



The shaman Dirga Bahadur Dumi reciting for the ethnographers. Baksila, Khotang district, Nepal, 2006. Photo by Marion Wettstein.

15 -16 December 2009
at CRASSH
17 Mill Lane
Cambridge

World Oral Literature Project Workshop

with a focus on collections
from the Asia-Pacific

This workshop has been
made possible by support from:

C-SAP
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The Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research



For further information and registration details, visit:
www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/940/

About the Workshop

This workshop brings together established scholars, early career researchers and graduate students with indigenous researchers, museum curators, archivists and audio-visual experts to discuss strategies for collecting, recording, preserving and disseminating oral literatures and endangered narrative traditions. Topics include the ethical responsibilities of researchers, their engagements with local communities as partners, the place of western universities as archival repositories of living practices and the role of digital archives and community cultural centres as sites of knowledge transfer, teaching and research.

About the World Oral Literature Project

The World Oral Literature Project is an urgent global initiative to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record. The project is supporting researchers engaged in the documentation of oral literature by providing funding for discrete projects and by hosting training workshops on field methods and digital archiving.

www.oralliterature.org

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About CRASSH

Established at the University of Cambridge in 2001, the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) works actively with the Schools and Faculties across the University undertaking collaborations that cross faculties and disciplines in order to stimulate fresh thinking and dialogue in and beyond the humanities and social sciences and to reach out to new collaborators and new publics.

Financial support from



Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research

**World Oral Literature Project Workshop
with a focus on collections from the Asia-Pacific**

Programme

Tuesday 15 December

9.00 – 9.30 Registration

9.30 – 9.45 Welcome and Introduction

9.45 – 11.30 **From Practice to Text**

Chair: Mark Turin

Ritual Drumming and Chanting of the Tamu Shamans of Nepal
Yarjung Kromchai Tamu, Chief Advisor, Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh

The Parched Grain Chant. Parallel Verse and Simultaneous Action in Magar Rituals
Michael Oppitz, University of Zürich

Tamu Shamans' Books: The Challenges of Textualising the Pye-ta Lhu-ta
Judith Pettigrew, University of Limerick

11.30 – 12.00 Tea/Coffee Break

12.00 – 13.00 **Keynote Address**

Introduction: Alan Macfarlane

The Rewards and Issues of Studying Oral Literature: Some Personal Reflections
Ruth Finnegan, Open University

13.00 – 14.00 Lunch

14.00 – 15.15 **Archives & Dissemination**

Chair: Charles Chadwyck-Healey

DSpace@Cambridge – Ensuring Access to Cultural Heritage Resources
Elin Stangland, DSpace, University of Cambridge

A New Look at Archiving for Sensitive Community Based Materials: A “Web 2.0” Approach to Distribution and Updates
David Nathan, School of Oriental and African Studies

15:15 – 15.45 Tea/Coffee Break

15:45 – 17.00 **Community Cooperation & Collaboration**

Chair: Peter Austin

Collecting Change in Vanuatu: Oral Traditions and Cultural Change
Lissant Bolton, British Museum

Participatory Cultural Preservation on the Sino-Tibetan Fringe
Gerald Roche, Griffith University / Qinghai Normal University

17.00 – 17.30 Summation and General Discussion
Chair: Stephen Hugh-Jones

17.30 – 19.00 Reception at Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (open to all)
Host: Nicholas Thomas

Wednesday 16 December

9.30 – 10.45 **Orality and Textuality: Himalayan Examples**
Chair: Michael Oppitz

Documenting Ceremonial Dialogues in East Nepal: An in vitro Performance and the Problem of Textualisation

Martin Gaenzle, University of Vienna

'Producing' Thangmi Ritual Texts: Practice, Performance and Collaborative Documentation

Sara Shneiderman, University of Cambridge

10.45 – 11.15 Tea/Coffee Break

11.15 – 13.00 **Audiovisual Engagements: Songs & Narratives**
Chair: Martin Gaenzle

Collecting Shamanic Songs in Nepal

Anne de Sales, CNRS

Reciting Landscape: Documenting Ritual Journeys and Landscape Among the Dumi Rai of Eastern Nepal

Alban von Stockhausen, University of Zürich

Who's Singing Now?: Exploring the Effects of Reframing Lo Monthang's Musical Dialogue

Katey Blumenthal, University of Virginia

13.00 – 14.00 Lunch

14.00 – 15.15 **Classifications of Language Endangerment**
Chair: Bert Vaux

Languages and Species: Threats and Global Patterns

William Sutherland, University of Cambridge

Reading the Lontars: Endangered Literary Practices of Lombok, Eastern Indonesia

Peter Austin, School of Oriental and African Studies

15.15 – 15.45 Tea/Coffee Break

15:45 – 17.00 **Re-presenting the Orality of Inner Asia**

Chair: Piers Vitebsky

Data, Basically: Computers, Documents and the Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia
Christopher Kaplonski, University of Cambridge

Re-sounding the Spirits of Altai-Sayan Oral Epic Performance
Carole Pegg, University of Cambridge

17.00 – 17:45 Summation

Chair: Mark Turin

17.45 – 19.00 CRASSH reception (open to all)

19.30 onward Dinner at St Catharine's College

Speakers' Abstracts

Reading the Lontars: Endangered Literary Practices of Lombok, Eastern Indonesia

Peter K. Austin

School of Oriental and African Studies

The Sasaks of Lombok island, eastern Indonesia, have a literary tradition of writing manuscripts on palm leaves (*lontar*) in a manner similar to that of the Balinese (Rubinstein 2000), and historically, the Javanese. Lombok today remains only one of three places in Indonesia (along with Bali and Riau) where reading *lontar* (called in Sasak, *pepaosan*) continues to be practised, however even there the number of people who are able to read and interpret the texts is rapidly diminishing. In this paper, I outline the nature of the Sasak *lontar* materials (see also Marrison 2000), how reading is taught, the nature of reading performances, and the role of this literary genre within contemporary Sasak culture. I will support the paper with multimedia illustrations (video, images and sound) drawn from fieldwork on Lombok, and studies I have carried out with one of the few younger specialists who is able to perform *lontar* reading.

References

Marrison, Geoffrey E. 2000. *Catalogue of Sasak manuscripts*. KITLV Press.

Rubinstein, Raechelle. 2000. *Beyond the realm of the senses*. KITLV Press.

Who's Singing Now?: Exploring the Effects of Reframing Lo Monthang's Musical Dialogue

Katey Blumenthal

University of Virginia

This talk concerns the ethical dilemmas presented during 2009 fieldwork that sought to archive and disseminate the folk song repertoire of Lo, an ethnically Tibetan region in the Nepali Himalaya. Tashi Tsering, the official singer of the royal court of Lo, is the last remaining singer of the region's lineage of musicians. While he performs apotropaic offerings of music to the Buddhist cosmology, Lo residents peripheralise him because he is a low-class member and considered to be highly impure. As recording sessions with Tashi Tsering progressed, social interactions were stirred, identities questioned, and I came to assume unexpected roles in Lo's social setting. Through detailing various social interactions, this talk discusses the complex social dynamics encountered during field research and the necessity of researchers to consider fieldwork methodology to be a flexible process.

Collecting Change in Vanuatu: Oral Traditions and Cultural Change

Lissant Bolton
British Museum

The nations of the Pacific region are faced with a substantial challenge in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. Vanuatu, for example, is a nation of approximately 145,000 people who speak 113 different languages, none of which were written until the European incursion after 1840. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre has developed a unique program to address this problem – the fieldworker program. Volunteer extension workers, based in their own villages and districts, work to document and revive local customary knowledge and practice. Operating now for nearly thirty years, the program has resulted in the production of thousands of hours of audio recordings of various kinds, kept in the National Audio Archives. This documentation process both demonstrates and raises many issues about the nature of oral traditions, and in particular, the way in which they constantly transform to meet new circumstances. This paper will describe some aspects of the fieldworker program and will consider the complex issue of change and transformation in oral traditions.

Rewards and Issues in Studying Oral Literature: Some Personal Reflections

Ruth Finnegan
Open University

The study of oral literature brings many rewards, not just of personal inspiration and service, but also intellectual, humanistic and ethical/political. There are also intellectual, ethical and practical issues to confront, however, among them the two terms of the concept itself (both individually and combined); the widespread but sometimes misleading assumptions about its nature; its transcription and preservation; its political implications; and the problem of assigning due credit to its creators.

The presentation will not attempt any systematic review of the subject but consist merely of personal reflections based on my experience with oral literature – principally in Africa but also Fiji, Britain, and comparatively – beginning with anthropological fieldwork in Sierra Leone in the early 60s and before that, but unawares, in my earlier studies of classical Latin and Greek literature.

Documenting Ceremonial Dialogues: An in vitro Performance and the Problem of Textualisation

Martin Gaenszle
University of Vienna

Among the Rai of eastern Nepal, ritual speech is generally an important part of most ritual behaviour. Even simple formal interactions, like requests for a loan or parting after a gathering, are accompanied by little speeches and ceremonial dialogue. The most elaborate of such ceremonial dialogues are held as part of marriage transactions: these are not only a reciprocal give-and-take of gifts but also of words. However, recording such rituals as live events, i.e. *in situ*, is not an easy task. There is usually a noisy crowd of people around the main actors, their speeches are frequently interrupted, followed by long breaks and non-ritual activities. The paper deals with an in vitro recording documenting a staged wedding dialogue among the Mewahang Rai. Comparing it with live recordings, I discuss issues such as authenticity, structures of action and the difficulties and implications of textualisation.

Data, Basically: Computers, Documents and the Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia

Christopher Kaplonski
University of Cambridge

The international research project ‘The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia’ currently has well over 400 interviews in its database. The database encompasses background data on the interview, the person interviewed, the interviewer and an estimated 12,000 pages of interview transcription, in addition to 600-700 hours of audio, over 100 hours of video and thousands of images. In this paper, I discuss the implications of this volume of data for how anthropologists think about and handle their research data. In particular, I address the issues involved in making data useful in terms of accessibility and key words. How does one actually structure one’s data, both in terms of presentation and database / website infrastructure? Where does one draw the line between specificity and generality in designing keyword-based search facilities? Perhaps most importantly, does this force us to rethink how we approach the documents that underpin all anthropological research?

A New Look at Archiving for Sensitive Community Based Materials: A “web 2.0” Approach to Distribution and Updates

David Nathan
School of Oriental and African Studies

The Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS is creating a new archiving system that takes advantage of developments in web-based social networking in order to address complexities of access and distribution of documentation materials. Many of these materials are sensitive because communities and their speakers are under pressures and deprivations, heightened by the dangers of recording naturalistic speech in small communities. To address this, the archive is reconceived as a forum for conducting relationships between information providers (depositors) and information users (language speakers, linguists and others), using the now-familiar idioms of the Facebook or eBay page. Rather than the archive having to continually broker complex access conditions, parties can negotiate directly with each other to achieve more flexible and creative outcomes. In this way we aim to increase the distribution and effectiveness of language documentation, and ultimately to make a stronger contribution to language research and to the maintenance of languages.

The Parched Grain Chant. Parallel Verse and Simultaneous Action in Magar Rituals

Michael Oppitz
University of Zürich

The faith healers of the Magar community are renowned for their elaborate ritual traditions. These combine chanting of numerous oral texts with the performance of nightlong séances. The chants may be divided into two classes: narrative mythological creation stories and auxiliary songs containing instructions for the correct choice of materials. Although the auxiliary chants lack a manifest plot, together with the narrative myths they form a single artistic whole.

One of these auxiliary chants is called the ‘Parched Grain Chant’. It deals with the primordial search for the right type of grain to be roasted in a particular vegetal offering rite. The craft of the chanting shaman is assessed by his ability to synchronise his song with the physical preparations needed for the corresponding actions. This presentation focuses on both the content and form of the song, and on its position within the entire ritual event.

Re-sounding the Spirits of Altai-Sayan Oral Epic Performance

Carole Pegg

University of Cambridge

My paper argues that, when collecting and re-presenting traditions based on orality, we need to consider the challenges of transferring from one medium to another, for instance, from sounds experienced within a performance complex to a potentially isolated written text or recording. Drawing on fieldwork among Altaians and Khakasses of the southern Siberian Altai-Sayan mountains, I illustrate the sound-power of the epic when performed within enabling events. In these societies, the *kaichy*, like the shaman, is chosen by spirits and, together with vocal tone (*kai*), event, words, instrument and music, each has its own ‘master-spirit’. Only by producing *kai*, enlivening his instrument and uttering the ‘correct’ words can the *kaichy* travel with his hero to other worlds or ease a dead soul from one dimension to another, and thereby rebalance cosmic and social relations. How do we ensure retention of the sound and performance spirit of oral literature?

Tamu Shamans’ Books: The Challenges of Textualising the Pye-ta Lhu-ta

Judith Pettigrew

University of Limerick

In this presentation, I discuss my ongoing work with the Tamu-mai, an ethnolinguistic community of central Nepal with whom I have been working collaboratively for two decades. I begin by reviewing a number of Tamu cultural preservation projects in which I have played a part, including the curation of sensitive material culture collections within museums in Europe and Nepal, an extensive video documentation project and studio recordings of traditional Tamu ritual chants and songs. Through these and other examples, I address the challenges of textualisation and the problems that are raised when delicate cultural materials are recorded, archived and disseminated to a wider audience.

Participatory Cultural Preservation on the Sino-Tibetan Fringe

Gerald Roche

Griffith University / Qinghai Normal University

This paper discusses the application of participatory methods – developed by Robert Chambers within the context of development studies – to the practice of cultural preservation. As the title suggests, participatory methods are grounded in local participation rather than in top-down, expert-oriented approaches that often characterize cultural preservation initiatives. The approach based on local participation entails giving local people the choice to document their own culture, providing the equipment and expertise to do so, and empowering locals to control the use of such material. Case studies are drawn from several related projects in China’s Sino-Tibetan fringe – contemporary Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan provinces – to demonstrate the application of participatory methods in cultural preservation.

Collecting Shamanic Songs in Nepal

Anne de Sales
CNRS, Paris

Shamanic songs describe what the shaman does as he is doing it. The reflexive character of shamanic performances makes it necessary to study the oral tradition within its ritual context. In the course of his recitation, the shaman constantly changes perspective, sometimes playing the part of one or another of the protagonists in the narrative, and sometimes acting as an external commentator on the performance as a whole. This shifting perspective has significant implications for the collection of shamanic songs among a Tibeto-Burman minority population of western Nepal insofar as the songs are inextricably linked to performance. In addition to presenting examples of this phenomenon, my presentation will also explore how the changing socio-political context over the last 30 years has transformed the issues involved in this activity.

'Producing' Thangmi Ritual Texts: Practice, Performance and Collaborative Documentation

Sara Shneiderman
University of Cambridge

In the course of my research on Thangmi ethnic identity, many members of this community spread across Himalayan areas of Nepal and India expressed a desire to see the oral recitations of their *guru* (shamans) made available in a written form. Thangmi individuals held divergent rationales for this project — some focused on its spiritual benefits, while others emphasized the political or practical implications. Others, including some of the shamans, did not wish to see textualisation occur at all.

This year, in collaboration with Bir Bahadur Thami, I began the process of 'producing' textual transcriptions and translations of three primary Thangmi ritual texts. Here I reflect upon the challenges of making our work both rigorous at a scholarly level, and meaningful within a contentious community environment shaped by ethnic, class, religious and personal politics spread across two countries. In particular, I describe two recent community workshops held in Kathmandu and Darjeeling at which such issues were discussed.

DSpace@Cambridge - Ensuring Access to Cultural Heritage Resources

Elin Stangeland
University of Cambridge

DSpace@Cambridge is the institutional repository for the University of Cambridge. It was established to facilitate both dissemination and preservation of digital materials created by members of the University. The first part of the presentation will focus on how the DSpace@Cambridge service can support the management of cultural heritage resources generated by University projects. Available approaches will be discussed, and case studies from various departments in the University will be presented.

As repository services such as DSpace@Cambridge are still in their infancy, we expect to see considerable changes in the coming years. The second part of the presentation will focus on the challenges faced by DSpace@Cambridge, and will include a discussion of possible future directions for the repository.

Reciting Landscape: Documenting Ritual Journeys and Landscape Among the Dumi Rai of Eastern Nepal

Alban von Stockhausen
University of Zürich

Among the Dumi Rai of eastern Nepal, the notions of ethnic identity and its geographical boundaries and reference points are strongly expressed in oral recitations. In many rituals, these landscapes — partly existing and partly imaginary — are travelled in the course of a shamanic journey by the specialist conducting the ritual or the spiritual being for whom the ritual is conducted. This presentation explores the relations between oral recitation and ritual landscape, through the recording and analysis of the pronounced words, but also by documenting and contextualising the landscapes and imaginary points referenced. Documentation methods include the audiovisual documentation of rituals, the mapping of the ritual landscape, and the collection of research outcomes in a database of toponyms and ritual language.

Languages and Species: Threats and Global Patterns

William Sutherland
University of Cambridge

Both languages and species are threatened with extinction. This talk will compare patterns of cultural and biological diversity. The aims will be to compare the extinction risk of languages with other groups and then compare the patterns of the global distribution of languages and species. The factors influencing diversity and threat will be considered.

Ritual Drumming and Chanting of the Tamu Shamans of Nepal

Yarjung Kromchai Tamu
Chief Advisor, Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh

Tamu shamans in Nepal use spiritual healing processes, power and oral texts passed down from their ancestors when performing rituals vital to Tamu life. This power is still as effective now as it was in ancient times. I was trained by my father to be a shaman from the age of five. I will be performing some ritual drumming at the workshop.

In my presentation, I will discuss my efforts to collect and translate Tamu shamanic traditions and ancient stories. Shamanic rituals are primarily passed down orally through the generations, frequently in the ancient Cho Kyui language which most modern Tamu cannot speak. To make these oral traditions more widely available and accessible, I am translating them into Tamu, Nepali and English. In this way, I believe that the language and cultural heritage will be protected for future generations.

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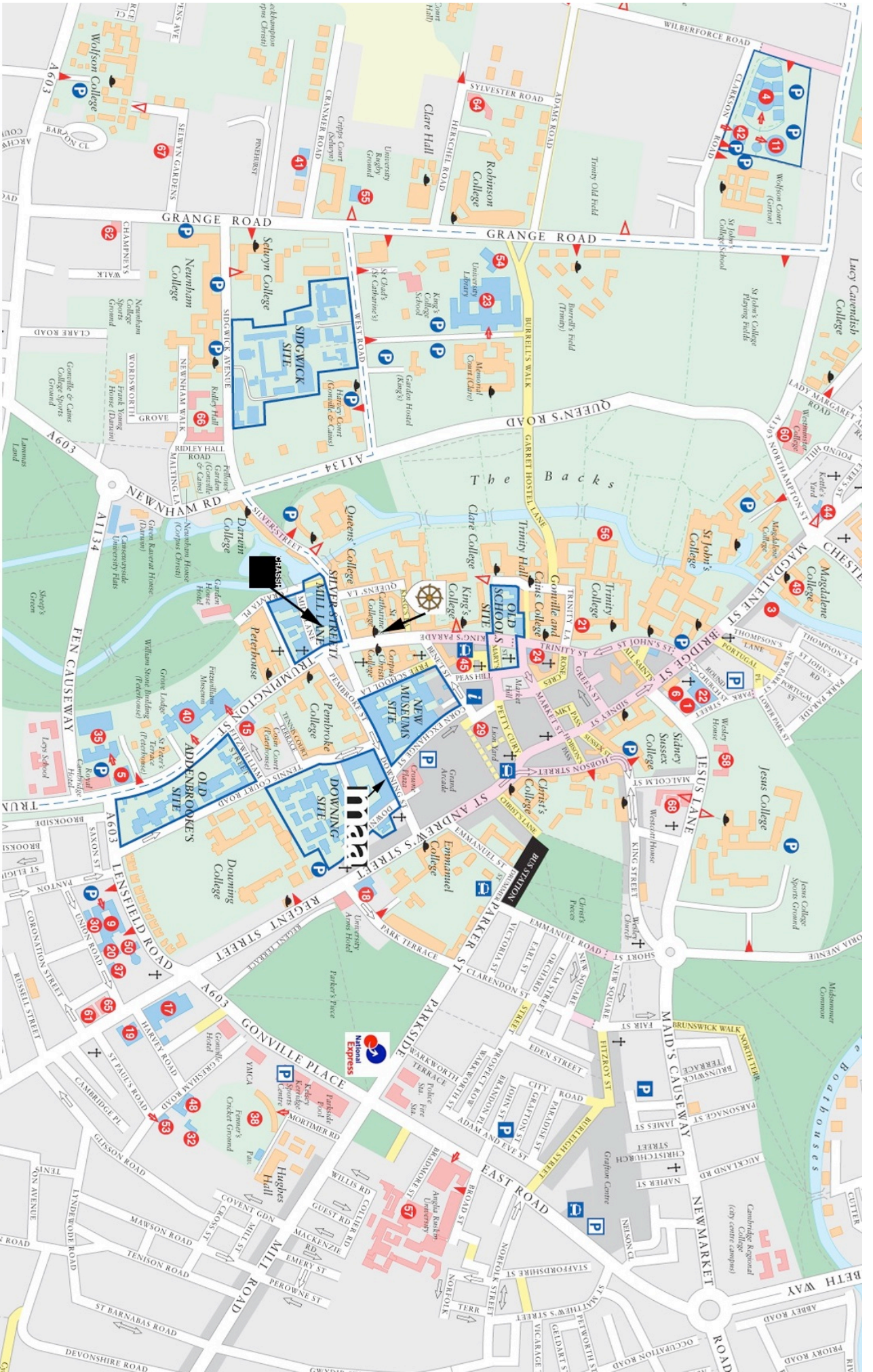
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