**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot podcast

**Aven:** where the more we know

**Mark:** the more we want to find out

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven

**Mark:** and I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about the alphabet. Woohoo. Actually, we're talking about lots of alphabets, even better and things that aren't even alphabets. Woo . We're going to do an interview and before we get to introducing our guest, I just want to say that this is the beginning officially of our eighth season.

Wow. Yeah. We've slowed down to about one a month. Now we were doing two a month when we started, but still that's a lot of episodes. This is episode number 109, and we're on our eighth season. I feel like we've been doing this a while. Not that that makes any particular difference to anyone. It's just a way of counting the passage of time.[00:01:00]

So today we're going to be talking with Tim Brookes.

**Mark:** Tim Brookes has an MA from Oxford University. He founded the Endangered Alphabets project in 2009 and is the author of Endangered Alphabets and the Atlas of Endangered Alphabets. He's recognized as the world's leading figure in script endangerment and revitalization.

**Aven:** Tim currently lives in Vermont and among his other work, is a wood carver who produces beautiful sculptural representations of scripts and alphabets from around the world. You'll hear lots more about that in the interview, but I strongly urge you to go to his website if only to see some of the lovely things he's made.

We spoke to Tim back at the beginning of the summer. So let's hear that now.

So, hi, Tim, thank you so much for joining us.

**Tim:** Thank you so much for inviting me.

**Mark:** Well, I think what we wanna maybe start off with today is a question that we ask many of our guests about the [00:02:00] unexpected connections that maybe got you into what you're working on. And I think, one particular story that I know you have about the sort of origins of your interest in, in all of this is quite a, a neat connection there.

**Tim:** Ooh. So I was actually gonna tell you a different story because the origin story lasts 68 minutes.

**Aven:** all right. Well, maybe we'll send people to the website for that one.

**Tim:** And, and in a sense, this story is more interesting and, and sort of subtler. So I began the work that became the Endangered Alphabets in 2009/2010. And it really got underway with the first exhibition that I did in which I carved article one of the universal declaration of human rights which says roughly speaking, all [00:03:00] peoples were created alike in dignity and respect. They were endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

So I carved that in 12 different minority scripts. And what was interesting to me looking back is that I saw that as an act of documentation. And so the way that I carved them and the way the pieces wound up they look documentary. So by that, what I mean is when you look at the at the carving it looks printed.

So the carvings sort of looked documentary in the sense that if you look at them, the impression you get is that this is a piece of unfamiliar writing.

And later I would get much more interested in the [00:04:00] aesthetics of individual letters or the aesthetics of the wood or whatever, but these are mostly rectangles of wood and there's this unfamiliar writing on them. So, as it happened. I then as now have many hats that I wear and in 2012 I went to Bangladesh and at the time a friend and I had a nonprofit called writers without borders, which was about teaching writing skills to people in the developing world who are working in healthcare because essentially all of the world's healthcare issues either begin in the developing world, or they're more apparent in the developing world yet nobody ever listens to what they have to say.

And it's impossible for them to get their research or their experiences published in Western journals. So we are running these writing workshop. And before [00:05:00] I left I put the word out through social media saying, are there any endangered alphabets in Bangladesh? And I, I got contacted by somebody very, very helpful who said, yes, there are actually two or three and helped me get in touch with some people who could actually, you know, read and write and, and, and speak in these minority languages and could actually write some stuff for me in their scripts.

And so I thought this is great. So I went out to Bangladesh and I got there in the monsoon and that's a whole story in itself. And I was fortunate enough to be met in Dhaka, the, the capital by representatives of three different minority groups, ethnic minorities who were originally from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which is this upland forested area sort of in the Southeast of the country.

And they proceeded to tell me what it was [00:06:00] like to be a member of an ethnic minority whose writing and to a certain extent whose language was marginalized or even suppressed. And this was something that I could only have learned at firsthand by, talking to people who had had that experience. And they were kind enough to write me out short pieces of text that I, I went back to Vermont and I included them in the next carving series that I had done. Which was a series of four panels, vertical panels, five feet high. And I had composed a poem which went, these are our words shaped by our hands, our tools, our history. Lose them and we lose ourselves. And I'd had this translated into a number of different minority scripts, including some of these from Bangladesh.[00:07:00]

So I did that and and I photographed the pieces, of course, and I put 'em up online and I got an email. From somebody called Maung Nyeu and he said, I cannot believe what I'm seeing. Here I am halfway around the world from my home. I'm in, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I go on your website and I see my language, my writing.

This is just a amazing to me. I'm so grateful to you for having included it. If you are ever in Cambridge, I would love to meet you, et cetera. and as it happened, and this is the, the connection part, I was gonna be in Cambridge, the following week. And so rather than just taking this as a well, that's nice kind of message.

I arranged to meet him and we met in a cafe in Harvard square and he told me about his life and life in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. And again, this [00:08:00] is something that could go on for a long time, but in he was a Marmar, an ethnic Marmar, a member of the Marmar people. And he told me about his first day at school.

And he had been really looking forward to school and his mother had been really looking forward to him going to school and he gets to school and the teacher addresses the class in a language he cannot understand because Bangladesh has at the, or especially had at the time a one language policy, which was you know the national language is Bangla.

And it will do you good to learn to speak the national language. And in any case, we don't really care what you minorities think. You know, this is, this is what we are all about. And because he couldn't understand what the teacher was saying, his attention wandered, not surprising, you know, he's six years old and the teacher calls him up to the front and canes him for not [00:09:00] paying attention. Okay. And then later in the same day, the same thing happens again, the teacher canes him again for not paying attention in a language that he can't speak. And so he went home and the following morning when he was supposed to be going to school, he's just sitting there with tears running down his face and his mother says, you must go to school.

You know, you must get an education. And he explained what had happened. And his mother, even though she believed very strongly in the value of education decided that this was wrong. And she essentially homeschooled him to the point where he could go to a boarding school, which required him to walk through the jungle and then to take a bus and then a, a river taxi and then another bus, you know, all, all this kind of stuff.

And he did so well at his schooling that he wound up being the first of his people to go to university in America. He went to the university of Hawaii [00:10:00] and he did a degree in engineering, I believe. And then he went to University of Southern California and did an MBA. And when I met him, he was at Harvard doing a PhD in multilingual education.

He also told me about what it was like in the Hill Tracts. The fact that the whole area is militarized and closed off to outsiders, especially journalists and human rights workers and how all of the Indigenous people in the Hill Tracts speak multiple languages. Very frequently they speak, you know, other ethnic minority languages and even use some of their scripts, but their ability to get themselves taken seriously is virtually zero.

And so what he was doing was learning how to create a school. He had found a ruined temple and the monk of the temple had a number of kids who were in his care because their parents had been killed by the military, their houses had been burned. But he, he couldn't teach [00:11:00] them. And so Maung had decided it was his job to learn how to create a mother tongue curriculum. And so he and I then worked together for several years and in some respects we're still working together. And I worked with my students in a publishing class that I'd created at Champlain college in Burlington. And we created all of these learning materials in these minority scripts, because of course the government wouldn't provide materials in the scripts for these languages that the kids spoke.

And we did alphabet wall charts and we did rubber stamps so the kids could stamp out their letters. And we did coloring books cuz they'd never seen coloring books and writing journals and story books based on folk tales that the kids' grandparents told them. And the reason why it changed everything that I do is important because in the west, we're in the position [00:12:00] of being privileged enough that our languages and our alphabet really dominate the world. And so it's very hard to have anything other than a kind of intelligent curiosity about how other people do things. And that's really how I had been operating up until then. I thought, wow, this stuff is really interesting, I'm gonna carve this and I'm gonna carve that. And what this experience did is it made me an activist. It made me someone who realized that the academic notion of studying, but not getting involved was a crock. Because by the time somebody else would do something it would be too late. And that I had to actually get involved in actively supporting and encouraging and promoting and working with these cultures rather than simply being fascinated by [00:13:00] these scripts as if the scripts could be divorced from the culture.

And that really is and has become the central tenet of everything I do, which is that an endangered alphabet is a symptom of an endangered culture. And to revive an endangered alphabet is to go some small way towards helping revive an endangered people. And in the end, it's the people that are important, not the words, right.

**Mark:** Yeah. And I mean, I think that's one of the things that linguists who do field work are becoming much better about is, knowing that you can't just parachute yourself in there, get your data and go home. An important component of, studying the language is providing something to the community and often that's, educational materials or, or that sort of thing

**Aven:** support in their own work that almost every community is trying to do themselves anyway.[00:14:00]

Yeah. It's not a matter of coming in and telling them to do work. It's a matter of coming in and saying, How can I help the work I'm sure you're already doing. Yeah.

**Tim:** And that in itself has interesting origins and poses. Interesting problems. So it's a central tenet of anthropology, for example, that the biggest mistake you can make is to get involved in the research that you're doing and that you're going.

**Aven:** Certainly it was one of the central tenets, anyway.

**Tim:** Exactly. And that you are going to impose your own priorities on the situation. that's even in, in star Trek, you know, it's the prime directive in star Trek. And it's also why in linguistics There has been this move over the last 25 years from seeing your main priority as being, gaining a technical understanding of the workings of the language to such things as you know, revitalization, which is an [00:15:00] extremely new part of the whole field of linguistics.

Now, as it happens, linguistics also established a set of priorities where writing was a very low priority or actively irrelevant. And so there is no field of linguistics, which is devoted to the cultural importance of writing. Some anthropologists work on that, but not that many. And so when I started work on the alphabets, I assumed that I could read all these books that would tell me all the things that I didn't know, which was everything.

And discovered that no that, that didn't exist. And the future of of endangered alphabets, heaven help us, was in my hands.

**Aven:** that brings me to something that maybe before we go much further is worth talking a little explicitly about, about that relationship between language and script. Because as you say, when your script or alphabet[00:16:00] is the default one in so many global spaces, the tendency to equate script and language is pretty strong. In other words, when you're an English speaker, you think of the English language and English writing as being the same thing, even though we call it the Roman alphabet, but of course it's not.

And you are very focused on, scripts, obviously. Do you wanna say a little bit about like what that relationship, you know, a language is not a script nor is a script, a language, obviously they overlap. How do those sort of fit together in your work and in the way you think about them?

**Tim:** Yeah, in fact, this is actually such an interesting conceptual problem. That even when I'm talking with my own Board, they will say endangered languages when they mean endangered alphabets. Right. And there was an article about minority writing systems that I think the BBC did on their website number of months ago, and the writer without realizing he was doing it, used the terms, endangered language and endangered writing interchangeably.[00:17:00] it's one of the things that I have to do is to actively try and move people's thinking and perception from one to the other. So here's the, here's the relationship . First of all, there are spoken languages that are not endangered, but their script is. So when Indonesia gained independence after world war II the government decided that you know, here we are trying to unify 17,000 islands.

And in order to do that what they decided to do was to have one official language which was really a form of Malay, which they called Indonesian, and one official script. And they decided that as the, the Latin or Roman alphabet, as you say, is like the world script, that's the one they would use.

Right. So what that meant was that on those islands, the schools pretty much immediately stopped teaching the traditional script and started [00:18:00] teaching the, the Latin alphabet And so in an island, like Bali, for example they still speak Balinese, but virtually everybody writes it with the Latin alphabet and they would recognize their own script, their own traditional script, but they wouldn't be able to read it.

Right. Clearly there are some cultures where both are endangered, and obviously there are some cultures where neither are endangered, but the way that the point that you touch on, which is really, really interesting is that this leaves those of us in the dominant cultures of the world not only ignorant about other scripts, but curiously blind to the importance of script because the Latin alphabet is, I say that it's like linguistic duct tape to us, you know, you use it for everything

And the fact is that in something like three quarters of the countries of the world, it's either the official script or an official script. [00:19:00] And so what that means is that we don't understand why a script should be important to its culture. Because we think of it, so kind of universally and so do the Germans and the French and the Italians, you know, So one of the ways in which I try and bring this to people's attention is the fact that there are many cultures where having their own writing system is so important that individuals have created a writing system specifically for that culture and their language. But even more than that, there are cultures that respect and value their own writing system so much that it has a place in their lives, even though they can't read it and write it.

So, for example the Amazigh people are also called the Berbers who once you know occupied. North Africa from the Canary islands to, Western Egypt, [00:20:00] have suffered a series of colonizations by the Romans, by the Arabs, by the French and to a small degree by the Italians, to the point where they are marginalized in every country where they live. When the Amazigh Renaissance began in the 1960s, one of the first things they did was to create an Amazigh flag and the Amazigh flag right in its center has a letter. It's the letter, yaz. And the reason the letter is there is because the Amazigh script, which is called Tifinagh has been found on monuments and stones that predate the Romans that are more than 2000 years old.

And so the letter simply by being there is a symbol of the fact that they were there first and they've been there all along. And in that sense, it's very similar to Cherokee, for example, where [00:21:00] most Cherokee cannot read and write the Cherokee syllabary. And yet if you go to downtown Telequa Oklahoma, the street signs and the road names are in English and in Cherokee.

And it's a visual reminder of the fact that, and this is a phrase that that many native groups use in, in this country, we are still here. And the difference, one of the crucial differences between a language and a script is that the script can act as the visual reminder and embodiment of the fact of a people

**Aven:** and that very long not that oral stuff can't have a long history, of course, but it has that tangible length of time associated with it, at least in some contexts where as you say, you can, you can see the physical remnants or not remnants, but the physical existence of a script.

Over a long time in a way that spoken word can't.

**Tim:** Yeah, exactly. [00:22:00] And and that also ties in with something else, which is that script is given respect and even legal status. So one of the reasons why the Abenaki, who are the indigenous people in the area where I live, were denied official status for so long was because they were primarily an oral people, an oral culture people.

And so it's like, where is the evidence that you were here 5,000 years ago? And when we say, put something down in black and white, or have it in writing we are talking about legal rights, which can include, for example, land rights. And if there isn't that kind of documentation, it's very easy for people to be exploited.

**Mark:** And it does say a lot about, I mean, it sends all kinds of messages about the sort of context in which a language is used, you know, for instance, with minority languages, you may still speak it at home with your family and then you go to schooling in [00:23:00] another language and in the context of the home The sort of contexts that you use it in are very casual and there's not a lot of place for writing things down

**Aven:** little need and no pressure on you to do so.

Yeah.

**Mark:** And so that can send all kinds of messages about, the relative importance or, legitimacy of your home language versus a more official, government language or school language or whatever,

**Aven:** and that conflation of script and language, which so many people have in their head means essentially, I think for many people in many contexts that if you don't have a script, you don't have a language. That in other words, it's just a dialect or it's just a, it's not a real language, unless, I mean, obviously that's not true of course in a hundred ways.

But I, had a friend who I was talking to, not that long ago, who talked about how her mother's, she can't learn her mother's language because, well, she's found very hard because it does not have a script. It has never had a script. And so learning it in a sort of second language way. Because she never properly learned it at home has become very difficult because there's no [00:24:00] book , you know?

Yeah.

**Tim:** That's, that's really interesting. And quite by accident What I realized was that by carving a piece of text in wood, and by sending it to somebody in, you know, the, the script/language place of origin and having them display it what I was doing was creating something that combined art and signage.

And both of them had much more power than I had really anticipated. Art has the, the power of beauty and also of respect. The idea that somebody has cared about something so much to put so much effort into it is an important kind of embodiment and signage as you were saying, has that quality of officialdom

And so if you are a member of a culture that you would [00:25:00] never see your writing anywhere official, such as on a wall, right. Then all of a sudden this becomes a revolutionary gesture. And so one of the first things I did for this mother language school that Maung had started was to carve article one of, of the universal declaration of human rights in one or two of their scripts.

And I had assumed that this would go out to the villages and, you know, sort of go up somewhere, but it turned out that the, the headmaster of the school immediately took it and put it up on the wall of his office. Not that his office was, you know, particularly grand or, or separated from the rest of the school as it would be here.

But it, it became something that was the, the only signage in their script. And the fact that it was these, these kind of noble words gave it this sort of resonance that I [00:26:00] certainly hadn't fully understood it would have .

**Aven:** Yeah. And, and, I wanna just put a quick note in that, of course, none of this is to deny the importance of oracy and all of these things, like sure.

You know, there are many languages and cultures that have a primacy of orality and that's very important. And we, you know, one doesn't want to impose literacy on a group that doesn't have it, which I know is not what your work does at all. But, you know, just to say that that one should not need a script in order for a language to be an important and, and valuable language and all of those things.

But especially if you do already have a script if you have a script and you've historically had a script, the loss of that script or the dismissal of that script as not important, or all of those sorts of things like, you know, is, is something that really needs to be marked and noticed, I think.

**Tim:** Yes. And I'm really glad, and, and, and I understand why you, corrected yourself from lost to dismissal or, or loss to dismissal because there is still a substantial [00:27:00] body of thinking that talks in terms of languages dying or scripts dying or failing. it's like the Dodo, right?

The Dodo did not die out. If you look at the descriptions of the Dodo even in, in dictionaries and encyclopedias, it's fascinating how often they talk about it as being a stupid bird. And the impression is that it died out because it was stupid. No, it was, it was actually tame. And when people on the island of Mauritius went to kill 'em, they didn't run away.

This is not stupidity. And similarly when we see languages or scripts that are used by fewer and fewer people, and then eventually no people, it's never because either they were somehow inadequate for expressing everything that they needed to express [00:28:00] or, you know, a script or a language is kind of like a tree, which is which grows and then just dies, you know?

And going back to the point about revitalization and the challenges it faces, this is almost invariably a political issue because the people whose script or language is, not being widely used are invariably being marginalized by a, a more powerful group or multiple, more powerful groups.

And if somebody goes into those minority communities and starts working with their language, then there's a very good chance that somebody in authority is gonna be annoyed and may even try to prevent them. And this is true, interestingly, also of post-colonial societies. So in west Africa, for example people tend to be very aware of the colonial history and how it's affected their [00:29:00] people, but it's also quite common for those who are now in charge in this post-colonial time to say, but our children should learn French or should learn English because we,

**Aven:** we will give them the advantages economically and it will give them political clout and all of those things.

**Tim:** Yeah. And the flip side of that, they will say, if we use our indigenous language or even more our indigenous script, we will look backward.

We will look primitive. And it was sort of fascinating the first time I was involved in a conversation like that and heard somebody who was actually involved with the ministry of education, talking about how important it was not to permit minority scripts. Right.

**Aven:** And yeah, one of the other big post-colonial forces that, I imagine also is involved, is, and you mentioned this really with Indonesian, is nationalism the whole idea of a nation state and the idea of unity and the idea of [00:30:00] reflecting unified cultural values and cultural approaches and things in Bangladesh. You mentioned this as well.

A lot of places that have had to carve out new identities in a post-colonial world that encompass multiple nationalities that encompass many different languages and things. One of the, ways that often happens, I mean, China is I know to bring up something else that's I know very much involved with the projects you've been doing.

You know, China is a, a very obvious place where that has been an ongoing process as well.

**Tim:** Yes, very much so. And in fact, actually Bangladesh is a, a really good example because, So after partition, when British India was divided into India and Pakistan and Pakistan in fact was divided into west Pakistan and east Pakistan, the assumption was that there would be this kind of unity in Pakistan of religion. Everybody is of course Muslim, and there'd be this unity of language.

And the official language was [00:31:00] Urdu, even though I believe Urdu was spoken by fewer than 10% of the Pakistani population. Right. And of course you have multiple religions. When. East Pakistan demanded the right to speak their own language, which was Bangla that led to the Pakistan civil war and after much bloodshed, the eventual creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation, and one of the rallying cries in east Pakistan, which became Bangladesh, was the mother tongue movement. Which was a protest movement to be allowed to speak Bangla. So no sooner has Bangladesh become an independent and sovereign nation than the government passes a one language policy rule, which is that you are not entitled to full citizenship rights unless you are a Bangla speaker.

And there are. Dozens of languages spoken in Bangladesh [00:32:00] and also there are multiple religions practiced. So one of the reasons why the Hill Tracts became such a point of conflict was precisely because land in that area and political and, military and economic decisions in that area were being made by a Bangla speaking Muslim government over the wishes of a dozen or more separate ethnic groups who had multiple languages and religions. And what's more, they were there first. They had been there for centuries and their land was being flooded for a dam. And then given away to Bangla settlers and in part, because the locals had no documentation that they owned the land, they had nothing in writing.

Yeah. Right.

**Mark:** Circling back a little bit to something that you were talking about and, and the idea of a language and a people being a kind of living, breathing thing. It's one of the [00:33:00] reasons I really like the, the medium of carving cuz on, on the one hand, as you say, the, the sort of effort and time that it takes to produce that says something about its importance and its value gives its status and gives it status and value. Yeah. But carving it in wood is a sort of reminder that it is something organic that it represents human beings, people who have this connection to the script and the language.

**Tim:** Yes. And and in fact, I'm gonna take that in a slightly different direction, but it, without contradicting you in the slightest.

So one of the things that I still am trying to understand fully and put into words is why people look at the pieces I do, or at least some of the pieces I do and say that is beautiful. And. In some cases it's clearly a sense of delight and ownership. So I'll post something, a photograph of a carving I've done on Facebook [00:34:00] and somebody from that community on the other side of the world will say, thank you for respecting or paying attention to, or whatever, our beautiful script.

And that obviously is a particular meaning of the word, beautiful with a particular richness of its own. But one of the other things that I find fascinating is that when you use wood, because as you say, it's this extremely organic medium, which is also very sensitive to wind and weather and water and sunlight and local soil and all this kind of thing, then, what you see in the grain is a set of patterns, which have this extraordinary quality of being regular, but not predictable. And this is particularly true in curly maple, which I use a lot, where in addition to the longitudinal grain, you also have this ripple pattern [00:35:00] running at right angles across the grain.

And it's really it's really beautiful. In part, because as I say, it has the, the regularity of pattern of ripple, but it's also not predictable, so it doesn't seem mechanical or, or mathematical. And I, I realized at one point fairly early on that as human beings, we are pattern seeking and pattern creating animals.

Right? And one of the ways in which we recognize danger for example, is by violation of a predictable pattern. And one of the ways in which we try to impose a sense of, of security for ourselves is by creating patterns. And language is a pattern and writing is a pattern. And I did this one carving and it was of a chant, Om and Shanti, Shanti, and Om.

And it was on a piece of [00:36:00] wood that had this unbelievably turbulent grain. And all of a sudden I had this sense that writing is a pattern that we create as is chanting for that matter in order to establish a sense of order within an unpredictable and chaotic universe. And and so therefore part of our sense of beauty has to do with reassurance, the fact that we have created something that is not entirely chaotic and radical and, and frightening, but actually implies that we are doing our best to, to create some sense of order and predictability within this existential chaos.

**Aven:** That of course reminds me of the Greek word for beauty, kosmos. Which literally means order regularity, beauty. That's what it is.

**Tim:** I did not know that. That is wonderful. [00:37:00]

**Aven:** Yeah. So hence of course the cosmos, which is the order of the universe, as well as cosmetic, the thing you do to make yourself beautiful.

**Tim:** I love that!

**Aven:** But its most basic meaning is, is order really.

Mm. And so I think the Greeks would certainly agree. And I, I agree with you. I think, I think maybe what we find most beautiful in the world is something that -- that's a big statement for me to make. I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna rule on aesthetics among humans. But I mean, I think one of the things we find beautiful is something where there's a tension between, and that's, I think what you're talking about too, a tension between the order and the regularity and the disorder and the, tendency towards irregularity everywhere. So, you know, the famous idea of the beauty spot, that a set of perfectly regular features is beautiful, but it is most beautiful. If there's one irregularity, one mark that blemishes, somehow that kind of tension.

**Tim:** Right. And, different [00:38:00] cultures place, differing degrees of value on the order end of things.

Or you could call it disorder or you could call it creativity or individuality.

**Aven:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, and certainly when you're talking about the grain in, in wood, for instance, I mean that uniqueness, that every single piece of wood is going to be slightly different, no matter how similar they are. Yeah. Is, is part of what we find beautiful about wood.

you know, one of the reasons we go to such great lengths to get perfectly lovely pieces for a countertop or something like that is because of that combination of, order and something else.

**Tim:** Yeah. Yes, yes. Very much so. ,

**Mark:** Earlier we were talking about how especially after the, mid 20th century, there, there was you know, this kind of move towards using more standardized global scripts. And, and of course there's this sort of technological pressure there in terms of things like printing.

And then again, later on [00:39:00] with computers, but I wonder, do you think in the very most recent time period now that we, we have devices with touch screens, that that may be a good thing to take advantage of in terms of Preserving and, reviving endangered texts because you're no longer tied to a physical keyboard.

And so you can have an input that is designed specifically for any script, each individual script. What do you think the role there for that technology might be?

**Tim:** So I, I have this saying, which is that the internet is always doing two countrary things simultaneously and It's absolutely true that the spread of computing did create this kind of script hegemony which is actually at the heart of things, because even if your display will show different script or languages, the coding is done in the Latin alphabet, almost exclusively.

and the [00:40:00] fact that one of the first priorities of a culture that's trying to revitalize its traditional script or create a new one is to get it digitized. That predisposes everybody toward writing with their thumbs, basically. And thinking of writing in terms of, of individual and individualized characters, as opposed to, for example, cursive characters.

So all of that's going in one direction. Going the other direction is the fact that I could never be doing the stuff that I'm doing if it weren't for the internet. And I want to give a plug here now to a guy called Craig Cornelius who works for Google and has worked with multiple cultures all over the world to help them make their writing systems consistent and adaptable for Android phones and for keyboards. And that means that you have a situation which is [00:41:00] extraordinarily radical, where somebody from a me, who's a member of a minority culture, let's say who is Somali Bantu. So the Somali Bantu have been repressed by just about everybody everywhere they've been.

But Ooh, that's not a good example. They don't have their own script. Okay. Let's talk about there's Zaghawa people. Okay. So the Zaghawa people live on the borders of Sudan and Chad very desert area. They do a lot of, of camel herding and they they have a script which was created initially in the 1960s that is actually based on branding marks of camels which is super appropriate.

And they're certainly not a, a powerful or dominant culture in their region, but. Somebody can now text in the Beria script to somebody else of, of the Zaghawa people without having to go through the [00:42:00] intermediary script of a colonial or, or governmental authority. And that is, as I say, politically, that's an extraordinarily new and radical idea.

Of course it's an idea that has terrified colonial authorities all along, because you don't know what they're saying to each other. yeah.

**Aven:** Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, the flip side of the wind talker code the, between the, the code coding and Codebreakers, the use a language that nobody knows and suddenly your codes are 85 times better.

Yeah. Yeah. that was fine when they were doing it in the service of the government. Exactly. But there'd been three centuries, four centuries of it being the most subversive thing you could do to speak your own language exactly. In the same places. Yeah. On that note Mark reminded me today.

This will, for those of you listening, this will not really apply, but Mark reminded me of course, that it is quite [00:43:00] suitable that today we are speaking to you on Indigenous people's day here in Canada.

So that is an appropriate time to be talking about this. Cause I did wanna actually ask that. We've talked a lot about sort of colonialism and indigenous scripts. I imagine that that can be quite a complicated, well complicated in many ways, but one of the ways in which that may be complicated sometimes is that in some areas, scripts may have initially been a product of colonial involvement, a group comes in and imposes or creates or in some other way leads to the, the creation of a script for a language.

And then successive historical moves slash new waves of colonial people may render that, you know, by the time that something else has happened, that original colonial imposition has now become integrated into a culture and is now essentially an indigenous and now perhaps oppressed or suppressed or otherwise marginalized script.

[00:44:00] Does that, is that true? Am I making that up or is that something that has happened?

**Tim:** No, that is especially true in Canada. In

**Aven:** fact, yes. That's what I was thinking of to some degree. Yeah. Yes, yes.

**Tim:** Yeah, absolutely. And yes. So for your listeners who don't know this there was a young Methodist sort of minister in training named James Evans who emigrated from England and arrived in Canada in the early 19th century and became especially interested in and apparently well accepted by initially the Cree also later Ojibwe and it was very common among missionaries to learn the local language as a means of then reaching the population and, and trying to convert them.

and in fact, the largest linguistic organization in the world is in fact, a Christian missionary organization that has been learning languages and documenting [00:45:00] them very, very widely indeed. What happened with with Evans, which I, I think is particularly interesting and makes it sound and possibly be less of an imposed notion is that when he created this syllabary it was accepted and taught by the Cree to each other and within their community to an astonishing degree and, and it spread with amazing rapidity. So one of the, the, the things that is often said about the Cherokee script is that once it had been accepted by the tribal council, the Cherokee achieved something astonishing like 80 to 90% literacy within about a decade, which may well be the fastest literacy gain rate, you know, of any people in history, certainly yeah.

In many, in many areas they had a higher rate of literacy than, than [00:46:00] the European settles around them. And I don't know the figures for the Cree, but I do know that within some extraordinarily short period of time, like six to nine months it was showing up a thousand miles from its point of origin.

Wow. Which given that travel, I mean, obviously the Cree were a mobile people, but a thousand miles is, is pretty

**Aven:** much, it's still a thousand miles. Yeah.

**Tim:** And, and yes, it came to the point where it did become the form of expression and the embodiment of a minority in a way that was then discouraged. Having said that Evans was discouraged even while he was alive and creating this. In fact, the Hudson's Bay Company essentially tried to create trumped up charges against him, not

**Aven:** What, the Hudson's Bay Company, but such a Paragon of, of good corporate actors in the world.

Yeah. Right.

**Tim:** But apparently what really irked the [00:47:00] most was that and this is still true in North America, among many native cultures. The exchange of goods was seen as being the communal and respectful way to proceed and to, to sort of base an economy, whereas money was not seen as being something that had the same kind of sort of deep communal value or earned value

And so consequently the Hudson's bay company felt that when First Nations people were exchanging goods, they were actually carrying out illegal trade. And so anybody who was supporting or respecting that was automatically working against the Hudson's bay trade monopoly and, and Evans was put into that category.

And there were, these charges brought up against him that he had been acting improperly as a man of the cloth. And it turned out that, what [00:48:00] that meant was that if one of the people in the village where he was living was sick, he would take them into his house and make sure that they were like warm for example, and cared for.

**Aven:** that doesn't sound very religious .

**Tim:** Yeah, he was he was hauled up by his church council and examined both in Canada and then subsequently in England and all of this became so stressful that he wound up dying. Oh,

**Aven:** that is not a story I know. Which I feel quite well, I'm gonna say ashamed by, but I mean, there are many stories in the world I don't know, but that one's one, I feel like I ought to have known that, I mean, did, I did know about the writing system in a sort of generalized way, but I didn't know its particularity of its history. Yeah, not fun, but in that same way then, when they then went on to establish the residential schools and all the rest of it, of course, even though that had been originally not an indigenous script, I'm sure the loss and suppression, again, a suppression rather than simple loss of [00:49:00] it was felt just as strongly by the communities as it would've been otherwise.

**Tim:** Right. I, I wanna put in a plug here for a great organization, I believe based in Nunavut called Inhabit Media and the rule of thumb pretty much in Canada is that the closer to the us border, you are the less likely you are to find First Nations people using the syllabics; the further north you go, the more likely you are to see the syllabics. Right.

Which fits in with my theory that endangered alphabets survive best in deserts and in mountains and in jungles and in, in

**Aven:** inaccessible places. Exactly. That no else can come.

**Tim:** Yeah. So Inhabit Media is a a publishing company that turns out these fabulous books based on Indigenous tales or even Indigenous first person experience and they publish them not only in Inuktitut as a language but also in the [00:50:00] syllabics. And so anybody who's listening, I invite them to to check out the, we'll

**Aven:** put a link to that. I'll find it, put a link in, in the notes. Yeah. Yeah, we could just keep talking cuz I have so many other things that I want to talk to you about, but I wanna make sure that we give you an opportunity to talk about some of the actual projects that you do with endangered alphabets.

We, by the way, have the game Ulus. Yeah, yeah. And have played it, enjoyed it. So I, I don't know if you wanna talk about that and about the Alphabets Atlas and I, wanna make sure that you give some, some time to talk about some of those things.

**Tim:** Yeah. So I, I often say that the Endangered Alphabets is like a hedgehog because , it, really sticks out in so many different directions and it touches on so many not just so many cultures, but so many issues and so many ideas.

So I I will almost certainly run out of voice before I talk about everything that I've tried. but yes. So At endangeredalphabets.net, we created -- what happened was that I would go out and give talks and, and show the carvings. And people would say, this [00:51:00] is fascinating. Where can I learn more about this?

And the answer was there, isn't anywhere. And so the Atlas of Endangered Alphabets is an online. interactive site where you can go to anywhere on the globe. And there'll be a pin where anywhere where there's an endangered alphabet, you can click on it and then you can see examples of it, learn more about it.

There's going to be a print edition of the Atlas coming out next year, which I've been working on. Oh yes. So that and, and of course the Atlas is perennially out of date. Not I'm glad to say because endangered alphabets are dying out, but because new scripts are being created for their user communities, which we are constantly trying to keep up with.

So the game Ulus: Legends of the Nomads came about when I heard that the Chinese government had decided as, as part of the policy you were talking about earlier, this kind of homogenization policy they were going to[00:52:00] replace the teaching of the Mongolian language and the use of this unbelievably beautiful Mongolian vertical script with Chinese.

And so rather than March across the world in protest on my own and, and, and shout abuse at the Chinese government I did, I sort of took a lot of advice in and we decided that we were gonna create a game, a tabletop game. The idea being twofold. One was to introduce Mongolian culture to the west, where basically Mongols are only ever depicted as blood thirsty savages as if the world, you know, were still in the year 1200 and we were busy being overrun by them. And and, and so the game explores the Mongol lands and mythology and heroes and also, you know, historically genuine people and works within sort of values of the Mongol people. But we also wanted to [00:53:00] make it so that in Mongolia and to a lesser degree in China and Russia there would be this game that would reiterate, shall we say traditional values at a time when the Mongols in particular are, are sort of torn between their traditional nomadic herding Outdoor lives and the kind of citified contemporary existence so that was, that was the game Ulus I'm also working on a thing called the Red List project. So nobody thought about endangered species or even used the phrase until the publication of the red list of endangered species in the 1960s, which really Positioned the situation so that instead of kind of going the Dodo is a stupid bird and it's extinct, we would kind of go, oh, actually there are only 12 breeding pairs of Osprey left in Scotland and changed all that around.

[00:54:00] So the red list of endangered alphabets is intended to document all. Of the world's current writing systems and to assess the degree of health or threat that they each face, which is a huge task, not least because it turns out that there are a lot more writing systems than anybody thinks I had estimated Threatened or marginalized or actively suppressed. So that's a big project and it's gonna take probably three years. And then I mean, having worked on, on this subject for a decade, I estimated there are about 140, and in fact there are over 300.

And of those at least 90% are to some degree Threatened, the one that I am hoping to engage, and by the time you broadcast this, our fundraiser will either have succeeded or failed is to help the king and the people of Bamum, which is a, a kingdom within Cameroon to revitalize their writing [00:55:00] system that was created by their king, King Ibrahim Njoya about a century ago, and was then crushed by the French colonial authorities who did their best to eradicate not only the script, but also the spirit of Indigenous and sort of Bamum-ly self-respect and independence that the script had come to represent. So the script now is in the state that Cherokee was maybe 30 years ago, which is that people recognize it and revere it and esteem it, but they can't read it or write it. And we have heard from the palace that they are very, very keen to have us come in and work with them, to revive their script, which is obviously gonna be a multi-year project.

And if any millionaires are listening to this broadcast, we need you. But that is in many ways that is such a perfect [00:56:00] embodiment of the value to a culture of its own script and the threat that, that poses to a more powerful culture and the outcome of that threat, namely that it is it's virtually destroyed.

And so if we can help to revitalize that my hope is that that is going to give impetus to revitalization of scripts everywhere. Right.

**Aven:** And maybe a, a model for, some of the, you know, you can find out what mechanisms work best or don't or all of that in the same way that Revit language revitalization has been a sort of shifting process, people are figuring out how different models for how to do that.

**Tim:** Yeah, I forgot to mention that one of the other things that I want to do is to have a conference, which would be the first conference on script revitalization and new script creation and promotion anywhere in the world. And one of the things that that would do is to start establishing best practices and start to [00:57:00] connect both people in communities that are trying to revitalize their scripts with experts in the west who can help, but also do that whole kind of south south connection between individual communities who are facing the same issues. And we're hoping to make it easier for them to talk to each other and share best practices and experiences.

**Aven:** So, okay. How can people, I know that this that's one specific project that you're doing a specific backing for right now, but how in general, if people are interested, obviously they can go to your website and see the, I mean, we have only touched on just for the audience, we have only touched on a few of the projects and things that exist. There's a, you can get carvings, you can get books of, of images. You can get all sorts of things like that. But what Sort of what ways can people be helpful if they want to?

**Tim:** Yeah. So we are appallingly ill funded and [00:58:00] the fact that we are funded at all is largely due to running pretty much once a year, a Kickstarter campaign, so people can watch out for our next Kickstarter campaign.

We are now starting to work looking for corporate sponsorship, especially in the language and language services industry. I have just launched a Patreon. So that's another thing that people might find interesting because I'm gonna be as, as one of the, the Patreon benefits I'm creating videos that show exactly what I do with these pieces of wood and how they wind up the way they are and all the various misfortunes that happen along the way. . And I'm delighted that we are also regularly contacted by people who want to volunteer for us and offer their their skills or their services or their time.

So all of those would be possibilities and all of those really go through the endangeredalphabets.com website.

**Aven:** Yeah. there are so many [00:59:00] different, I would imagine there are so many different areas of expertise or interest given that you cover so many different areas of the world and so many different languages and someone, you know, all of these things that if anyone is at all interested, I'm certain there's ways for you to be to be involved and to be helpful.

So reach out to Tim, if you can. then I know that you're also on Twitter. Can you just remind me of your handle?

**Tim:** Yes. I'm on Twitter @EndangeredAlpha, Instagram @EndangeredAlphas, and we just started a, I've been on Facebook for a while, but we've just started a Facebook group that is specifically an Endangered Alphabets Facebook group. And I have a relatively modest presence on LinkedIn,

**Aven:** Oh, great. So I'll post all of those things in the show notes. And I urge everyone to at the very least go and look at the absolutely beautiful things, speaking of beauty, that, that Tim makes [01:00:00] and the the work that's being done. And we enjoyed the game. I think that if you're a tabletop gamer and you are looking for something interesting and different, this is definitely one, plus the work of trying to figure out what is a camel and what is a goat on the bones will help keep your mind sharp. yes, yes. And a horse or whatever. I can't remember the four of them well,

**Mark:** just speaking of another thing I gather there's an endangered alphabet Sudoku in the

**Aven:** works. Oh, my mother will be so excited by that.

It's

**Tim:** So we have a, a book of endangered Alphabet's word search puzzles. And yeah, endangered alphabet, Sudoku. We've already done individual ones and knowing me, there's likely to be a book of some kind coming .

**Aven:** Well, thank you so much. This is like, again, there are so many other things I could have asked you, or we could have talked about, because this is such a fascinating area, and I imagine it's very fractal. The more you look at it, the more there is to look at [01:01:00] the, the farther in you get the the farther in you need to get, but thank you so much for, for coming and talking to us today. ,

**Tim:** I am so glad that you invited me and you asked such great questions and not only did you make really good observations, I wrote down a number of the observations you made.

So

**Aven:** well, I'm glad if we could be useful, right. exactly. That's what the best conversations are productive for both sides. exactly. Well, thank you so much. And good luck with the fundraising and I hope that you're able yeah, it's never over.

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. It will still be applicable when this comes out. But I hope that this particular project, which sounds really, really, really valuable and, and, and important manages to get, to get going. So good luck.

**Tim:** Thank you.

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**Mark:** Bye