

Orality and Language

Edited by G. N. Devy and Geoffrey V. Davis

Key Concepts in Indigenous Studies



ORALITY AND LANGUAGE

Part of the series Key Concepts in Indigenous Studies, this book focuses on the concepts that recur in any discussion of the society, culture and literature among indigenous peoples.

This book, the fourth in a five-volume series, deals with the two key concepts of language and orality of indigenous peoples from Asia, Australia, North America and South America. With contributions from renowned scholars, activists and experts from across the globe, it looks at the intricacies of oral transmission of memory and culture, literary production and transmission, and the nature of creativity among indigenous communities. It also discusses the risk of a complete decline of the languages of indigenous peoples, as well as the attempts being made to conserve these languages.

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Indigenous (2013); *Performing Identities: Celebrating Indigeneity in the Arts* (2014); and *The Language Loss of the Indigenous* (2016), published by Routledge.

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Key Concepts in Indigenous Studies

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Dharwad, India, and Chairman, People's Linguistic Survey of India*

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This series of volumes offers the most systematic and foundational literature available to date for use by undergraduate and postgraduate students of indigenous studies. It brings together essays by experts from across the globe on concepts forming the bedrock of this rapidly growing field in five focused volumes: *Environment and Belief Systems* (Vol. 1); *Gender and Rights* (Vol. 2); *Indigeneity and Nation* (Vol. 3); *Orality and Language* (Vol. 4); and *Performance and Knowledge* (Vol. 5). These contain short, informative and easily accessible essays on the perspectives of indigenous communities from all continents of the world. The essays are written specifically for an international audience. They thus allow drawing of transnational and cross-cultural parallels, and form useful material as textbooks as well as texts for general readership. Introducing a new orientation to traditional anthropology with comprehensive and in-depth studies, the volumes foreground knowledge traditions and praxis of indigenous communities.

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First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-24536-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-60937-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-10259-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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PREFACE

The volumes in this series have long been in making. The idea came up in 2011 in a conversation between Prof. Geoffrey Davis and me. The two of us had by then worked on six anthologies related to indigenous studies to which scholars from all continents had contributed. Two of these are published by Orient BlackSwan (*Indigeneity*, 2009 and *Voice and Memory*, 2011) and four by Routledge between 2012 and 2016 (*Narrating Nomadism*, *Knowing Differently*, *Performing Identities* and *The Language Loss of the Indigenous*). However, we felt that we needed to do more, a lot more, in order to firmly establish this newly emerging field. Shashank Sinha and Shoma Choudhury of Routledge showed a keen interest in our proposal. Enthused by the idea of bringing out a set of volumes dealing with some of the definitive themes of the field and assured by the possibility of publication of the volumes, we started our work. Of course, it was not entirely easy going for us. The challenges were many and the scale in which we wanted to cast the volumes was not easy to handle. Despite the difficulties and setbacks expected in such an intellectual venture, we kept up. Most of the editorial work was completed by early 2018. As we were getting ready to send the typescripts, alas, Prof. Geoffrey Davis died in a short internment in an Aachen hospital. His last mail came to me a day before he was to be admitted. The loss was a big blow to me. His friends and colleagues spread over all continents mourned his death deeply. For me, the most civilized way of mourning was to ensure that the volumes to which he had contributed so much care and toil got published. Who was Geoffrey Davis and why was he interested in the indigenous? Perhaps the best way for me to explain this is to repeat here the response I sent to two questions from Prof. Janet Wilson (hereafter JW) of Southampton University.

JW: What were the points of synergy (ideological, intellectual, political activist) that brought you and Geoff together, and when and how did this happen, i.e.,

what were the particular contexts/motivations? I remember I think Geoff had just retired and was possibly looking for a new project? And might have been inspired through his involvement with ACLALS.

DEVY: I think I met him the first time in 1984 at the EACLALS conference at Sitges, Spain. During the 1980s, I was a “regular” at the EACLALS since India did not have an active Commonwealth Literature culture as yet. But, my memory of that meeting is not very clear. In 1988, Geoff had convened a conference at Aachen, Germany, where Geoff spent most of his academic life. I was invited to it for a plenary. This experience left me impressed by his organizational ability. In between, we had met at other places too – Austria, Hungary, Singapore. But all these meetings were casual; and I do not recall any memorable conversation having taken place between us during these conferences. During the 1990s, Geoff hosted a conference on literature and activism. I left my professorship at Baroda, India, in 1996. Geoff had heard about this move from friends. He asked me to lecture at the conference. I did. It was during this conference I noticed that he was deeply respectful of activism; that his empathy for the dispossessed was genuinely deep. I also noticed that he was extremely wary of using clichéd and fashionable jargon. The impression these qualities made on me was strong. A few years later, he was to attend the ACLALS Triennial in Hyderabad, India. He wrote to me asking if he could visit me after the Hyderabad conference. He knew that I had stopped attending academic conferences and there was no chance of our meeting in Hyderabad. So, I invited him to Baroda, 1500 km north of Hyderabad.

I am not sure if he enjoyed his visit to Baroda. On the day he was to arrive, for reasons difficult for to me know, I altogether forgot about his arrival. I was to meet him at the airport. Baroda in those days was a very small airport and every day only three or four flights arrived there. And overseas visitors were not a common sight. Geoff waited there till almost the last co-traveller had left the meeting area. The last one to leave happened to be an architect named Karan Grover, who is a living legend in the field of architecture. Grover asked Geoff if he was expecting anyone. Geoff mentioned my name. This worked. Karan Grover and I had been friends for decades, and Geoff was made to feel welcome on my behalf, brought to his lodgings and, the forgetting and forgiving over, we met over dinner. The next day, I drove him in my car to the location of the Adivasi Academy (the Tribal University) that I was trying to establish in those years. This location was 90 km east of Baroda. On the way, I talked with passion all about my plans, my dreams. He listened. He spent another day in Baroda meeting Karan and enjoyed the famous Grover wine. I was busy in my work with the tribal academy. The next morning, I drove Geoff to the airport as he was leaving for Bombay and then to Aachen. At the airport, he asked me if I could have him visit the Adivasi Academy again for a longer time, a week or so. I said, “Why do you not stay for a semester?” He was a bit puzzled by my offer, made in such a casual manner. So, I added, “Be a Fellow with us.” He took that offer and returned to Baroda the following year,

but for a short time. I think it was after two more brief trips that he agreed to spend six months in Baroda.

I must explain that the Adivasi Academy is not like a university. It is a community workstation at best, with really very minimum facilities that makes for most of us what we call “civilization.” The “Fellowship” had no set rules. They were made looking at the individual’s ability and desire to contribute what one had promised to contribute. . . . The “projects” ranged from writing a book or an article, teaching music or language to children, keeping the library or museum in good order, tending a piece of agricultural land, setting up a community micro-credit group or just documenting any of these activities. When Geoff became a fellow of the Adivasi Academy, there were three others, Brian and Eileen Coates from Limerick, Ireland and Lachman Khubchandani, a linguist from Pune, India. Eileen had accepted to help us with the museum and Lachman was to write a book in linguistics. I was more ambitious with Geoff. I said to him, “If you do not mind, please do nothing, only watch what goes on here and when it pleases you discuss ideas with me.” He agreed. The facilities given to the fellows included housing in Baroda and meals when they visited the Academy, 90 km away from Baroda. All my meetings with tribals were transacted in their languages. English words were rarely heard. Only occasionally, some visitors helped Geoff with English interpretations. Geoff, I must say, braved all of this discomfort without a murmur. The impression I had formed about his deep empathy for the dispossessed became firmer. In the fifth month of his stay, I sent a word to him asking if he was available for a serious conversation. He obliged. We met in my Baroda office – the Bhasha Centre – at 2 PM. I asked him if he would join me in imagining an international “non-conference” for looking at the world through the perspective of the indigenous. He said, “I cannot promise, but I will try.” Our conversation continued for several hours and, probably, both of us had a reasonably good idea of what all must be avoided in making our idea of conference a completely rooted to the ground. I proposed the name “chotro” (a shared platform); he consented to it with great enthusiasm. Next morning, I found him at Bhasha. He had a “Call for Chotro” ready with him. I made several calls to various offices and individuals in Delhi to finalize the material arrangements for the First Chotro. That afternoon, Geoff sat at the computer and sent out close to 150 mails. Before he left Baroda, we were fully involved in putting together the unusual conference. He made one visit to India before the conference was held in Delhi in January 2008. We met in Delhi. I had to combine some of my other works with the work related to Chotro. One of these involved a visit to the prime minister’s office. He was a bit shocked when I told him that after sorting out the conference related arrangements for stay and local transportation, I would be going to the PM’s office and he was welcome to join me. Years later, I have heard him narrating this anecdote to friends over a glass of wine. The Delhi Chotro was the first one. We put together several more in subsequent years and worked on the conference volumes, meeting in several

countries. Geoff became a frequent visitor to India to Baroda, and also to my home and family. I am not aware if we shared an ideology. In a way, all of us in the field of literature have a varying degree of progressive outlook on life and society. But, what clicked between Geoff and me is something else, and that is his immense patience with me and his ability to cope with surprises and shocks, which could not be avoided considering my involvement in several social causes. John Keats, speaking of William Shakespeare's "genius," had used the term "negative capability" – the ability to live amidst uncertainties. The mutual recognition of this negative capability brought us together for undertaking unconventional kind of work, serious though not strictly academic.

JW: What roles/or positions did Geoff take as collaborator, e.g., in co-organizing Chotro and in working with the Adivasis/Bhasha more generally?

DEVY: When we thought of creating the Chotro non-conferences, we had no funding support. We had no sponsors, no funds for international travel. Bhasha Centre was not a full-scale "institution" till then. Besides, "Indigenous Studies" was not any accepted field of academic work. We were not sure if any self-respecting publisher would accept to publish the proceedings. Therefore, in all of these matters, we shared responsibility. But, generally speaking, he dealt with the overseas participants and I handled the Indian issues, material and academic. I accepted to identify publishers, negotiate with them, do the necessary correspondence; Geoff focused on copy editing of the texts. But, this division of work was not sanctimonious. Either of us was free to cross over and even required to do so looking at each other's convenience. Never forget that Geoff had his other major obligations and academic projects, and I had mine. We had no desire to claim credit for the work we were doing. It was born out of our desire to create a legitimate space for the voice of the indigenous.

I hope my response to Janet Wilson will have made it clear why I enjoyed working with Geoffrey Davis on so many intellectual projects. In India's intellectual history, there have been glorious examples of intellectual collaboration between Indian thinkers and scholars and writers and scholars from other countries. W.B. Yeats and Purohit Swamy, Yeats and Tagore, Tolstoy and Gandhi developed their ideas through such collaborations. In our time, with the rising tide of the "Right" political parties, a narrow idea of nationalism is gaining a greater currency, making such collaborations difficult to carry through. I am pleased that this series of volumes is seeing the light of the day, bringing my work together with Geoffrey Davis to a successful conclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The initial idea of this volume and the series to which it belongs came up in 2012. Since then, Prof. Geoffrey Davis, who was to be the co-editor, corresponded with several scholars from the field of Commonwealth literature from other academic disciplines. These scholars from various disciplines and several continents gave their advice and suggestions for identifying scholars to be involved in the project. They are too numerous to be mentioned individually. I would like to record my gratitude to them. The scholars and activists who consented to contribute, and the majority of them who kept their promise, made the putting together of the volumes possible. Their participation in the most tangible way calls for my thanks. Several organizations and institutions offered Prof. Geoffrey Davis and me opportunities of meeting and taking our plans for these volumes forward. They include the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, for a conference in Cyprus; Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Baroda, for various events through these years; the Kiel Voche, organized by Kiel City Council in Germany; the German Academy, for convening a conference at Hamburg; Aide et Action, for convening a meeting in Geneva; and several Indian colleges and universities, for creating spaces on the sidelines of conferences – I thank all of them. I wonder if without these meetings the project would have moved forward at all.

I would like to thank Ingrid, Prof. Davis's wife, for ungrudgingly encouraging him to spend his funds and time on travels to India to work on this project. Surekha, my life partner, has most generously supported the project throughout its years of slow progress by providing ideas, hospitality and courage. I cannot thank her enough.

The publication of these volumes would not have been at all possible had it not been for the abiding friendship and support of Dr. Shashank Shekhar Sinha, Publishing Director, and his inspiring colleague Shoma Choudhury at Routledge. I carry in my heart the comfort drawn from their genuine friendship.