

The Santals and the Bodding Paradox

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Abstract

I first came across the mythical creation stories of the Santals in 2012 when I was 34. A chance reading of a book revealed them to me. I felt cheated of a large part of my identity by not knowing them sooner or not growing up with them. I soon discovered that these traditional stories were documented by Norwegian missionary Paul Olaf Bodding and others during their time in Santal Parganas, India in the late 19th and early 20th century. I grew up in a Santal family that was not only Christian, but as the daughter of a second-generation pastor—whose parents were converted by these same missionaries. Thus, the people who documented and preserved our traditional stories were the same ones who influenced our parents' generation to uphold the biblical creation stories as the only narrative of creation worth passing on at home.

While Bodding documented our stories as an ethnographer, he demonstrated detachment from the real worth or essence of them. Christianity has alienated us from our traditional stories. The most impressive and popular work in Roman script Santali is the Bible. The folklore, though, was reproduced for other people. The bearers and tellers of the stories became objects. The ones facilitating the production of the literature were no longer the ones enjoying it. Who Bodding's audience for the narratives initially was is ultimately not relevant. Reclaiming our stories and knowledge for the contemporary, lived Santal culture is far more crucial. Reclaiming them in a way we can engage with, revise them, build on them, should be the principles for a new era for the Bodding manuscripts collection. Maybe then a new generation of storytellers will begin to disseminate them again—bringing renewed meaning to Bodding's literary legacy.

Search terms: Bodding, Santals – folklore – literary tradition – orality – creation – narratives – identity

Norsk sammendrag

Artikkelens forfatter, Ruby Hembrom, er vokst opp i en kristen familie, som datter av en prest i andre generasjon. Først i en alder av 34 fikk ved en tilfeldighet kjennskap til santalenes skapelsesmyter. Da følte hun seg snytt for noe som angikk hennes identitet, og som hun beklaget hun ikke hadde hørt om før. I artikkelen kritiserer hun Bodding for å objektivere fortellerne og fortellingene. Han forsto ikke deres essens, den verdien de hadde for santalene selv. Nedtegnelsene var ikke beregnet for santalene, men utenforstående, fremmede. For kristne santaler sluttet å bruke disse fortellinger, de vokste opp bare med den bibelske skapelsesberetningen. Slik bidro misjonen og kristendommen til å fremmedgjøre dem fra deres egne tradisjoner og deres egen kulturelle livsverden, hevder hun. Men Hembrom er på det rene med at santalenes gamle fortellinger ikke er tapt. Hun påpeker verdien og betydningen av manuskriptene og den litterære arven etter Bodding. Det han samlet, må nå tas tilbake, fortelles, gjenfortelles og fornyes for slik å revitalisere santalenes kultur og livsverden av i dag.

An introduction: Situating My Own Personal History

The stories that stay with us are mostly our own or those that are intertwined with our lives. This is a story of coincidences and paradoxes. Mine is set in Benagaria, Santal Parganas, the seat of the Lutheran Mission established in 1867 under the collaboration of three Western missionaries: The Baptist Missionary Edward C. Johnson (nd-1900), the Danish Missionary Hans P. Børresen (1825-1901) and Norwegian Missionary Lars O. Skrefsrud (1840-1910) in northern India, which Paul Olaf Bodding (1865-1938) joined in 1890. And no, this is not Bodding's story—just yet. This one begins with my parents, more than a century after Bodding.

My mother's hometown is Benagaria. My maternal grandfather, Paul Murmu—grew up in the mission era— and started to work as a compounder at the Benagaria Dispensary at age 18, essentially from 1939 to 1975. The concrete structure of the Ebenezer church in all its glory stood across from my maternal family's thatched house. The mission area stood and stands in sharp contrast to the village homesteads. The concrete constructed arena offsets the organic and natural village landscape in distinct ways. This contradiction was the reality my mother, Elveena Murmu grew up with.

My father, Timotheas Hembrom, is from Lakhpokhar village, Pakur District, Santal Parganas. In 1964, as a 25-year-old, he began to study theology at Benagaria Theological College. The son of the first Lutheran convert and pastor of his village, he was a hand-picked student sponsored by the Lutheran Church. After completing his Licentiate in Theology there and Bachelor of Divinity in Bangalore he returned as Lecturer to Benagaria in 1971-1972, under the Principal, Rev. Dr. Johannes Thoft Krogh, a Danish Missionary who worked in India from 1947-1978. In addition, he served as a hostel warden. One evening, my father took five students to attend a local wedding and led them in song and dance playing the traditional drums, the *tumduk* (a hand-struck double-headed drum) and the *tamak* (stick struck kettle drum). This, however, constituted the playing of what were considered 'forbidden instruments' and led to the expulsion of both the students and my father in 1972 by the then Moderator (Head of the church) and board. Their sponsorship was withdrawn and they became outsiders – practically exiled from the community. In protest of the harsh, unfair decision for a

seemingly illogical reason, the principal, Rev. Krogh resigned and took all six along with him to Kolkata and helped place them elsewhere.

My father was sent to Bangalore for further studies, before eventually joining the Church of North India and teaching Old Testament at Bishop's College, Kolkata from 1977 until his retirement in 2007. His illustrious career as a theologian was marred personally by a deep sadness, a result of being banished from his own people and not being able to work amongst them—all of this only because he dared to be himself, a Santal.

Breeding Ground of Paradoxes

The seat of the Santal mission, Benagaria, thus plays out a story of irony for my parents: Despite being rejected, they remained resolute in their faith in the 'new religion' and my father has been steadfast in his call to serve the Christian church and its ministry.

Yet, the great Bodding and the missionary legacy left to the Christian Santals became a battlefield of Christian dogma and the breeding ground of paradoxes. The missionary legacy is not just the physical church, the mission, its *human advancement* services, and a religious belief system but an edict—a code of conduct, which one never questioned. What could be the reason that the Santals' customary ways of worship through music were seen as a threat or disrespectful to how the Christian God must be venerated that they forbade it? Was it just that the association of the 'drums' in ritualistic pagan worship was offensive or were their natural, cultural expressions deemed uncultured or not fit for Christian worship?

When the Santal Moderator (the head of the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church) does not see the paradox of pronouncing expulsion for revelry during a communal social event or maintains an order that estranges indigenous Christians from their own traditional cultural identity makeup, there is a problem.

In newly converted Christian Santal families, mine included, Biblical stories soon took precedence over traditional tales. A chance reading of the mythical Santal Creation stories documented by Bodding created an unexpected stir in me. Growing up on Adam and Eve's creation narrative; this ambush of new information in the *Has (Gander)*, *Hasil (Goose)*, *Pilcu Haram (The tiny man—first Santal man who evolved from geese)* and *Pilcu Budhi (The tiny woman—first Santal woman who evolved from geese)* narrative made me feel hollow. I felt cheated of a huge part of my identity by not knowing these tales. How did the Biblical narrative become the single narrative of creation for us?

A deeper look at sources and documentation points to missionaries like Bodding, who undertook the ethnographical work. On the one hand there is his impressive, steady work of ethnographical documentation continued via the spiritual conquest that bequeathed to us only the Santali Bible and hymnbooks. This means that the missionaries who documented our traditional stories, language and culture were the very same ones who inadvertently influenced our parents' generation to prioritize a single account - the biblical creation stories - as the only narrative to be appropriate to share at home. Christianity alienated us from our traditional stories and the pure form of our culture.

Through actions like these we were being transformed—poured into new moulds – while, at the same time, being ethnographically studied and preserved as closely as possible to our original selves.

This preservation came in the form of a written tradition and was undertaken by those who had the advantage of knowing the technologies of writing, of being literate and understanding the significance of the act. Santals did not need to document their knowledge and knowledge systems, literature, scholarship or culture because we were living documents ourselves.

Knowledges – From the Intangible to the Tangible

Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism* says of knowledge: 'Knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently without comment, from one text to another. Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously; they are repeated without attribution; they have literally become *idées reçues* (*ideas received*); what matters is that they are *there* to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed uncritically.' (Said, 1978, 116).

But when he says it is *there*, that's what was negotiated with. The form that our knowledges existed was not congruent with the necessities for survival in those times and ironically even the present. Though Kolean Haram had dictated his tale to the missionary Skrefrud and finished the narration in February, 1871; *Horkoren Mare Hapramko reak' Katha* (*Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*) was not printed until 1886. Skrefrud had written that the old practice of verbatim teaching by *guru* to disciple had fallen into disuse (Hodne, 1982). Bodding, his predecessors and contemporaries' intervention was thus timely in ensuring posterity through text.

Bodding's family environment - owning a bookshop and a small printing press - laid the foundation and influenced his work in documenting Santal culture. The earliest recorded written literature of Santals was in translation - not from one script to another, but from oral discourse to the written form. Bodding's incredible studies and recordings in *Materials for a Santali Grammar* were created because we were a people with a well-developed and rich language. Bodding's *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* was possible because we were a people with a deep and intimate understanding and knowledge of healing, plant and forest life. This huge landscape of living cultures was a goldmine for ethnographers and ethnologists.

In the 44 years Bodding worked in India, he produced material that is humanly unmatched. He was without doubt an exceptional ethnographer and linguist as he improved the adaptation of the Roman script for the Santali language that he mastered. But Bodding's work was possible and made easier with the help of his Santal guides, teachers, collaborators and helpers like Sido, Sagram Murmu and other contributors. I am guessing they learned to read and write in Roman script Santali from the early Missionaries.

Bodding could easily have been a tape-recorder, typesetter and a printing press all rolled in one. But we were the memory, the bearers of the traditional tales and the storytellers of the Santal panorama we now see before us. What was impressive about his documentation production was that he was able to take what was organic and breathing and turn it into a form that was tangible, a form that can be a challenge, as it in many ways limiting. I believe that Bodding's contribution through the recording of a great ethnographic treasure is still a work in the process of being translated—from the narration to the written. Whether he emphasized the letter or the spirit, it is important to remember that every translation is itself an invention; one based on a creative transformation into another form—in this case, the written word. While it is true that in every translation something of the original is lost, it is equally true that in the best translations too something new is gained. This newness could be influenced by the translator's circumstances, worldviews, interpretations and understanding of cultural contexts and prejudices and Bodding and his collectors could have, and have in some cases conferred their individuality along with the texts.

Whose Stories and For Whom?

Bodding's *Santal Folk Tales*, the Santali (in Roman script) and English bi-lingual edition, in three volumes witness to his dynamic. Though he is attributed as the editor, and the contributors relegated to the footnotes there is additional material that could solely be

credited to him or endorsed by him. The introductory remarks for stories about women (1925, Vol. I, p. 221); prefatory remarks and the footnotes are complete with cultural meanings, interpretations and explanations, personal notes, and observations about the Santals. Many of these are unflattering, offensive, derogatory, and untrue.

A case in point in the way Santal marriage and relationships are expressed: Bodding believes that Santal marriage forms owe much to Aryan influence. The relationship between a man and his elder brother's wife is very intimate; there are few restrictions theoretically. It all depends on what the persons are. (1927, Vol. II, p. 10).

In Volume III (1929), it appears that a younger brother also has rights to sexual intercourse with the older brother's wife. E. M. Loeb reviewed these books for *American Anthropologist* between 1927 and 1930 and remarks that this constitutes yet another case of 'Indian fraternal polyandry.' On the other hand, an older brother had to treat the wife of a younger brother with the greatest possible reverence, to 'avoid' her. When have the Santals been fraternal polyandrous peoples? No sociologist or anthropologist of repute or disrepute has ever claimed that and no Santal will validate such a claim.

Bodding at best could also be called a compiler and if we look for some original works he produced, we may hit a blank spot. Some may consider his biography of Mrs. Sona Murmu (c. 1862–1918), a Santal woman who had been baptized as a young teenager, close to being his original work. *Sona: The Life and Deeds of a Christian Lady* is based on reminiscences that Bodding had encouraged her to write (Anderson, 2002). But here, too, the content had to be based on facts and he would be restricted in using his imagination completely in that creation. However, if we could compose a brand of Bodding thought called 'Boddingology' or 'Boddingism' it would derive from these introductory notes, footnotes and correspondence among informative, public material, which is laden with dichotomies. There is a certain detachment and apathy but also judgment in presenting these people he lived among. His yardstick for comparison seemed to be the Aryans and, more often than not, we Santals fell short of those standards.

In the preface for *Santal Folk Tales*, vol. I, Sten Kunow seems to be convinced that there are Aryan influences. He writes:

It is not difficult to detect traces of Aryan folklore in these stories, and sometime we can point to parallel tales in the in the well-known collections of Aryan India. It is probable that a not inconsiderable portion of Santal folklore has been derived from Aryan sources, and even from such as are available in printed books.... (p. VII).

In his translations and compilations, Bodding either invents, or falls into the trap of racial and cultural prejudices. We know of Santals' objection to his comparison of *Maran Buru Bonga* (*Santal principal spiritual being*) to the Biblical Satan; but there is hardly any furor or protest to his assertions of Santal people, their character and customs, that come through in the folktale series. Santals have either not read his works closely to dispute it or have not been able to, as this additional, supporting material is not rendered into Santali and this may be the main reason Santals have not engaged these materials. And therein lies another paradox. Who then were these stories for? The English translation of all non-Santali expressions in the stories is in European languages; which again confuses who the beneficiaries of this bi-lingual version were.

In volume I, the section *Stories about Jackals*, story 7. *Toyo reak' phorphundi*—(The Jackal's Craftiness) is a case in point. The translation of *Are dhan dibe na? Coro moro dibe*, in a crude form of Bangla is "Du da, wirst du nicht den Reis geben? Du mußt augenblicklich etwas geben." (p. 94–95). The English translation is suddenly interrupted by German sentences. And these translations of non-Santali terms, words, phrases, sentences are only in German and not English. To truly comprehend

and enjoy these translated stories one therefore needed to know both English and German.

In volume II, section *Humorous Tales*, Note 3 of story 42. *Arjun ar uniren bahu reak'*—Arjun and his wife, shows how a reference to a common Norwegian term to explain a Santal expression is used: ³Here and nearly everywhere in the following, the wife is referred to as *aimai*. The word may be used about women in general, but as a rule it conveys an idea of disparagement. The Norwegian 'kvindfolk' is used very much like the Santal word.' (Footnote on p. 124–125)

In volume III, section *Stories Concerning Jugis*, Story 70. *Mittan raj ar jugi rean*—The Story of a King and a Jugi; the 6 verses beginning with *Chagol muri muri jaye, go baba*; is *Die Ziegen sind gestorben, O Mutter, O Vater*;. The note for this entry is: ⁸The following verses are in Hindi' (See fn. p. 24–25).

Each volume has several such examples that clearly determine the demographics of the audience for who these were produced.

Co-Cultures: Is There Room for Everyone?

Thus, while Bodding documented our stories as an ethnographer, it appears he showcased a dispassion from the real worth or essence of them. The guardians, bearers and tellers of the stories became objects. The ones facilitating the production of the literature weren't the ones enjoying it. The people from whom this collection grows remain bereft of them. The most impressive and popular work in Roman Santali then again became the Bible, widely and freely circulated and available.

In that we became peoples of co-cultures: one that was domesticated by Christianity and one that could and needed to remain heathen. However, the fear with co-cultures is that it is a struggle of assertion waiting to happen. It wouldn't be wrong to point out that, this is happening now—from co-cultures, some are relegated to becoming sub-cultures. A battle of supremacy continues: Which Santal is pure, which became acculturated, and which diluted based on pre-dominantly religion as well as script and language?

However, through it all Bodding managed to preserve the singers' and storytellers' living experiences—who in their oration and singing re-create their community's idea of itself for posterity and thus make it a literary and historical product. That is no ordinary feat.

Mr. Bodding has been the first to record Santal folklore. He may be the last. In preparing the present volume [I], which is replete with footnotes giving important cultural explanation, he has presented an original document, which may later be expanded, but cannot well be superseded. (Loeb, 1927)

Loeb is probably right when he says Bodding's recording of Santal folklore cannot be superseded – well, it need not be. What is important is that it exists as well as his other material; even as transformed and coloured through prejudices and misunderstandings.

The Final Equation

Paradoxes are not meant to be solved, they are meant to question and bother our understanding, and they are effective at doing that. The paradoxes are still alive and we can find a kind of closure in the resurgence of texts, knowledge and narratives. This closure comes from a generosity of the spirit to honour ancestral knowledge systems that have kept us alive for millennia, and overcoming the feeling of misrepresentation and misplacement.

Memory is a tool. Furthermore, it is an important tool in our own path towards emancipation. We remember our stories, customs and techniques, lineages, grievances, humiliations, struggles and defeat to embrace who we are, and reconcile with who we have become, and cope with our lifeways. Boddington's texts, materials, artifacts need new presentations and commentaries that negotiate with them and produce accounts that create that kind of closure—that are liberating and relevant today.

Some efforts to re-interpret Boddington's texts for the present day were already made as early as 1970. S. K. Jain and C. R. Tarafdar in their *Medicinal plant-lore of the Santals (A reengagement with P. O. Boddington's own series on Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore published in 1925, 1927 and 1940)* have worked on the redundancy of his medicinal book (names and technical equivalence) and updated it for today's reading.

Yet, my question remains: Can our people use this material? Will our people make sense of it? What good is the material we helped produce or that emerged from us if we cannot use it ourselves. Reclaiming our stories and knowledge for the Santal living culture is far more urgent. Reclaiming them in a way we can engage with them, revise them, build on them, should be the ground to a new era for the Boddington manuscripts collection. In this way, a new breed of storytelling will emerge, disseminating our histories and cultures anew. It is astonishing to think that Boddington had collaborators back then and will continue to have them through our new engagements and presentations, if, when and how we choose to do so.

As a publisher, I cannot let new editions or reprints of his folklore, for example, be produced without the Santali translations of his introductory notes and a collation of the footnotes. The *Santal Folk Tales* series is in serious need of a new introduction. Sten Kunow makes very strong points of the Aryanisation of Santals and their language and how it has influenced their social and cultural traits. Boddington himself gives the impression of viewing the Aryan culture as a high culture. This Aryanisation and Sanskritization create doubt in Santals (Tribals/Adivasis) being the original inhabitants of India. Texts that subjugate or help others to find the pretext to continue subjugation have to be done away with.

Boddington's manuscripts and material of that era need to come alive with new meaning and reside in and with our living traditions and cultures. It would be magnificent if the physical structures and property of the mission era, a lot of which lie abandoned now and many now are barely standing would become cultural hubs of the revival of traditional knowledge, information, culture and narratives through Boddington's texts. For me as a publisher, the printing and binding presses at Bengaria are of great importance and need to be given due attention. The neglect and abandonment of these significant places that hold the history of the seeds of a Santali Literary tradition is tragic. These estates need to become entry points for rejuvenation of connections, conversations and legacy. Those places hold in them stories, too.

Let the manuscripts sleeping in enclosed boxes and shelves awake; let the lead letters of the press come alive too; let the edifices talk. This is a heritage walk we need to take together and cross together. Boddington's stories are mine too; they are stories of my identity after all. They serve as deep links to my ancestors and my land. In tangible inheritance lies individual and community memory. As I bid my parents farewell and make the long journey to Oslo²; with a *tumdak* and *tamak* in tow; it is only a bittersweet reminder that a generation of storytellers have given way to new ones.

Noter

1. Benagaria, in the Dumka district of Santal Parganas falls in the present day Jharkhand, India. It is the place chosen to be the base of the The Indian Home Mission to the Santals. The three founders (The Baptist Missionary Edward C. Johnson, the Danish Missionary Hans P. Børresen, and the Norwegian Missionary Lars O. Skreftsrud gathered a pile of stones, prayed and sang: 'Here I raise my Ebenezer, Hither by the help I'm come.' (Hodne, 1982).

2. A version of this paper was first presented at the The Bodding Symposium 2015: Belief, Scholarship and Cultural heritage: Paul Olav Bodding and the Making of a Scandinavian-Santal Legacy, held in Oslo, Norway on the 3-5 November, 2015.

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