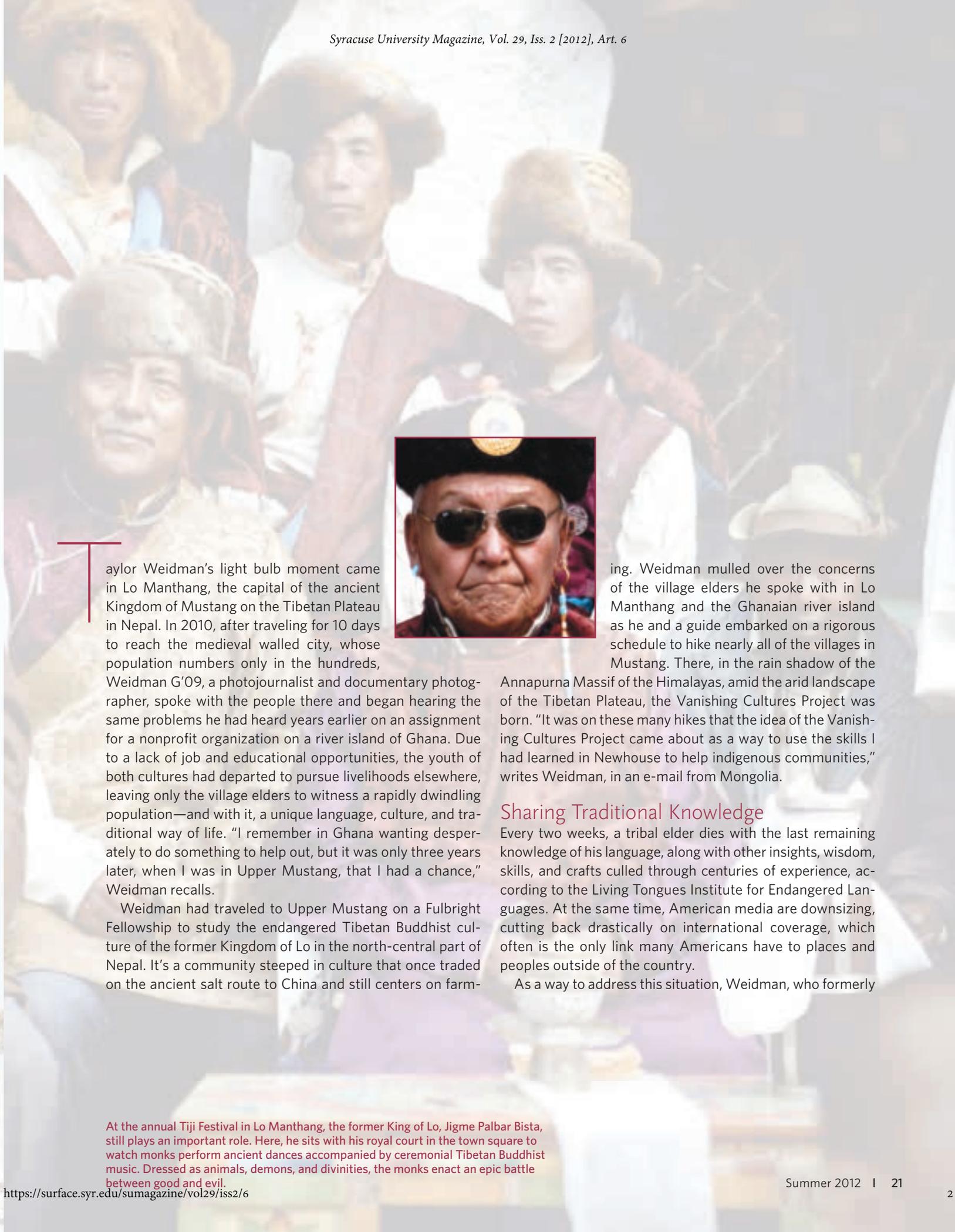


VANISHING CULTURES

Newhouse alumni Taylor Weidman and Nina Wegner document threatened indigenous communities as a way to make the world aware of their plights and to preserve their traditions | BY HUSNA HAQ | PHOTOS by Taylor Weidman/The Vanishing Cultures Project





Taylor Weidman's light bulb moment came in Lo Manthang, the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Mustang on the Tibetan Plateau in Nepal. In 2010, after traveling for 10 days to reach the medieval walled city, whose population numbers only in the hundreds, Weidman G'09, a photojournalist and documentary photographer, spoke with the people there and began hearing the same problems he had heard years earlier on an assignment for a nonprofit organization on a river island of Ghana. Due to a lack of job and educational opportunities, the youth of both cultures had departed to pursue livelihoods elsewhere, leaving only the village elders to witness a rapidly dwindling population—and with it, a unique language, culture, and traditional way of life. "I remember in Ghana wanting desperately to do something to help out, but it was only three years later, when I was in Upper Mustang, that I had a chance," Weidman recalls.

Weidman had traveled to Upper Mustang on a Fulbright Fellowship to study the endangered Tibetan Buddhist culture of the former Kingdom of Lo in the north-central part of Nepal. It's a community steeped in culture that once traded on the ancient salt route to China and still centers on farm-

ing. Weidman mulled over the concerns of the village elders he spoke with in Lo Manthang and the Ghanaian river island as he and a guide embarked on a rigorous schedule to hike nearly all of the villages in Mustang. There, in the rain shadow of the

Annapurna Massif of the Himalayas, amid the arid landscape of the Tibetan Plateau, the Vanishing Cultures Project was born. "It was on these many hikes that the idea of the Vanishing Cultures Project came about as a way to use the skills I had learned in Newhouse to help indigenous communities," writes Weidman, in an e-mail from Mongolia.

Sharing Traditional Knowledge

Every two weeks, a tribal elder dies with the last remaining knowledge of his language, along with other insights, wisdom, skills, and crafts culled through centuries of experience, according to the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. At the same time, American media are downsizing, cutting back drastically on international coverage, which often is the only link many Americans have to places and peoples outside of the country.

As a way to address this situation, Weidman, who formerly

At the annual Tiji Festival in Lo Manthang, the former King of Lo, Jigme Palbar Bista, still plays an important role. Here, he sits with his royal court in the town square to watch monks perform ancient dances accompanied by ceremonial Tibetan Buddhist music. Dressed as animals, demons, and divinities, the monks enact an epic battle between good and evil.



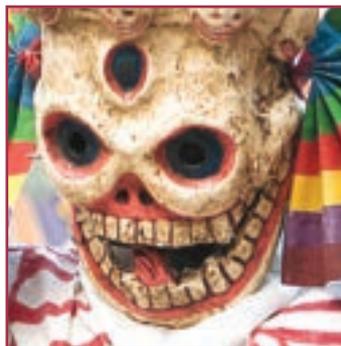
Tashi Dolkar Gurung, a Loba woman, removes gravel from rice near the light of a window in her earthen home in Lo Manthang.



Nina Wegner G'09 and Taylor Weidman G'09 visit with Tsoodol, a herder in central Mongolia. They are sitting in his ger (Mongolian felt yurt), which he moves about four times a year for fresh pasture. Tsoodol is holding a jade pipe while Weidman holds a jade snuff bottle. Although not as common today, in traditional herding culture, most men own a pipe and snuff bottle and offer guests snuff as a sign of hospitality.

worked as a photographer with the *Christian Science Monitor*, and Newhouse classmate Nina Wegner G'09, a journalist and editor, founded the Vanishing Cultures Project (VCP) in 2011 to document threatened cultures, empower cultural leaders to keep their heritage alive, and improve geographic literacy in the United States. "Our aim is to give indigenous peoples the power to decide their future, while showing the world what an amazingly diverse and endlessly fascinating place our planet is," Wegner says.

The duo—advised by a three-member executive board that includes Newhouse professor Bruce Strong, a noted international photojournalist and multimedia storyteller—plans to complete one documentary project each year focusing on an endangered indigenous culture. Each project will culminate in a full-color book featuring Weidman's stunning photography and Wegner's well-researched prose, as well as an online gallery of prints available for purchase; and an online archive of video, audio, photos, and interview transcripts of the duo's fieldwork (www.vcproject.org). "I'm grateful to be a part of an organization that is helping to preserve parts of our heritage as a whole, as a



A monk's skeleton mask worn during an ancient dance performance at the Tiji Festival.

human race," says Strong, who had Weidman as a student in a Newhouse graduate photojournalism course.

This year, the two also started offering a documentary photography workshop to teach people in indigenous communities how to take photos and tell their own stories, so the documentary work can continue long after Wegner and Weidman leave. The pair says documentary journalism has been a powerful tool in their efforts. "We feel that documentary journalism is not only a way to record these beautiful cultures and traditions, but also a way to educate the public about indigenous issues and give some voice and agency to far-flung and little-known communities," says Wegner, a *Huffington Post* blogger. "We think indigenous peoples should shape their own future, and that's why we donate the funds raised through our documentary projects back to grassroots cultural programs run by indigenous leaders."

Strong believes Weidman and Wegner are setting a compelling example for Newhouse students. "That idea of documenting for future generations the life and culture of a society is important,"



The village of Tangge stands on the edge of a Kali Gandaki tributary in Mustang. The buildings are packed tightly together to help protect residents from the strong winds that kick up each afternoon.





Loba farmers gather outside of Lo Manthang before a prayer ceremony. It's become increasingly common to see locals in western garb as a new road nears completion, bringing with it the offerings of modern life.

he says. "As photojournalists, that's what we do, that's who we are. I believe in what they're doing, both as a photojournalist and as a professor who wants to encourage entrepreneurial adventures and enterprises within my own industry and by my own students."

Safeguarding Traditions

For the VCP's first documentary, Weidman returned with Wegner to the mountains of Upper Mustang, where he first envisioned the project. The region's remote mountain geography and political autonomy have insulated it from the transformation impacting Tibetan culture, making it one of the last pockets of traditional Tibetan life left in the world. The Buddhist Loba people there still farm with wooden plows and spend hours spinning prayer wheels, chanting mantras, and consulting Buddhist astrologers on every aspect of life. "The people there still live very much as they did 500 years ago when the kingdom was founded," Weidman told NPR in an interview earlier this year.

But that is changing as a new highway nears completion, connecting remote villages to larger cities and bringing with it opportunity—and accelerating change. And while many Loba laud the arrival of modern conveniences like electricity, well-equipped hospitals, and the chance to travel to nearby Kathmandu and

India for school or work, many elders also fear their traditions are eroding fast.

In late 2010 and early 2011, Weidman and Wegner spent months interviewing and photographing the Loba and reporting on the effects of the new highway. Their work culminated in a beautiful photo book, *Mustang: Lives and Landscapes of the Lost Tibetan Kingdom*, whose proceeds contribute to preserving the Loba culture.

This year, for their second VCP mission, Weidman and Wegner are spending six months in Mongolia, exploring one of the world's largest remaining nomadic cultures. For millennia, pastoral herders have lived on the Mongolian steppes, grazing livestock on lush grasslands in a centuries-old way of life. Traditional herding communities make up roughly 30 percent of the population in Mongolia, according to Weidman. "But nomadic life is changing very quickly due to a combination of overgrazing, climate change, desertification, and the effects of a rapidly expanding mining industry," he says.

Weidman and Wegner arrived in Mongolia in mid-March to document the ancient traditions of the nomadic herders, using proceeds from their photographs and reporting to contribute to existing initiatives that work to support traditional lifestyles. "One



A group of senior monks meets for a ceremony in a field outside of Lo Manthang. Dhakmar villagers (inset below) return to town after a day of working in the fields.

of our criteria for working with a traditional community is that they prioritize the safeguarding of their traditions and practices," Weidman says. "We want to support these initiatives, such as the Arts Council of Mongolia or the government-backed pasture management programs in the western regions of the country."

Weidman and Wegner often live, eat, and interact with the communities they are documenting for months at a time, experiencing their way of life firsthand. The reception, Wegner says, has been more than gratifying. "I've been amazed over and over by the warmth, openness, and curiosity our hosts have shown us," she writes in an e-mail from Mongolia. "During both our Mongolia and Mustang trips, we've been welcomed into people's homes as total strangers and left as friends. Many of the families we work with have little to give, but they give it openly—they bring us in from the cold, feed us, give us a bed, let us ask impertinent questions, share their stories with us, and teach us games and laugh with us as if we were their family. It moves me every time."

Indigenous Lessons

In a rapidly changing world in which advances in science and technology are pushing the boundaries of what is possible in modern society, why look backward? Why use precious resources to study dying cultures and "outmoded" ways of life? The answer, Wegner says, lies in those issues science and technology are striving to address. "The modern world has given rise to a host of new problems—energy use, land use, the population ex-

plosion, climate change, cultural erosion, pollution—which indigenous wisdom can help address," she says. "The way indigenous communities have lived sustainably off the land for millennia offers valuable lessons in land and natural resource use. Many of these communities understand their native plants and wildlife better than anybody else in the world, and this knowledge has proved to be invaluable to scientists and medical researchers."



As a "shoestring nonprofit trying to make an outside difference for indigenous communities," the VCP welcomes those interested in promoting the organization's goals. Weidman and Wegner are looking to grow their fledgling project by expanding their support network. They're eager to collaborate with professionals in fund raising, publishing, the arts, and in media, education, and policy making who will support their efforts. "I would love over time for more

SU alumni to become involved," Strong says. "To have SU alums support us with resources, skills, or publicity is tremendous."

The VCP Board of Directors has approved the organization's next project—entering the world of an Amazonian tribe in Brazil, where a proposed dam may displace tens of thousands of indigenous people. Weidman and Wegner plan to cross the globe to photograph and document the tribe's way of life, so future generations may benefit from its wisdom. "Indigenous communities are stewards of ancient knowledge, but we can all be the beneficiaries of it," Wegner says. "We feel like this collective body of human knowledge is a public asset, so everyone should feel a responsibility to protect it." «