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GERALD ROCHE, BAN+DE MKHAR, BKRA SHIS BZANG PO,  
G.YU LHA, SNYING DKAR SKYID, TSHE RING RNAM GYAL, ZLA  
BA SGROL MA, CHARLES KEVIN STUART

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# Participatory Culture Documentation on the Tibetan Plateau

Gerald Roche,<sup>1</sup> Ban+de mkhar,<sup>2</sup> Bkra shis bzang po,<sup>2</sup> G.yu lha,<sup>2</sup> Snying dkar skyid,<sup>2</sup> Tshe ring nam gyal,<sup>2</sup> Zla ba sgrol ma,<sup>2</sup> and Charles Kevin Stuart<sup>3</sup>

Griffith University and Qinghai Normal University,<sup>1</sup> Independent Scholars<sup>2</sup> & Shaanxi Normal University<sup>3</sup>

*Lung ba red la, chu red yod ge.*  
*Sde ba red la, dpe red yod ge.*

For every valley, a stream.  
For every village, a tradition.

Tibetan proverb

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we examine participatory approaches to culture documentation in the context of work undertaken with Tibetan Plateau communities in China. We describe the diversity of vernacular traditions found within such communities, arguing against the ‘taken-for-granted’ homogeneity of Plateau culture. We discuss the implications of such diversity on documentation practice and introduce participatory approaches drawn from development studies, and suggest that these may provide novel, effective solutions in this context. We also describe the challenges of culture loss on the Plateau, arguing that with the current rate of loss and homogenization, documentation work is now vitally important. To conclude, we examine the pros and cons of participatory approaches in documentation on the Tibetan Plateau in particular, but also more broadly.

Our general approach is informed by the belief that the purpose of culture documentation is to record the greatest possible amount of extant cultural diversity in a manner that enables such diversity to be sustainably maintained in situ. We also argue that it is important to consider the specific, substantive nature of the communities in which culture documentation is undertaken, rather than applying generic concepts of culture and community.

## 2. The nature of plateau communities<sup>1</sup>

Rather than emphasizing ethnic, individual, or linguistic diversity, we focus on cultural diversity at the community level in Plateau communities by examining the specific substantive form of these communities, and not applying a generic notion. What follows is an imagined example of an agricultural community and its local traditions.<sup>2</sup> Although this depiction is generalised in form, it emphasizes the specific, variable content of Plateau communities' culture.

At the start of the first lunar month, villagers celebrate the New Year (Tsering Bum et al. 2008). All village males above the age of ten gather on the first day to communally worship the village's territorial deity at a *lab rtsi* 'territorial deity altar.' They pray for success for their family and community, and for other surrounding communities to experience bad luck. This is done in part by reciting a *bsang yig* 'incense scripture' to the deity. This scripture might be shared with other villages that share the same territorial deity, or might be unique to the village. During the New Year, a trance medium embodying the local deity may become possessed and make predictions about the fate of the community in the coming year (Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2009, Dpal ldan bkra shis and Stuart 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Plateau communities' is used in lieu of the sobriquet 'Tibetan' as the latter conceals much cultural and linguistic diversity. Samuel (1995) argues for using the plural when referring to Tibetan societies, while Tourandre (2008) reports that there are twenty-five distinct Tibetic languages derived from Old Tibetan. Furthermore, the Tibetan Plateau and adjoining regions are inhabited by people professing diverse identities and speaking Mongolic (Janhunen et al. 2007, Georg 2003, Slater 2003, Wu 2003, Kim 2003), Turkic (Janhunen 2005, Goodman 2008, Ma et al. 1993, Hahn 1988, Poppe 1953), Qiangic (Sun 1990, Libu Lakhi et al. 2010a, Libu Lakhi et al. 2010b, Libu Lakhi et al. 2009, Libu Lakhi et al. 2007, Sun 2007, Sun 2004, Sun 2000a, Sun 2000b), Sinitic (Janhunen 2009, Janhunen et al. 2008, Dede 2003, Dwyer 1992), and Lolo-Burmese (Bradley 2001, Mathieu 2003) languages. 'Tibetan' is also often synonymous with 'Tibetan Buddhist', which excludes Tibetan adherents of Bon, Islam (Zarconne 1995), and Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> We are unable to provide a description of such a pastoral community due to a dearth of detailed ethnographic material. See Ekvall (1983), Karma Dondrub (2005) and Rinzin Thargyal (2007) for ethnographies of Tibetan pastoralism. Our description is primarily based on experience and knowledge of communities on the northeastern Tibetan Plateau, but can tentatively be applied to other agricultural communities elsewhere on the Plateau.

Villagers visit each other in order of diminishing kin relation over the next few days and are aware that failure to visit is insulting and invites gossip. Each village household is required to send at least one member to weddings held during this time. Speeches are given extolling the virtues of local landscapes and historical personages during the weddings. Village weddings vary to the extent that guests attending from outside the village notice significant differences and find the process novel (Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010, Blo rtan rdo rje and Stuart 2008). Parties celebrating the eightieth birthday of a village elder, the building of a new house and a girl's coming of age (Tshe dpal rdo rje et al. 2010) are also held and compulsorily attended by a representative of each village household.

At the end of the two weeks of New Year celebrations, villagers gather to dance on a threshing ground in the village center or in a nearby field. Participation is obligatory and non-participants are fined. During the dancing, performed in a large circle divided by gender and ranked by age, songs are sung, and many of the lyrics are mumbled to keep outsiders in the audience from understanding them (Dkon mchog dge legs and Stuart 2009).

The performance of this and other annual village rituals is overseen by a group of village men selected by vote or by a game of chance (Ramble 2007). They ensure the participation of representatives from all village households in village rituals as well as activities central to the village agricultural cycle.

After New Year, these village leaders organize the villagers' ploughing and sowing. Before ploughing, a short speech is given by a village man, praising the crops and farm equipment. No villagers may begin work until this speech has been completed and a mock first ploughing has been conducted in a selected field. Afterwards, fields are off limits to village livestock, which must be strictly monitored until after harvest to ensure they do not wander into the fields and damage the crops. Livestock are herded collectively but the family whose livestock roam into fields and damage or consume crops must pay a fine to the village leaders.

Irrigation is a tense time. Water is scarce and must be shared with surrounding communities (Tsering Bum 2007). Negotiations by village leaders attempt an equal sharing of water. If problems arise, conflicts, perhaps resulting in death, may occur between village communities. Such conflicts may lead to long-running feuds between neighboring communities.

In the fourth lunar month, villagers organize to chant *ma Ni*<sup>3</sup> together. This month has days commemorating the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha and is, therefore, an auspicious time to chant and perform other meritorious activities; a time when all positive actions generate extra merit. Each household sends a representative to chant in a village home, where they are provided three meals a day. The chanting lasts three days and moves to a new home each day.

A ritual is held to protect the growing crops after fields have been weeded in the fifth lunar month. Mostly women carry scriptures on their backs and circumambulate the fields, making *bsang* ‘incense’ offerings at various points as they circle the village territory. The image of a local deity may be taken from a local temple and carried around the village fields. People may sing *ma Ni* and may sing ribald love songs antiphonally during rest breaks on their rounds. This is another instance when inter-community conflicts may occur, as disagreements may arise over the precise delineation of community boundaries.

Village leaders ensure that all households participate in a picnic or other celebration prior to harvest and also determine the date and method of harvest, whether community members will do the work or whether wage labourers will be brought in. During harvest, villagers sing harvesting songs. The lyrics are *ma Ni*, but the melodies vary from one community to the next.

Threshing and winnowing follow harvesting and are mostly organized by individual households. However, villagers may collectively rent and use threshing equipment, in which case village leaders organize these activities. If villagers do not use a threshing machine, they use flails to thresh and sing improvised threshing songs that insult or praise fellow villagers, as well as providing hyperbolic descriptions of threshing tools in the local vernacular.

Funerals are held throughout the year when deaths occur. Precautions are taken to ensure that the deceased does not haunt or pollute the community. It is mandatory for each household to send at least one member to death rituals (Rin chen rdo rje and Stuart 2009). A ritual overseen by a local religious figure may be held to expel a ghost that is believed to be disturbing a

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<sup>3</sup> *Ma Ni* is an abbreviation of the six-syllable Tibetan Buddhist mantra *om mani padme hum*.

community, as evidenced by repeated accidents and misfortunes (Kondro Tsering, n.d.).

In the tenth lunar month, as villagers begin to contemplate preparations for the New Year, a ‘*cham*’ masked religious dance’ is held in the village temple. The dance is organized by a lay manager who, in addition to inviting monks to chant in the temple, is also responsible for providing meals and small gifts of cash to the household representatives who attend the ritual.

Births in the village may occur at any time of the year. Shortly before the birth, the mother-to-be may be attended by either her mother-in-law or her mother. After giving birth, she stays in one room of the home for seven days, at which time she may leave the room but not the home compound. There are no visitors for thirty days after the birth. After this period, one representative from each village home visits with gifts of food, and local religious personalities may perform rituals.

During an atypical year, a village or its local monastery may receive a visit from an important reincarnated *bla ma*.<sup>4</sup> On such an occasion, village women sing *ma Ni* and a villager gifted at improvisation may create a praise song for the visiting *bla ma*, improvising lyrics to an existing melody. Although most of this song will be quickly forgotten, certain song lyrics may work their way into the folk repertoire.

This, then, is the substantive nature of many agricultural Plateau communities. Its form is generalised but the content – local deities, melodies, lyrics, religious figures, oratory, specific ritual processes – varies from one community to the next. Such communities have a defined leadership consisting of annually elected village leaders who oversee both agricultural and ritual cycles. They have a defined membership that is reaffirmed throughout the year by the compulsory attendance of a representative from each village household at every village ritual. Plateau communities have a territory that is defined and defended each year throughout the annual agricultural and ritual cycle. These communities are also corporate in acting socially in the event of conflict and in the sense that they each generate and embody a unique set of vernacular traditions.<sup>5</sup> The phrase ‘compulsory

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<sup>4</sup> A *bla ma* is an esteemed Tibetan Buddhist practitioner.

<sup>5</sup> This assertion of the corporate nature of Plateau communities does not suggest that these communities are internally homogenous. See Makley (2007) for a discussion of the internal diversity of a Plateau community.

creative communities' adequately sums up the nature of these communities, as they are compulsory in membership<sup>6</sup> and creative in generating vernacular traditions.

These communities are typically villages but may consist of two or more villages united by a shared territorial deity; a network of villages adhering to a common sect (e.g. Rnying ma pa Tibetan Buddhism) or religion (e.g. Bon); or they may consist of the *lha sde* 'lay community' of a monastery. At the largest, they may be a community determined by a geographic setting – a riverine valley or river drainage system. This may be at considerable variance with such government designations as natural and administrative villages, townships, counties, prefectures, regions, provinces and so on. Above this community level, large units, such as religious, linguistic and ethnic groups, act as homogenizing agents, rather than agents for diversification of traditions.

The community-driven mechanism generating the diversity of the Tibetan Plateau resembles the mechanism that Laycock proposed to explain the enormous linguistic diversity in Melanesia: 'linguistic diversity ... is perpetuated as a badge of identification' (1982: 33) by the small-scale societies found in Melanesia, rejecting the isolationist and diffusionist hypotheses that have also played a significant role in explanations of Himalayan diversity. Laycock (1982: 35) further writes that:

language in Melanesia is, in its very diversity, being used constructively, to hold social groupings to a small and manageable level – and, conversely, to keep other groups at a distance.

Laycock suggests that linguistic diversity is actively constructed and maintained by Melanesian societies, and we suggest the same for cultural diversity among Plateau communities. Whereas Barth (1998 [1967]: 15) stressed the importance of distinguishing between 'the *ethnic* boundary' and 'the cultural stuff that it encloses', we suggest that in the case of community-level traditions on the Tibetan Plateau, the 'cultural stuff' *is* a boundary, though not an ethnic one. Many traditions may have originated specifically in order to distinguish communities from one another and to create boundaries between them.

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<sup>6</sup> Leadership, elected by vote or chance, is also compulsory.

Such boundaries were maintained over long periods because the differentiation of these communities was in some way important. It is possible that this proliferation of vernacular traditions at the community level formed what Scott (2009) calls a ‘state preventing mechanism’ – aspects of culture serving to maintain a relatively small and acephalous social structure, thus preventing centralisation of power. Given the competing pressures often exercised by the Chinese Imperial State and Tibetan Buddhist polities, not to mention local chiefdoms (*tusi, nang so*), such a social structure may have served to protect Plateau communities from the ravages of taxation, conscription and corvée. Competition over scarce water and land resources might also have contributed to the formation and maintenance of this atomistic social structure and the generation of diverse vernacular traditions. Cultural notions of collective fortune that may be ritually manipulated probably also played a part in the formation of such a social structure (da Col 2007, Clarke 1990). Whatever the mechanisms that led to the social structure, which in turn fostered the cultural diversity on the Tibetan Plateau, it most certainly was not isolation and diffusion: the region has long been enmeshed in networks of long distance trade (van Spengen 2000, Richardson 1981), pilgrimage (Huber 2008) and politics (Tuttle 2005).

### 3. Culture loss among plateau communities

Considerations of the nature of community are important in terms of the nature of culture change and loss that culture documentation seeks to address, ameliorate and sometimes reverse, as we will illustrate with examples from music on the Tibetan Plateau. First, it must be noted that music loss across the Tibetan Plateau is a poorly documented phenomenon owing to our limited understanding of vernacular musics of the area. However, even a cursory examination reveals that the number of genres being actively practiced and transmitted is declining across the Plateau, certain genres are on the verge of vanishing, styles are homogenizing and improvisation is declining (Tsering Bum and Roche, n.d.).

Lullabies; work songs; harvesting songs; songs sung while herding, including sounds made to encourage mother animals to give milk to their young (see Pegg 2001, Levin 2006 for other examples of these); praise songs for important personages and places; archery songs; wedding songs and love

songs are examples of extremely endangered songs. Related to this is the rapid loss of oratory forms. Certain genres, such as songs sung in pairs by women in the region around Qinghai Lake, have disappeared (Learner 1933).<sup>7</sup>

A second aspect of musical loss is homogenization or reduction in regional variety due to access to local mass media, beginning with the cassette culture of the late 1980s and extending into the video-disc (VCD) era of today. Cassettes and VCDs of traditional songs are distributed and consumed at a level greatly exceeding the community scale at which they were produced. This has led to a blending of local styles and of the emergence of new styles, e.g., the emergence of *rdung len* music in A mdo (Savolainen n.d., Anton-Luca 2002, Morcom 2007) and the emergence of widely distributed and consumed circle dance cassettes, VCDs and DVDs that have become popular since the 1990s.

A final aspect of musical loss on the Tibetan Plateau is the decreased rate at which the corpus is being renewed. Traditionally, such genres as love songs, praise songs and *mgur glu* ‘songs of realization’ (Sujata 2005) were constantly improvised, and while the vast majority of these improvisations vanished, some found their way permanently into local repertoires. Such improvisation no longer occurs, or only rarely. As songs fall out of fashion and are forgotten, new materials are not generated to replace them, and the corpus that constitutes individual genres rapidly diminishes.

The driving force behind this loss, homogenization and a decrease in improvisation results in the erosion of Plateau communities as substantive, generative units. Two central government policies, neither of which was designed to result in this outcome, have strengthened this tendency: *Gaige kaifang* (1979, Opening and Reform) and *Xibu da kaifa* (2000, Develop the West; see Lai 2002). Both policies explicitly aimed at improving the economic conditions within China and have had certain success. The cost, however, has been the erosion of communities and community traditions on the Plateau and throughout China.

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<sup>7</sup>It is worth quoting Learner’s (1933: 46) description of this now-vanished practice:

One custom in singing seems to me peculiar to Tibet. Two young women sit facing each other so closely as to enable their noses to touch. As they sing together in unison, their voices are echoed and re-echoed from each other’s throats. The effect if the two voices blending as if in one is mellow and resonant..

As China's economy surges, able-bodied rural residents travel from their communities to urban centers to work from after the fields are sown until harvest time, and then leave again until the New Year period. Plateau residents also travel to highlands areas during May and June to dig for caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*), a high-priced ingredient for traditional medicines and tonics (Winkler 2008). Migrant labor and caterpillar fungus collection and sale provide Plateau communities with much-needed cash income.

A second impact of these policies has resulted in an unprecedented number of rural children attending official schools (Caixiangduojie 2009). The distances between the children's homes and the schools often means that children from the age of seven and older may spend most of their year outside of their village community. This may continue until they graduate from college some fifteen years later.

The policies of Reform and Opening and Develop the West have resulted in a massive build-up of infrastructure (e.g., electricity and roads) that have given outsiders and outside information unparalleled access to Plateau communities and vice versa.

While many such changes have benefited Plateau residents, they have also spelled an end to Plateau communities as substantive units generating vernacular traditions. The annual agricultural and ritual cycles have been disrupted by the dislocation of the population from children as young as seven to the oldest able-bodied adults for most of the year. Community has become a point of reference to return to, rather than an all-encompassing context. Such communities are no longer the sites at which identity and tradition are generated – larger ethnic, linguistic and religious categories have come to the fore. The result has been loss, homogenization and the cessation of improvisation resulting in an enormous loss of diversity and the death of countless traditions – not just of music but also other vernacular traditions.

#### **4. Participatory solutions**

A consequence of what is outlined above is the inability of a sweeping, survey-style approach to cultural documentation that treats the entire Plateau as a homogenous substantive unit to adequately capture the diversity present among local communities. Methods addressing the issues of loss at an appropriate, community-level scale are required. Participatory approaches are a meaningful option in this context.

Participatory approaches assert that communities have the right to define their problems and negotiate appropriate solutions and that problems are most efficiently and completely addressed in this manner. Participation is not only a question of rights and ethics but also of efficacy.

Practically, implementation of participatory approaches in this context is done by training primarily young Plateau people in the use of mobile digital technologies to record their community traditions and in the use of desktop digital technologies to process and archive those materials, and training them to create copies of the recordings that may be returned to the larger community in mass media formats in compact disc forms.

Participatory approaches were first introduced into Development Studies by Robert Chambers in the 1980s, primarily through his book *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983).<sup>8</sup> As participatory approaches have now blossomed into a sub-discipline, we touch on one point of Chambers' work particularly relevant to culture documentation – the notion of 'reversal'.

Since the term reversal is largely self-explanatory, we will give several examples employed in our work. The first is 'expertise reversal', which is a reversal in perception – a reversal of the idea of who should be considered an expert and on what basis. Perceptions of expertise are often barriers that exclude community members from culture documentation and preservation. Their lifetime of lived experience within that community is often overlooked because they may lack the technological literacy, theoretical basis and comparative outlook of professional culture workers. Such perceptions of who is and who is not an expert have real-world consequences, for example, in decisions made by funding bodies.

Our orientation determines who we consider an expert because both the local person and the professional culture worker are in different ways expert and novice. The local person is an expert on local culture and language and a novice regarding techniques and theories of culture documentation. The professional culture worker is the reverse. However, the professional's expertise is often privileged over the local in line with the assumption that the locals' expertise can be quickly accessed and acquired by the professional.

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<sup>8</sup> For other works on participatory approaches, see Jennings (2000), McIntyre (2002) and Narayanasamy (2009).

Such an assumption undermines the complex nuances of local knowledge and asserts the value of outsider knowledge.

Participatory approaches suggest that it is ethical and efficacious to reverse this assumption and instead assume that the skills and knowledge of outside professionals are more easily acquired, and that the more complex and valued form of knowledge is local expertise. This basic principle is that people work within their own communities to document local traditions and assume the role of expert and of culture worker, rather than bringing in ‘professional’ outsiders, except perhaps to provide training.

Closely connected to this idea of ‘expertise reversal’ are reversals in age and gender perception. It is often necessary to recognize women and young people as experts. To this end, we work primarily with young people and actively encourage a gender balance among our members. When returning to their communities, the idea of the ‘old village man’ as key informant has great power, as it does over most professional culture workers. Our training encourages considering how youths and women produce and access traditions. This often leads to documentation of tongue twisters (Blo rtan rdo rje et al. 2009), children’s games and ‘divination songs’ used by young women to determine who, among a group of peers, are destined to be lovers.

A third reversal is related to pedagogy and is drawn in this case primarily from English as a Second Language teaching practice and its student-centered classroom. This approach is employed in all our training. Traditional classrooms in the West and on the Plateau often adopt a teacher-centered perspective in which the teacher, the fountain of knowledge, stands up and tips over, and the students, as empty vessels, are filled. The training we undertake is student-centered – students are given the materials, language and situations in which to meaningfully construct knowledge for themselves. Learning by doing is the primary emphasis. We also adopt a system of peer scaffolding whereby once a student has acquired a new skill, they then have the option to teach this to others, hence solidifying what they have learned while empowering their student. Through informal discussion sessions we also encourage more experienced trainees to share their successes and failures.

A project undertaken from 2009-2010 will provide a concrete example of these reversals. Entitled ‘Oral Literature of the Northeast Sino-Tibetan Frontier’, the project was carried out with funding from the Cambridge-based World Oral Literature Project (WOLP). Six recent high-school graduates from across the Tibetan Plateau – Tshe ring nam gyal (male, born 1990), Snying dkar skyid (female, born 1991), G.yu lha (female, born 1990), Bkra shis bzang

po (male, born 1991), Ban+de mkhar (male, born 1988) and Zla ba sgröl ma (female, born 1990)<sup>9</sup> – participated in the project. Training was based in Xining City, capital of China’s Qinghai Province, and began with a series of informal discussions of traditions in the participants’ home communities. We discussed a different topic in each session, including food, clothing, architecture, oratory, folktales, children’s games, household rituals, music, funerals, weddings and home remedies. These discussions were later supplemented with readings in folklore and ethnographic theory and of ethnographic case studies, and with a field trip to observe and document a rural harvest festival. Technical training focused on digital photography and digital audio recording. Equipped with this experience, students then returned home for six weeks with digital cameras and digital audio recorders to undertake culture documentation. They began writing up their results back in Xining, changing their focus from a general description to a focused analysis, and taking notes on materials that would need to be collected on a subsequent trip home over the traditional New Year. After the New Year period, students concentrated on producing texts and preparing audio to be archived with WOLP. Students had completed first drafts of their texts in May 2010.

## 5. Outcomes

At best, non-participatory approaches to culture and language documentation produce nuanced records of the target language or culture. In addition to such records, participatory approaches also produce empowered individuals with increased capacities within the community in which the documentation was carried out.

The local person undertaking documentation in their home community often increases their knowledge of local traditions to realise their project. A person may not understand all of their local community’s traditions simply by virtue of being a member of it. For example, Snying dkar skyid was unaware of her village’s history or the way in which the village was structured in nine *tsho ba* ‘clans’ before beginning this project. Zla ba sgröl ma was unaware of and had never heard most of the work songs she recorded. G.yu lha increased her awareness of everyday figurative speech, which she also began including

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<sup>9</sup> The average age of participants was approximately nineteen when we began the project – half were male and half were female.

more frequently in her own communication practice. As stated above, the aim of participatory culture documentation is the in situ maintenance of diversity; and creating a context in which a young community member investigates and learns about her own traditions contributes to this aim. Acquisition of such knowledge also empowers the person within his or her own community.

An individual acquires a new social position within their community in undertaking such a project and develops new relationships, thus expanding their social network in the community. Tshe ring rnam rgyal worked primarily with a key consultant and greatly deepened and strengthened his relationship with this knowledgeable villager. Snying dkar skyid found that her project strengthened not only her relationships with other villagers, but also the relationship between her household and the broader village community. Bkra shis bzang po believes that having made many social connections in his local community, undertaking community-level work in the future will be facilitated. Having a local person going from home to home asking questions about local traditions also inspires reflexivity on behalf of the entire community about the value of local traditions and their maintenance.

The individuals undertaking such work also increase their technical capacities and proficiencies. G.yu lha found that collecting, collating, organizing, analyzing and synthesizing a large amount of data caused her to become more careful and pay greater attention to detail. Zla ba sgröl ma noted that her visual literacy increased through photographic training. Snying dkar skyid learned qualitative interviewing techniques and increased her English language proficiency – like other members she is trilingual, being literate and orally fluent in English, Standard Modern Chinese and Tibetan.<sup>10</sup>

In this situation, the collector, after undergoing training and the process of community engagement necessary to collect the materials, acquires technological and linguistic skills in mastering digital technologies, and finds that their social capacity in their community has increased. They have become locally significant and have an expanded social network and new relationships. Gaining valuable practical experience with identifiable outcomes has also increased their ability to find employment in China's competitive job market. This latter point is particularly significant, as new, unprecedented economic forces have had divisive effects on local

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<sup>10</sup> In addition, Bkra shis bzang po and G.yu lha also speak as their mother tongues two Qiang languages: Minyak and Lavrung, respectively.

communities. Creating empowered individuals within these communities with increased earning capacities is thus significant.

Sydow perceptively noted that within any given community, the bulk of the folk tradition was usually borne by a very few individuals – ‘It is true of all tradition that in comparison with the whole people its carriers are *very* limited in number’ (1948: 48). In highlighting the diversity of traditional repertoires alluded to above, it must be noted that many communities had individuals who were ‘living archives’ – repositories of numerous folktales, oratory, folk music, proverbs, riddles and local lore who were known locally by such monikers as ‘Radio’ or ‘Television’. In the context of communities of a few hundred people that have unique cultural traditions, recording the repertoire of one such individual would contribute significantly to documenting an entire tradition.

Participatory approaches to cultural documentation empower individuals to be such tradition bearers *if they choose to be*. It is also worth noting that it is *only* such empowered individuals who have the ability to work at the scale and resolution necessary to access community traditions and reveal the full extent of the cultural diversity of Plateau communities.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Critics of participatory methods have called participation ‘the new tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001), representing it as a way of generating consent and viewing reversals such as those discussed here as superficial measures with little impact on entrenched power structures. There is an element of truth in these criticisms. For example, we challenge members to reconsider which song genres are the most valuable to record. We cajole them into recording endangered genres such as lullabies and work songs, though their interest may be in representing themselves to the outside world through their most esteemed genres and virtuosic performers. We must be realistic about balancing community goals and providing objective documentation. To thus label our work ‘participatory’ in the fullest sense is somewhat misleading.

Despite this, our approach has many benefits. First, it can be done at very low cost – for example, digital audio and video recorders now come inbuilt in most mobile phones, and provide recordings of sufficient quality to allow lyrical, musical and linguistic transcription. Furthermore, now obsolete technology such as minidisc recorders produce archive quality recordings and may be obtained through donation drives.

In addition to the minimal costs associated with such projects, they are also easily replicable and scalable, and the outcomes can be propagated virally. For example, Roche and his colleague recorded numerous folk songs and put them on compact disc for distribution to primary schools. One of the songs recorded – a bridal lament – became locally popular, and on one occasion Roche observed a woman recording it onto her mobile phone from a car stereo. We are currently considering how to use mobile phones and compact disc duplicating technology to make the materials as widely accessible as possible.

In conclusion then, participatory approaches provide a viable alternative to expert-oriented culture and language documentation. In addition to producing documents of cultures and languages, such approaches also produce empowered individuals in the target communities. Our description of Plateau communities suggests that employing participatory approaches in a context with diverse and highly localised vernacular traditions is more effective than survey-style approaches. From a technical standpoint, we believe that participatory approaches should be employed in such situations where small-scale social structure fosters a diversity of vernacular traditions, in order to document the maximum amount of variation possible. From an ethical standpoint, we believe that participatory approaches to documentation should be employed so that this diversity may be maintained in situ, rather than extracting this information from communities that often suffer culture and language loss as a direct result of exogenous economic, demographic and political pressures.

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