

# CHANGING PLANET



## Tribal languages on International Mother language Day

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[Joanna Eede](#)

“You say *laughter* and I say *larfter*,” sang Louis Armstrong. The difference is subtle. Across the world, however, from the Amazon to the Arctic, tribal peoples say it in 4,000 entirely different ways.

Sadly, no one now says “laughter” in Eyak, a language from the Gulf of Alaska, whose last fluent speaker died in 2008, or in the Bo language from the Andaman Islands, for Survival International discovered that its last remaining speaker, Boa Senior, died in 2010. Nearly 55,000 years of thoughts and ideas— the collective history of an entire people— died with her. Before she died, she said, *‘They don’t understand me. What can I do? If they don’t speak to me now, what will they do once I’ve passed away? Don’t forget our language, grab hold of it.’*

Most tribal languages are disappearing faster than they can be recorded. Linguists at the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages believe that on average, a language is disappearing every two weeks. By 2100, more than half of the more than 7,000 languages spoken on Earth—many of them not yet recorded— may disappear. The pace at which they are declining exceeds even that of species extinction and still, very few tribal languages have been recorded.

*‘As tribal peoples are evicted from their lands, as their children are taken away from their communities and forced into education systems that strip away traditional wisdom, as wars, urbanization, genocide, disease, violent land-grabs and globalization continue to threaten tribal peoples with extinction, so the world’s tribal languages are dying. And with the death of tribes and the extinction of their languages, unique parts of human society become nothing more than memories’*, said Stephen Corry, Director of Survival International, which works for tribal peoples rights worldwide.

In western Brazil, among the endlessly dry, yellowing soya fields of Rondônia state, where smoke billows on the horizon and the smell of burning wood hangs in the air, there still exist small fragments of lush, intact rainforest. Here the five remaining members of the once-thriving, and isolated, Akuntsu tribe live. Their

diminished population is due to the building of a major highway through Rondônia in the 1970s, which resulted in waves of cattle ranchers, loggers, land speculators and colonists occupying the state. The settlers were hungry for land, at any price. Cattle ranchers bulldozed the forest home of the Akuntsu, tried to hide the destruction, and employed gunmen to murder the inhabitants. The surviving members fled into the forest, where they remained, traumatised, until contact was made in the mid-1990s. Since then, linguists have been working with the tribe in an effort to understand their language. The hope is that one day the Akuntsu will not only be able to recount their tragic story in detail, but will be able to share the knowledge and insights embedded in their words.

Further north, in Maranhão state, between the equatorial forests of Amazonia to the West and the eastern savannas, live the Awá people. They call their ancestral homeland *Harakwá*, or, '*the place that we know*'. But today the Awá are the most threatened tribe on earth. Over the course of four decades, they have witnessed the destruction of their homeland – more than 30% of one of their territories has now been razed – and the murder of their people at the hands of '*karaí*', or 'non-Indians'. In 2012, Survival launched an urgent campaign to protect the lives and lands of the Awá, but almost a year on, the situation is still so serious that a Brazilian federal judge has described it as a '*real genocide*.' And while their very existence remains threatened, so does their language.

The fate of tribal languages is the same across the world. Before Europeans arrived in America and Australia, hundreds of complex languages were spoken in each country. It is thought that when Captain Cook reached Australia, there were 1,000 languages being spoken there.

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Fewer than 20 are now in daily use – the Yawuru of western Australia only has a handful of speakers, as does the Yurok language of California. Among the Blackfoot tribes of the northwestern plains of North America, it is rare to find a person under the age of 20 speaking the mother tongue, Siksika; most speakers are dwindling groups of elderly people. When languages become the preserve of the old, the knowledge systems inherent in them become endangered; for the rest of the world, this means that unique ways of adapting to the planet and responding creatively to its challenges go to the grave with the last speakers. In a world of ecological uncertainty, such information is no small loss.

In fact, many of the world's tribal languages are not spoken to children. Preventing a tribe from communicating in its language has long been a policy deliberately adopted by dominant authorities in order to marginalize tribal ways of life. From the 1950s to 1980s, the Soviet authorities in Siberia tried to suppress the traditions of the country's tribal peoples by sending tribal children to schools that did not teach their own languages; some children were even punished for daring to speak them.

In Canada, Inuit children were taken away from their homes, sent to residential schools, and beaten for communicating in their mother tongue. *"I didn't expect to get strapped at that time, but I did,"* said George Gosnell, an Inuit man, *"I went to the principal's office and I got strapped for using our languages."* In Canada's Innu communities, although some teaching is now carried out through the medium of *Innu-aimun*, the Innu language, most is conveyed in English or French. *"The kids don't understand us these days when we use old Innu words,"* an Innu man told a Survival International researcher, *"and we can't translate, because we don't understand."*

Understanding is everything, however, in harsh environments. To understand a language and the knowledge and information held within it is to survive: land, life and language are intimately related for most tribal peoples. Encoded within their vocabularies and passed down the generations are the secrets to surviving in the deserts of Africa, the ice-fields of the Arctic or the rainforests of Papua New Guinea. *"I cannot read books,"* said the Gana Bushman Roy Sesana from Botswana. *"But I do know how to read the land and animals. All our children could. If they couldn't, they would have died long ago."*

The languages of Bo, Innu-aiman, Penan, Akuntsu, Siksika, Yanomami and Yawuru are rich in the results of thousands of years of observation and discovery and aspects of life that are central to the survival of the community – and the wider world. "The hunter-gatherer way of being in the world, their way of knowing and talking about the world, depends on detailed, specific knowledge," says anthropologist Hugh Brody; the Eveny language, for example has at least 1,500 words that refer to the colors and shapes of reindeer, their body parts, harnesses, diseases, diets and moods. Linguist K. David Harrison, in his book *When Languages Die* writes, "When we lose a language, we lose centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, reindeer, edible flowers, mathematics, landscapes, myths, music, the unknown and the everyday."

Most tribal languages, however, cannot be found in books. Or on the Internet. Or for that matter in any form of documentation, because most of them have been orally conveyed. But this, of course, makes them no less valid, or relevant. Oral languages record their own parallel stream of history. "Australia's true history is never read," wrote an Aboriginal poet, "But the black man keeps it in his head"—a thought echoed by the Bushman woman Dicao Oma when she said simply, *"We have our own talk."*

In the age of technology, there is some hope of revival for fading languages of the world, as people are turning to the web as a tool for language revitalization. One encouraging example is Quecha, the most widely spoken indigenous language in South America. It has long been in slow decline but is being revived after Google launched a search engine in Quechua, Microsoft produced versions of Windows and Office in the language, and the scholar Demetrio Túpac Yupanqui translated *Don Quixote* into his own mother tongue. Documenting and saving ancient languages is thus entirely possible, and can actually be facilitated by the latest communication technologies: mobile phone texts, social networks such as twitter and iPhone apps.

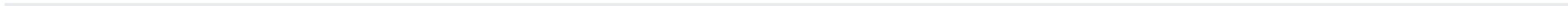
In the Andaman Islands, where Boa Senior lived, Anvita Abbi, a Professor of linguistics, has compiled the first dictionary of four endangered tribal languages. *'Words are cultural, archaeological, and environmental signatures of a community,'* she says. She has also spoken out over the Andaman Trunk Road that runs through the Jarawa people's reserve, saying that the Jarawa face a similar fate to Boa Senior unless the road is closed - *'unless we develop alternative sea routes, we cannot safeguard the life, culture, language and identity of one of the oldest civilizations on earth.'* Survival International's campaign to stop 'human safaris' in India's Andaman Islands has recently gained an important victory, after the Supreme Court banned tourists from traveling along the road which cuts through the Jarawa reserve.

In the end, the death of tribal languages matters. Not only for the identity of its speakers – for a language is, as the linguist Noam Chomsky said, “a mirror of the mind”– but for all of us, for our common humanity. Tribal languages are languages of the earth, suffused with complex geographical, ecological and climatic information that is rooted in locale, but universally significant. The very fact that the Inuit people of Canada

have no one word for snow, for example, but are able to name many different types, demonstrates just how attuned they are to their environment, and therefore to potential changes in it—a skill that, arguably, many urbanised people have lost now that they are that more removed from the natural world.

But languages are also rich in spiritual and social insights—ideas about what it is to be human; to live, love and die. Just as natural cures to humanity’s illnesses are waiting to be found in plants in the rainforest, so many ideas, perceptions and solutions about how humans engage with each other and with the natural world already exist, in the tribal languages of the world. are far more than mere words: they amount to what we know, and who we know ourselves to be.

*“They say our language is simple, that we should give up this simple language of ours and speak your kind of language,” wrote Inuit Simon Anaviapik. “But this language of mine, of yours, is who we are and who we have been. It is where we find our stories, our lives, our ancestors; and it should be where we find our future, too.”*





## MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including Portrait of England (Think Publishing, 2006) and We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.

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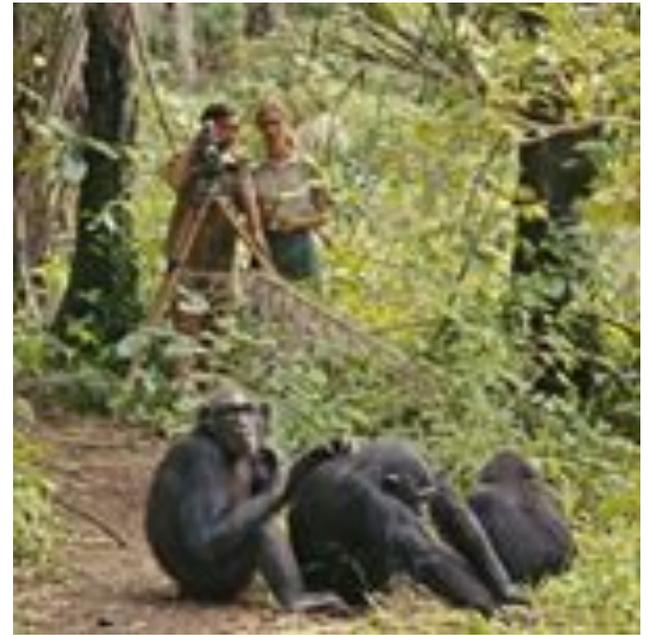
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