

Foreword



Fifteen years ago, Boa Sr, the last speaker of Bo, a language of the Great Andamanese family, made an impassioned appeal to her interlocutor: ‘Don’t let the language slip away, keep a hold on it.’ Elder Boa Sr passed away on 26 January 2010. As far as we know, there are no other living speakers or even ‘rememberers’ of the Bo language.

This tragic reality is offset—albeit only modestly—by the fact that Boa Sr could not have made her petition to a listener better positioned to recognise and accept the challenge. For some years already, Boa Sr had been in conversation with internationally-celebrated linguist and award-winning champion of marginalized and Indigenous languages, Anvita Abbi. Since her first trip to the Andaman Islands in December 2001, Professor Abbi has worked tirelessly to ensure that the unique linguistic and cultural traditions of the Andamans not vanish from human consciousness without record. *Voices from the Lost Horizon: Stories and Songs of the Great Andamanese*, taken together with Professor Abbi’s large oeuvre of important and interdisciplinary publications, offers a tangible demonstration of this commitment.

This book brings together 10 rare stories and 46 songs in Great Andamanese, the only collection of its kind. Transmitting these

precious teachings in ways that are appropriate, respectful and ethical is both a privilege and an enormous responsibility. What does it mean to publish stories and songs in a language which has no more living speakers? To whom do these stories belong, and what conditions attach to their circulation and dissemination? And who are the intended readers? Professor Abbi does not shy away from engaging with such questions. She honours the memory and cultural knowledge of Nao Junior—who narrated all but one of the stories—and Boa Sr, the narrator of ‘Dik the Demon’, by inviting the reader into the complicated context of each recording session. Each telling is prefaced with a careful description of the circumstances of its sharing, however imperfect, conflicted and interrupted these may have been.

Reading these carefully composed translations of these Great Andamanese stories and songs, I was reminded of Wade Davis, my colleague at the University of British Columbia, who lyrically describes each language as ‘an old growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an entire ecosystem of spiritual possibilities.’ In ways that are neither nostalgic nor bullish, Abbi shows these Great Andamanese stories and songs for what they are now, at this point in history, a partial remembering of a time when humans and the more-than-human-world were in more intimate relation, implicated in each other’s destinies.

The recorded elicitation sessions that Abbi shares with her readers speak to the humility of both recorder and recorded, forging human connections across vastly different cultures, languages and lived experiences. It is a testament to the patient compassion

of the community knowledge holders and the sincerity of the visiting scholars that meaningful relationships took root despite the structural and hierarchical impediments that history has placed in their way. Abbi invites us to consider Nao Jr as a ‘symbol of a priceless Indian heritage.’ Her point is delicate, and indeed political. Throughout their lives, Nao Jr, Boa Sr and their relatives have been subjected to multiples waves of indignities, starting with the epidemics brought to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by the British that devastated the local population; followed by the Japanese occupation of their homeland during World War II; and culminating in the forced relocation of their entire community to Strait Island, a small tribal reserve, by the Government of India whose approach to ‘tribal’ could be described as controversial to say the least. Abbi’s work invites us to think through the implications and responsibilities of colonization and occupation—external and internal. If the Indian republic considered the late Nao Jr to have been its subject and citizen, then he must also be entitled to the benefits that accord to such membership. To my mind, there is no doubt that Nao Jr and Boa Sr deserve recognition as having made profound contributions to the complex and rich heritage of India.

While each story or song in this collection carries extraordinary beauty, the ‘Great Narrative of Phertajido’ has resonant quality unlike any other. A short but complex narrative of ethnogenesis, the story is suffused with emotion and themes of survival. We are introduced to Phertajido, the first man of the Andaman Islands, who originated from the hollow of a bamboo stalk. Given the violent depredations to which the Indigenous communities of the Andaman Islands have

been subjected over centuries—colonial, political, epidemiological, evangelical and most recently, in the form of the 2004 tsunami, climatic—the bamboo motif seems particularly apt. As anthropologist and historian Alan Macfarlane has written, bamboo is a unique natural product and offers us a powerful metaphor to think with. At once incredibly strong, resilient, hardy and robust, bamboo is at the same time flexible, agile and malleable. No matter how much bamboo is warped by the wind, it always returns to its upright position, retaining its integrity. This same metaphor may be extended to the collaborative research undertaken by Nao Jr, Boa Sr and Anvita Abbi; while their creative partnership has required great adaptability and compromise as conditions around them have changed, its core structure—founded on truth and dignity—has remained unchanged. Thanks to this long-term and participatory research collaboration, a global readership knows something of the lives that Nao Jr and Boa Sr have lived.

Few Indigenous peoples have been as fortunate in their allocation of a resident linguist and advocate as the last speakers of Great Andamanese. For two decades now, Abbi has marshalled the full intellectual and strategic weight of her training, disciplinary expertise and socio-cultural capital to document, preserve and share with the world the voices, songs, stories and laughter of the Great Andamanese. We, the readers of *Voices from the Lost Horizon: Stories and Songs of the Great Andamanese*, are the beneficiaries.

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