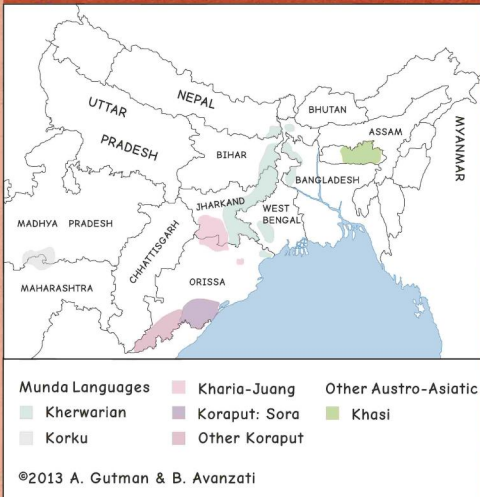


# Religion and language preservation: the case of Sora

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## Introduction

Sora is the largest idiom of South Munda languages. It is spoken in the states Odisha & Andhra Pradesh, India and has approximately 310.000 native speakers.



• **Data source:** fieldwork in Gajapati (town of Paralakhemundi, vill. Serango, Ranipeta, Barangsing, Samagaota, Porida, Ollada) and Rayagada (vill. Dombosara, Marichaguda, Engerba) districts, Odisha, India.

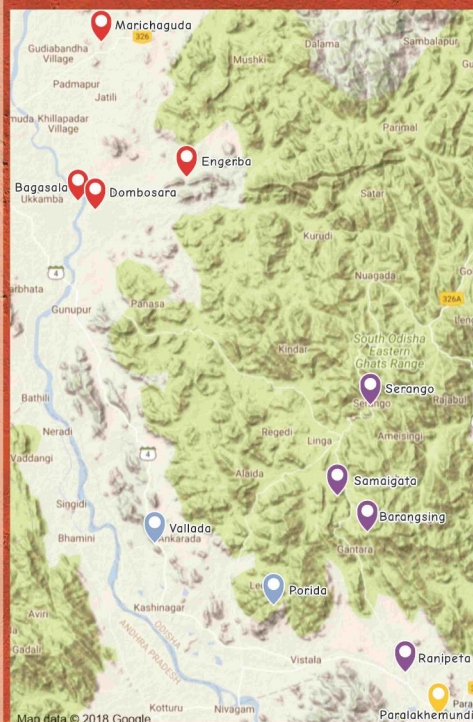
• **Methods:** interviewing, questionnaire survey, participant observation.

• **Sociolinguistic situation:** a wide range of language competence from monolingualism to total language loss is observed. Multilingualism is common in Sora community. Besides their native language, some Sora people speak local idioms of neighbouring tribal/caste groups, the official language of the state (Oriya), the official languages of the Union of States of India (Hindi, English). No dialectological survey of the Sora language has been conducted. Still, there are reasons to suppose different tribal subgroups of Sora speaking different dialectal idioms: Juray, Lanja, Sarda, etc.

• **Level of language endangerment (according to UNESCO):** vulnerable. Reasons:

- low prestige of Sora (because of Hindu caste bias against tribes and popular ideas of so-called primitive/uncivilized tribes)
  - dominance of the official languages in the government institutions, mass media and the Internet.
  - school education in Oriya (the reason for parents and kindergarten nurses to speak Oriya with preschool age children)
  - so-called 'hostel generation' (people below 35). Children from remote villages are sent to boarding schools in towns and larger villages. For the reason of developing better Oriya skills, speaking their native language is partly or fully prohibited in such institutions. Though 'hostel children' may learn Sora later at home, their vocabulary is decreased dramatically.
- Result: language and culture assimilation.

• **Religions among Sora people:**



• **References:**  
Vitebsky P. 2017. Living Without the Dead: Loss and Redemption in a Jungle Cosmos. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

• **Acknowledgements:**

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## Baptism

Serango village: Canadian Baptist Mission (since 1902).

- ☑ The Sora Bible has been published. There is also a book of original gospels in Sora.
- ☑ Pastors are native speakers of Sora and conduct services mostly in Sora (with addition of some Oriya).
- ☑ All members of the community participate in the service. They read the Sora Bible aloud and sing gospels in Sora.
- ☑ Church is the center of social life, all kind of issues are discussed inside the church. The main language of communication in the church is Sora.
- ☑ The popularization of the education led to the rise of language activity among the speakers. Language and culture activists become involved into the Multilingual Education Program (MLE).

- ☑ Loss and rejection of the pre-Christian cultural vocabulary as 'pagan'.
- ☑ The language learnt from reading the Bible is limited to a single functional style.
- ☑ The Oriya Bible is gradually replacing the Sora Bible in churches as more prestigious one.

### Script:

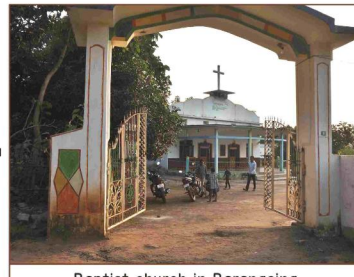
Two scripts based on Roman. Early version includes IPA symbols and is very close to the Sora phonology. Inventors: Rao Sahib G.V. Ramamurti & Anne C. Munro, 1931. Latest (simplified) version has no additional symbols.

### Facts:

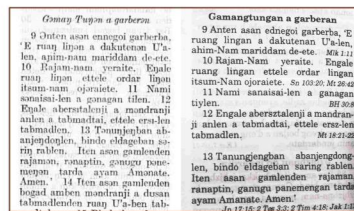
The Lanjiya idiom spread as a standard for all Baptist Sora communities. All known grammar descriptions are based on Lanjiya.



A church service, Barangsing



Baptist church in Barangsing



Matthew 6: 9-13 (the Lord's Prayer) in both scripts

## Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Behrampur since 1974.

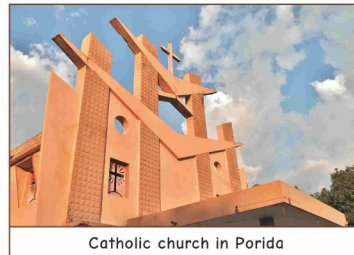
- ☑ There are some specific Catholic texts translated into Sora (Catechism, Deuterocanonicals, liturgical books).
- ☑ The Catechism is studied in Sunday schools.
- ☑ Priests are mostly Malayalam native speakers from Kerala, they learn Oriya and sometimes Sora (with varying levels of success) specifically to conduct services in Odisha.
- ☑ Services and confessions proceed in Oriya (with additions of Hindi and English).
- ☑ No practice of reading religious texts. There is no Catholic translation of the Bible, the members of the community have the Baptist Bible (and the Deuterocanonicals) at home, but have no need to read.
- ☑ The script is not standardized.
- ☑ The members of the community are mostly audience than participants of the service.
- ☑ Loss and rejection of the pre-Christian cultural vocabulary as 'pagan'.

### Script:

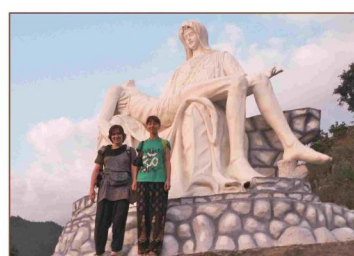
Two scripts on Roman base (cf. Baptism), non-standardized.



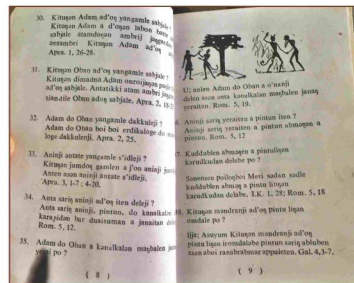
Service in a Catholic church, Vallada



Catholic church in Porida



The authors near a Catholic monument, Porida



A page from the Catechism

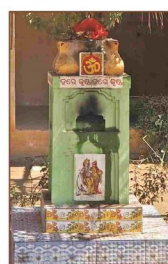
## Neo-Hinduism

Result of the missionary work of the Vishva Hindu Parishad organization, ghar vāpasi ('homecoming') program.

- ☑ Composing and singing bhajans in Sora, translation of Hindu literature.
- ☑ The main goal of the missionary work is involving Soras into mainstream Hindu community. It supposes cultural and language assimilation.
- ☑ Low prestige of the Sora tribe in the Hindu caste hierarchy which prevents Soras to become priests.
- ☑ The main language of religious practices is Sanskrit, the language of communication between priests and worshippers is Oriya.
- ☑ Composing of Sora bhajans looks mostly like a missionary trick than a potential long-term practice.
- ☑ Lack of written practice.

### Script:

Oriya (for Andhra Pradesh – Telugu).



A sanctuary of Krishna, Dombosara



Gangadhar Raika, a Sora Vishva Hindu, is performing a Sanskrit mantra, Paralakhemundi

## Matar Banom

(alphabet worshippers [Vitebsky 2017])

Neo-animist religion based on the Sorang Sompeng script invented specially for Sora and worshipped as an incarnation of Jagannath. 24 symbols are named after Sora tribal deities.

- ☑ Script is sacred => language is sacred.
- ☑ Using only Sora in religious practices.
- ☑ Language activism in a form of the script sacralization => there are ashrams with primary school-aged children studying in Sora and studying the script as a subject.
- ☑ The idea of an aboriginal alphabet is attractive for Sora individuals of other religions with high ethnic self-identity.
- ☑ Interest in the traditional cultural vocabulary.

- ☑ The script is not standardized and allows some phonetic ambiguities.
- ☑ The strong connection between the script and the religion prevents its spreading among other religious groups.

### Script:

Sorang Sompeng. Inventor: Mangle Gomango, 1936.



A typeset in Sorang Sompeng



The sanctuary of the worshipped Sorang Sompeng printing press, Bagasala

### Facts:

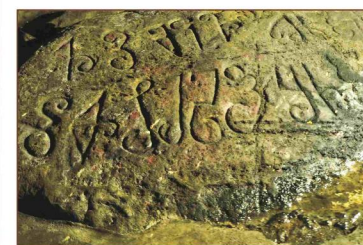
The script is based on the Sarda idiom.



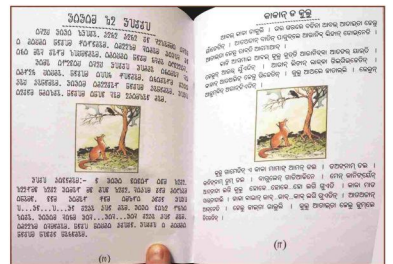
Children are performing a script prayer, the ashram near Engerba



A blackboard after a Sorang Sompeng lesson, the ashram near Engerba



The worshipped petroglyphs in the Matar Banom sanctuary, Marichaguda



A book of Hitopadesha tales in Sora: Sorang Sompeng and Oriya scripts

## Animism

The traditional Sora religion including shaman practices, sacrifices, worshipping of local spirits and ancestors.

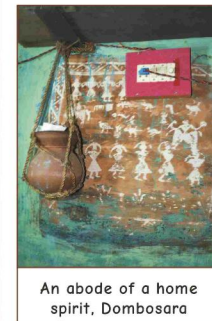
- ☑ Religious practices exclusively in Sora. Communication with mediums and possessed is performed only in Sora.
- ☑ Sacred texts and spiritual practices are often in competence of shamans and other devoted persons, not the whole community.
- ☑ Due to the lack of continuity of traditions the new generation leaves the traditional religion behind.

### Script:

No script.

### Facts:

The language loss leads to the loss of traditional beliefs.



An abode of a home spirit, Dombosara



A local spirit is incarnated in a piece of wood ornamented by tinsel above. An image of the Hindu goddess Durga is added below



Srinivas Gomango, a folklorist and folk singer, is performing a traditional hymn, Paralakhemundi



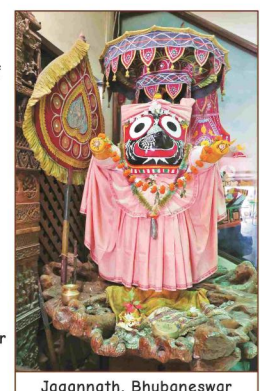
A home spirit, Bagasala

## Hinduism

There are also Hindus of Sora origin. They are completely assimilated by the Oriya culture including their language. Some of them know that they belong to Sora (or even to a "Scheduled tribe" without any name) only because of their official registration data.

### Facts:

The main Hindu god in Odisha, Jagannath (worshipped as local incarnation of Krishna) has some special features typical of tribal deities. He is commonly believed to be a Sora deity which was later withdrawn from them by Oriya Brahmins.



Jagannath, Bhubaneswar



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