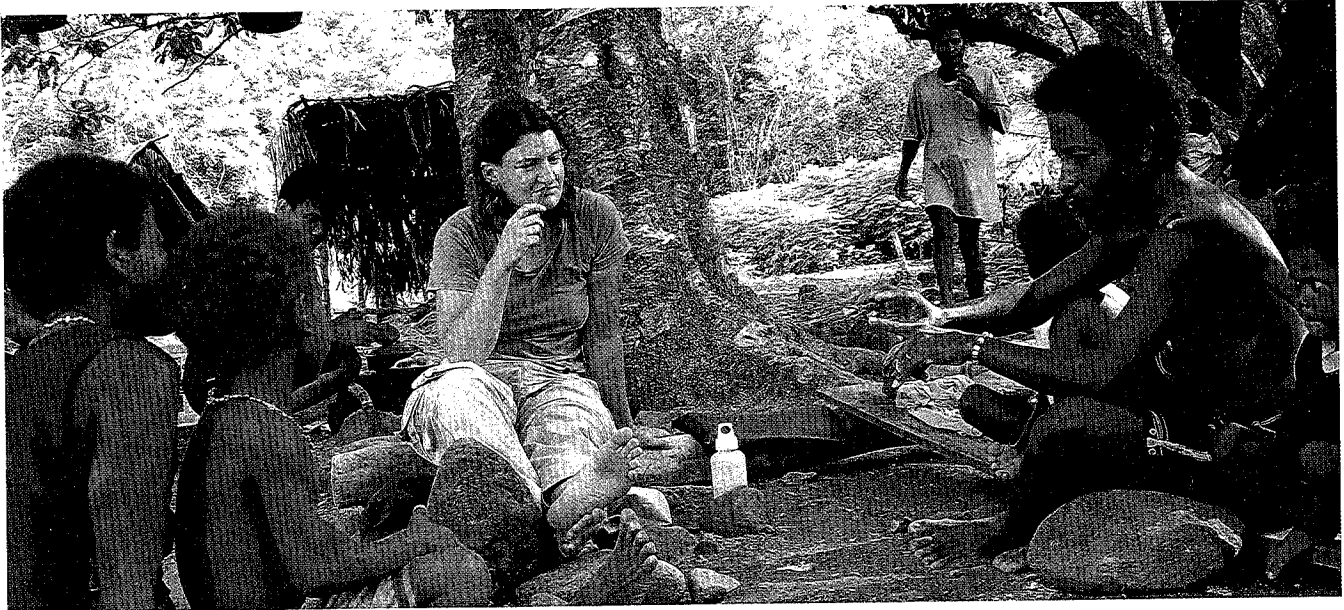


# Linguistics students document disappearing languages

by Tracy Matsushima



## Linguists at UH Mānoa are working on an extinction problem that, for many people, may mean the loss of their spoken words.

Linguistics Associate Professor Kenneth Rehg says that 94 percent of the world's population uses a mere 6 percent of its 6,900 ancestral languages. Many of the rest are on the verge of disappearing as globalization and modernization push minority and under-documented languages aside for the more dominate languages. The National Science Foundation estimates that by the end of the century, half of the languages will disappear; other estimates are even more bleak.

"It is likely that linguists of the future will remember this century as a time when a major extinction event took place, as an era when thousands of languages were abandoned by their speakers in favor of languages of wider communication," writes Rehg in the department's *Language Documentation and Conservation Journal*, an open-access journal sponsored by the National Foreign Language Resources Center.

Rehg is an authority on the languages of Micronesia, where he has conducted extensive fieldwork over the past four decades. He has documented the Ponapean language, which is spoken on Pohnpei in the Caroline Islands of the Federated States of Micronesia, and published the *Ponapean-English Dictionary* and the *Ponapean Reference Grammar*.

"What is considerably less certain," he continues, "is how linguists of the future will remember us. Will we be admired for having conscientiously responded to this crisis, or will we be ridiculed for having thoughtlessly ignored our evident duty?"

"Of approximately 7,000 languages in the world, we know virtually nothing about half of them. In this day and age, that's an amazing gap in scientific knowledge," says Laura Robinson, who earned her PhD in linguistics through Mānoa's Language Documentation and Conservation program. The program provides much needed training to young linguists to undertake the essential task of documenting the many under-documented and endangered languages of Asia and the Pacific. With close to half the world's languages spoken in Asia and the Pacific, the program's emphasis on fieldwork and the only graduate program in language conservation and documentation in the United States, Mānoa is attracting some of the brightest.

In some programs, people study languages as though they are disembodied things not spoken by real people, Robinson observes. At Mānoa, she combined her interests in language and culture, doing extensive fieldwork. "Fieldwork on an undocumented language seemed quite appealing," she says.

Robinson says there's no one right way to document a language and no agreement on when a language is finally

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Doing fieldwork in a familiar place proved to be an asset. "One of my consultants is the eldest man on Pakin Atoll, arguably one of the best storytellers. When I came back to Pakin and told him that I wanted to record stories from him, I thought that he would pick a few good ones and tell them to me in one sitting. Well, he came by for at least five different recording sessions, each night with one or two different stories to tell," Odango says. "When you build a relationship like that with someone over time—he had been telling me

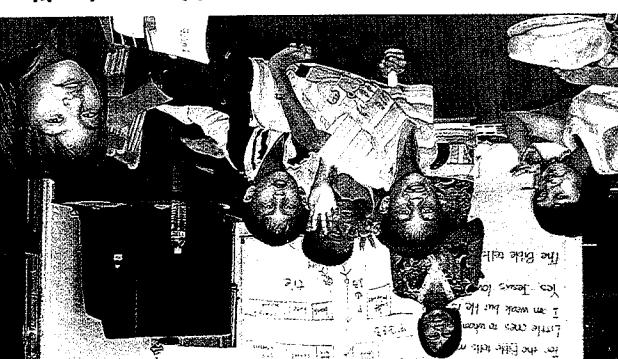
"I am passionate about the development of educational materials in Mortlockese and other minority languages in Micronesia," Odango says. "My students were so bright. I had to come up with creative ways to teach English grammar to them by making connections to their Mortlockese language skills. There are no learning materials available for them in Mortlockese. It was like sending a message to these students and teachers that their native language is not important, not worthy of being written down or taught in a classroom."

60,000 speakers. is the official language of Chuuk State and has more than books and educational materials were in Chuukese, which in the Mortlock islands, he discovered that all lesson islands by approximately 9,000 people. When he arrived of Micronesia, Odango learned to speak Mortlockese, a While serving in the Peace Corps in the Federated States

into archives. audio using the correct settings and how to upload the data written information in an open-source format, how to record standards in preserving information, such as how to encode (e), Odango says. They also need to know all of the best put together) and syntax (the way sentences are put together sounds are put together), morphology (the way words are aspects of linguistic theory, including phonology (the way in order to be good analysts, scholars are trained in all needs to be investigated and recorded."

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Facing page: Laura Robinson learns Dupanigan Agta from Negrito hunter-gatherers in the Philippines; Above: Emerson Odango works with Liperto Linge, a native speaker of Mortlockese in the Pakin Atoll; Apay Tang teaches children her native language of Truku

**The UH Manoa Department of Linguistics will host Strategies for Moving Forward, the 2nd International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation Feb. 11-13, 2011. Pre-conference technical workshops and a post-conference field study in Hilo are planned. Information at <http://nlrc.hawaii.edu/ICLDC/2011>.**

just about putting a language in print, taking pictures, making "Some people may think that language documentation is just "collect" pieces of a language as a means to an end. Manoa PhD student Emerson Odango says linguists don't

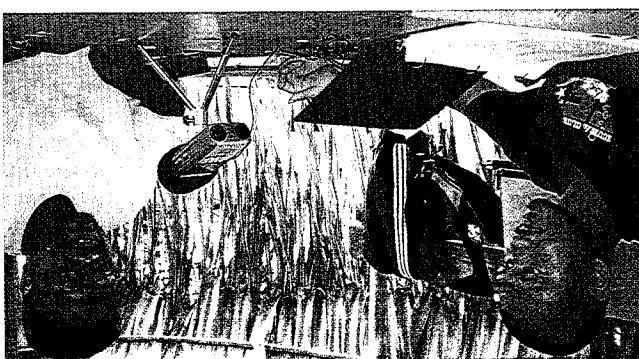
aries and collections of texts." may not be in the future. They are very keen to see dictionary though the languages are still being spoken today, they educated population. People seem to realize that even "In Indonesia, I've been working with a somewhat more that their language could ever go extinct," she explains.

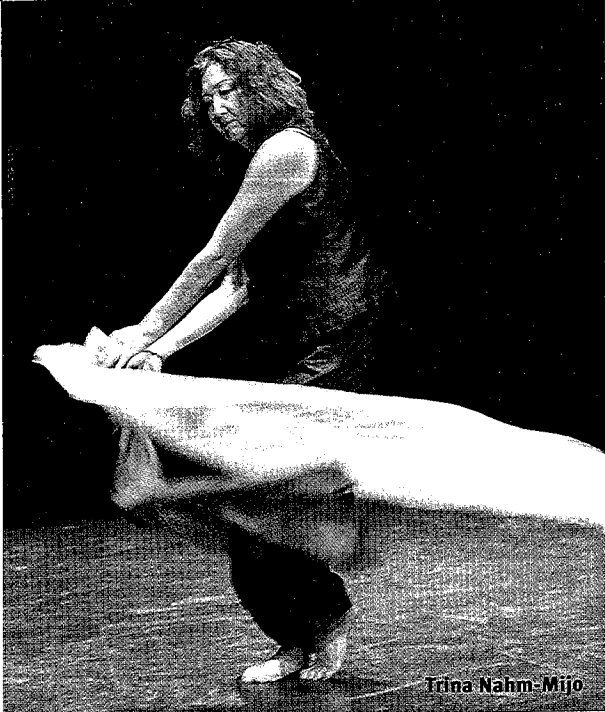
signs of endangerment, but people found it hard to believe them that their language had some of the early warning subsistence to be concerned about language. I tried to show ety. But they were too busy worrying about their day-to-day for a group that is generally marginalized from Filipino society. The project are more mixed. In the Philippines, I found that the presence of an outside researcher was very prestigious

"Everyone has been very receptive to me, but reactions to the project are more mixed. In the Philippines, I found that the presence of an outside researcher was very prestigious for a group that is generally marginalized from Filipino society. But they were too busy worrying about their day-to-day subsistence to be concerned about language. I tried to show them that their language had some of the early warning signs of endangerment, but people found it hard to believe that their language could ever go extinct," she explains.

researcher at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Indonesia to study the Teiwa language as a postdoctoral She has since traveled to a mountain village in Eastern none had ever been described in a book-length grammar. is one of the 24 languages spoken by Negrito groups and belonging to the Negrito ethnic minority. Dupanigan Agta ken by approximately 1,500 semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers Philippines documenting Dupanigan Agta, which is spoken by approximately 1,500 semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers

She did her doctoral fieldwork in northeastern Luzon in the Philippines documenting Dupanigan Agta, which is spoken by approximately 1,500 semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and a book on the grammar. dictionary, an extensive collection of texts with translations documented," but minimally, a language should have a






She also helped start dance programs at the college and at UH Hilo—both still going strong. She established a human services certificate and a women’s studies program and helped set up a women’s center, now administratively part of UH Hilo. “I like to start things and see them survive,” says Nahm-Mijo. By her count, she’s been involved with starting some 20 programs and organizations that are still active today. That doesn’t include her 34-year marriage to fellow faculty member Jerry Nahm-Mijo, with whom she has two grown sons, Renge and Shayne.


Among Nahm-Mijo’s more recent projects is directing the Middle College Arts Program at the Kea’au Youth Business

Center. The award-winning program allows at-risk high school seniors to earn dual high school and college credit. It boasted a 100-percent graduation rate for participants by its third year and received the UH Community Colleges’ 2008 Wo Community Building Award. Students learn digital media, culinary arts and computer skills in facilities that include a recording studio described as “probably the best on the Big Island,” a kitchen on wheels and a computer lab.

“A program’s not good unless it can survive by itself,” says Nahm-Mijo. “I’ve been blessed to find a lot of good people. It’s been neat to see students who were freshman at Hawai’i CC working all the way through their master’s and becoming colleagues in the community.”

The physical demands of teaching dance motivated Nahm-Mijo to pass that torch onto others, but she continues to choreograph new works with an activist agenda. She expects to carry this through in Estonia. “I see this experience as a continuation of what I started earlier in my career. I’m hoping to open their country and culture to the arts as a healing force to improve peoples’ lives.” 

Jeela Ongley (BA ’97, MA ’09 Mānoa) is Mālamalama Online editor and web content coordinator in External Affairs and University Relations

 **Web extra: Nahm-Mijo talks about the emerging discipline of expressive arts therapy and her dance-based social activism work in this video.**

## Linguistics continued from page 15

stories ever since I first arrived as a Peace Corps volunteer—it’s not so much a matter of fieldwork as it is spending time with a friend. That’s the best part about fieldwork: being able to build personal relationships because of a common interest in language.”


Odango comes from a linguistically diverse heritage—he speaks Tagalog at home, but his mother speaks Ilocano and his father, Cebuano. He’d like one day to work with minority languages in Mindoro, the island in the Philippines where his parents grew up and went to school.

In addition to fieldwork, students do work at the Language Documentation Training Center on campus. Run by linguistic graduate students, the center introduces basic concepts in language documentation to speakers of under-documented languages so that they will be able to document their own language. Each participant is paired with a graduate student who acts as a mentor, and the projects are added to the center’s website. Since 2004 the center has gathered information on more than 60 languages.

Center Director and PhD candidate Apay Tang is documenting a language close to her heart—her own language of

Truku, which is spoken in Hualien in Taiwan. Tang sees the urgency of fieldwork first hand. “There aren’t many people under 30 who speak our language. Most people speak Mandarin Chinese,” she says.

In addition to a Truku word list and grammar guide, Tang has recorded songs and stories that are posted on the center’s website. “The more I study my language scientifically, the more I appreciate it and see how beautiful it is,” she says. Inspired by the immersion schools in Hawai’i, she would one day like to have a youth center where children can speak Truku.

Tang was inspired by her grandfather, Yudaw Pisaw, who told her how important their language was in retaining their cultural identity. The 83-year-old pastor is passionate about keeping his language alive. He serves on Tang’s dictionary committee and teaches the language to anyone who is interested. “He says we have to care. We have to do it,” says Tang. 

Tracy Matsushima (BA ’90 Mānoa) is an External Affairs and University Relations publications specialist

 **Web extra: Listen to a song in Truku.**

THE LIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE



**First lady of limu**  
**UH's Gorey art**

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