

## Video-documenting and revitalizing the dying language Mani in Sierra Leone

PI: G. Tucker Childs, [childst@pdx.edu](mailto:childst@pdx.edu)

The work to be undertaken continues the documentation of a dying West African language and pilots a revitalization effort on a remote island where children still grow up speaking the language. The Mani language is still vital on Tangbaya, whose children won a special Mani cultural competition sponsored by a preceding project in 2009. They, their parents, village elders and chiefs were provided the first Mani books during that visit and are now ready to continue the revitalization effort, all of which will be documented by Voice of America's senior producer, Bart Childs, brother to the PI.

Few documentation projects can afford the equipment and even fewer have benefitted from such expertise as that provided by VOA. Preliminary videos have already been circulated to high praise. The language of focus is Mani, as it was of the Mani Documentation Project (MDP, 2004-06), a language closely related to Kim and Bom, the twin foci of the Project Documenting the Kim and Bom Languages (DKB, 2007-10). Combining VOA resources and personnel with five years of fieldwork create a rich symbiosis with high-quality production values.

VOA resources were made available for only two days on the Mani side in 2009 (the main focus was on other languages), but have been generously offered again in the form of high definition video and personnel. A special feature of this proposal is that it will be the first time an endangered African language has been part of a revival effort and the first time the process will be documented. Furthermore, it will pioneer the E-MAGINE wifi field station, provide computers and internet access to Mani learners, with access to the pedagogical and revitalization expertise at the PI's home university, Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.

The basic component of the E-MAGINE, an initiative is a stand-alone, solar-powered wifi station, which will be supplemented with a set of basic and durable computers for the students. Not only will students become familiar with computers and the internet, but they will also be learning how to read and write their language using computer-assisted technology developed interactively in real time with colleagues and students at PSU.

The other highlighted object of the documentation effort is the renowned dancing and music of the Mani-speaking Pamalap acrobat-dancers. (The PI has seen them perform twice and is still mystified by how a man dives into a small chicken basket.) They represent the best of the few performing groups left, groups that used to circulate within the once more extensive Mani-speaking area in fierce competition. Undoubtedly other groups will want to participate, as they did at the previous festival, but the Pamalap performers are the most well known and popular and have already agreed to be filmed. Other targets of video documentation are the diurnal activities of Mani speakers, including everyday interactions and activities, such as the traditional practice of "salt-cooking", the processing of sea water for its salt.

VOA has two hour-length programs planned, one on the language documentation effort itself, the other on project RAs Hannah Sarvasy and Marta Piqueras. These videos will help in future recruiting efforts as well as in disseminating general information about the projects, about documentation projects in general, and about the perilous state of many minority languages.

The filmed documentation and the use of the internet will model what can be done by other fieldworkers. Furthermore, both VOA and the language documentation community are keen on showing how recent technological innovations (miniaturization, digitization, satellite telephony and internet access) can modernize their operations, extend their global reach, and save money. Because VOA has such a well-established distribution network, the urgency and practice of documenting endangered languages will reach a wide audience. As internet access becomes cheaper and more available, the project has implications for Africa leapfrogging the earthbound, equipment-intensive technology of current systems going straight to internet access via established cell-phone technology, as has been done with telephones. Another major impact is the experience and training that the young fieldworkers will undergo, especially the local assistants; their experiences could lead to future documentation undertakings.