



Voicing the Absent Other: Dialogism, Death, and Relational Subjectivity in Saora’s Dialogue with the Dead

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Date of Submission: 14-02-2026

Date of Acceptance: 27-02-2026

The *Saora* people, an Adivasi community in Odisha, engage in dialogues with the spirits of the deceased through ritual specialists, also known as Shamans. These conversations are not merely metaphorical but are believed to be fundamental interactions in which the dead speak, complain, advise, or demand certain rituals. The community views these exchanges as meaningful dialogues that help maintain the moral, social, and cosmological order.

Conventionally, dialogue is understood as a conversation between two people. However, for Bakhtin and the *Saoras*, dialogue serves as the bridge that allows two completely different worlds to intersect. It is not merely about exchanging information; it is about connecting the living with the ancestors.

For a *Saora* ritual to work, the ancestor must remain an ancestor (dead/spirit), and the living must remain living. If they were exactly the same, there would be no reason to talk. The power of the ritual is the fact that the dialogue doesn't erase the gap between life and death; it uses that gap to create a connection. Bakhtin calls this “simultaneity,” holding two opposite things together at the exact same time.

Even if an ancestor repeats a phrase the living person just said, the meaning changes because of who is saying it. When a living *Saora* asks for protection, and the ancestor replies with the same promise, the words carry the weight of the spirit world. The dialogue is a constant back-and-forth in which the difference between the two speakers actually builds the relationship. To apply this to *Saora* rituals, we must shift from viewing them as merely “religious ceremonies” to seeing them as fundamental acts of existence.

Bakhtin argues that dialogue isn't just something we *do* with words; it is the very fabric of how the universe functions. Here is a conceptualisation of the *Saora* and their ancestors:

Feature	Saussure (The Sign)	Bakhtin (The Dialogue)
Focus	Static rules and definitions.	Active movement and interaction.

1. The “Both/And” Reality

When looking at the *Saora* shaman talking to the dead, we shouldn't ask: “Is this just a linguistic performance (a metaphor)?” or “Is this a literal spiritual event?” Bakhtin would say it is both: the ritual uses Language (the actual words spoken) as well as Existence (the event of co-being). In the *Saora* view, the living and the dead are not two separate things trying to meet; they are already part of the same “web of interconnections.”

2. *Sobytie*: The Event of Co-Being

Bakhtin uses the term *sobytie*, which basically means that nothing exists in isolation. A *Saora* person is not truly an individual without their connection to their ancestors. Furthermore, an ancestor has no “voice” or presence in the world without the living. The ritual is the “event” in which these two states of being (life and death) participate in a “ceaseless exchange of meaning.”

3. Language as a tool

While the shaman uses songs, cries, and spoken words to reach the ancestors, Bakhtin reminds us that the dialogic relation is deeper than the words themselves. Even if the shaman is silent, or if the “dialogue” happens through a sacrifice or a physical gesture, it is still a dialogue. In my analysis, I am looking at the physical ritual objects or the shaman's trance as part of the “dialogue,” even when they aren't using “natural language.”

The *Saora* ritual is a perfect example of Bakhtin's “master principle” of existence. It proves that being human means being in a constant state of “co-being” with others even those who have passed away. The ritual doesn't just *talk about* the dead; it *enacts* the fact that the living and the dead are forever linked in a massive, interconnected web.



Feature	Saussure (The Sign)	Bakhtin (The Dialogue)
Unit	The Word (Sign).	The Utterance (Sentence).
<i>Saora</i> Context	Defining what an “ancestor” is.	Observing the <i>act</i> of talking to them.

The Bakhtinian philosophy manifested in the ritual of dialogue with the deceased:

Unfinalizability of the Soul:

The idea that the deceased’s personhood is not “finished” at death but continues through dialogue. In Bakhtinian thought, no word is ever ‘final’; it is always a response to what came before and an anticipation of what follows. This principle of unfinalizability finds a striking ethnographic parallel in the funeral and memorial rites of the *Saora* of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Rather than viewing death as the cessation of the communicative act, the *Saora* treat the deceased as active interlocutors capable of demand, grievance, and counsel. This study explores the *Saora* ritual of ‘dialogue with the dead’ through the lens of dialogism, examining how the shamanic performance functions as a site of social heteroglossia in which the boundaries between self and other, and between living and dead, are perpetually redrawn. The *Saora* believe the dead are still “becoming”; they are hungry, cold, and want bigger stones. They are not “finished” as Bakhtin would argue; “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (166).

Heteroglossia: This refers to the multiple “voices” (ancestors, spirits, family members) that coexist in the ritual space. The Shaman speaks for the family, the ancestor, and the village tradition all at once. This is ‘heteroglossia’; multiple social languages in one mouth. The word becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (Bakhtin 293). This is applied to describe the shaman (the *Kuran*). The shaman “populates” the ancestor’s voice with the family’s own subconscious fears and social pressures.

Addressivity: Every ritual utterance is addressed to someone. The “dead” as an audience changes the nature of the speech; as Bakhtin explained, “the word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (280).

Chronotope: The specific “time-space” created during the ritual where the past (ancestors) and present (living) intersect.

Dialogism: For Bakhtin, meaning is never fixed or produced by a single voice. Every utterance is shaped by, oriented toward, and responsive to other utterances; past, present, and anticipated. Voices exist in a network of relations, and meaning arises from this interplay. Dialogism opposes monologic, closed systems of meaning.

If we strategically place the *Saora* practice through a Bakhtinian lens, several possibilities culminate:

Polyphony of voices: The *Saora* ritual speech is not only the voice of the living and the dead, but also that of the ritual specialist, the ancestors’ collective authority, and the broader cultural tradition. This resonates with Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony: multiple voices that do not collapse into a single voice.

Chronotopes of the living and the dead: Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope (the interconnectedness of time and space in narrative) explores how these dialogues collapse temporal boundaries; past lives and present community co-exist in a single dialogic event.

Dialogism beyond the human: While Bakhtin focused on literature and human speech, applying dialogism here challenges the anthropocentric scope. The *Saora* practice shows dialogism extending to the dead and the spirit world. This suggests that dialogism isn’t only social but cosmological; meaning is produced across ontological boundaries.

Utterances that demand response: In Bakhtin’s theory, every utterance presupposes a response. Similarly, the words of the dead among the *Saora* compel the living to respond (ritually, socially, emotionally). The ritual maintains dialogic continuity between generations.

Bakhtin’s dialogism is a philosophical-literary concept rooted in European intellectual history, while *Saora* practices are grounded in indigenous cosmologies. *Saora* beliefs are not “mere metaphor” for academic theory. Instead, they mutually illuminate each other; *Saora* dialogues



reveal a radical dimension of dialogism that Bakhtin may not have imagined.

Yes, it is not only possible but also insightful to apply Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to the *Saora* people's practice of holding dialogues with the dead. The theoretical lens offers a rich framework for comprehending the profound social and psychological dimensions of this unique cultural practice.

The *Saora*, an indigenous community from southern Odisha, engage in a sophisticated form of communication with their deceased ancestors through the mediation of a shaman. This is not merely a one-way address to the departed but a dynamic, interactive process that shapes their social reality, individual identities, and understanding of the world. Bakhtin's dialogism, which posits that meaning is generated through the interplay of multiple voices and consciousnesses, provides a powerful tool to unpack the nuances of this tradition.

At the heart of Bakhtin's theory is the concept of the "utterance," which is always addressed to someone and anticipates a response. For the *Saora*, the words of the living and the dead are fundamentally interconnected in a continuous dialogue.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, the presence of a diversity of social voices, is vividly enacted in the *Saora* dialogues. The shaman does not speak with a single, monolithic voice of "the dead." Instead, individual ancestors, each with their distinct personalities, memories, and concerns, communicate through the shaman. This creates a polyphonic tapestry of voices, where the perspectives of various deceased family members coexist and interact with those of the living. The dialogue is not about receiving a singular divine truth but about navigating a complex web of relationships with multiple, individual ancestral voices. Bakhtin asserted, "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6) is in fact the chief characteristic of the *Saora* ritual, which is not a monologue from the divine, but a polyphonic debate where the dead have as much "validity" as the living.

Bakhtin argued that our sense of self is not monolithic but is constituted through our interactions with the words of others. The *Saora* dialogues with the dead powerfully illustrate this. The living individual's identity, actions, and even illnesses are often understood in relation to the pronouncements and desires of their ancestors. For instance, an ancestor might express displeasure through the shaman, leading to a change in the living person's behavior. This demonstrates that the *Saora* "self" is porous,

constantly being shaped and re-shaped by the ongoing conversation with the departed.

Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, the way time and space are represented in language, is also relevant. In the *Saora* dialogues, the past is not a sealed-off period but an active and present reality. Ancestors are not distant figures; they are immanent participants in the community's daily life. The ritual space of the dialogue becomes a unique chronotope in which the boundaries between the world of the living and the world of the dead become permeable, enabling direct interaction.

For the *Saora*, the dialogue with the dead is not a metaphor; it is a literal and consequential interaction. A Bakhtinian analysis respects this ontological reality and does not reduce the practice to a mere psychological or social mechanism. The voices of the dead are understood as real and agentive within the *Saora* cosmos.

The shaman acts as a crucial interlocutor and mediator in this dialogic process. They are not simply a passive conduit but an active participant who shapes the conversation, interprets the ancestors' words, and negotiates between the living and the dead. The shaman's own voice and consciousness are in dialogue with those of the spirits, adding another layer of complexity to the interaction.

It has several social and therapeutic functions as documented in Piers Vitebsky's seminal work, *Dialogues with the Dead*, these conversations serve vital social and therapeutic functions. They provide a space for the community to process grief, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and understand and address misfortune. A Bakhtinian reading highlights how this is achieved through the articulation and negotiation of different perspectives; a "carnival" of voices, in a sense, that allows for the airing of grievances and the restoration of social harmony.

The *Saora's* intricate wall paintings, known as *ikons* or *iditals*, can also be understood through a dialogic lens. These artworks are not static representations but are created as a form of communication with the spirits and ancestors. The act of painting is a response to a dream or a shaman's vision, and the images themselves are a form of utterance intended to appease and communicate with the other world. This theoretical pairing allows us to move beyond a simplistic understanding of ancestor worship and to appreciate the sophisticated, interactive, and socially embedded nature of this tradition. A Bakhtinian lens is valid because it helps to highlight the agency of all participants, including the individual ancestors. Further, it emphasizes the social and relational aspects of the practice. Moreover, it provides a framework for understanding how meaning is co-



constructed by the living and the dead. Consequently, it recognizes the practice as a dynamic and ongoing conversation rather than a static ritual.

By viewing the *Saora* dialogues with the dead through the prism of Bakhtin's dialogism, we gain a deeper appreciation for the intricate ways in which language, consciousness, and social life are interwoven in this fascinating cultural practice. It reveals a worldview in which the conversation never truly ends with death but continues to shape and enrich the lives of the living.

Saora's practice of communicating with the dead reveals it as a complex, multi-voiced negotiation of meaning, rather than a simple monologue from a spirit.

First, we must understand that the "utterance" in a Bakhtinian sense is not just a single sentence but the entire communicative event.

The entire *Saora* shamanic ritual, from the shaman's (*kudan*) initial calling of the spirit to the final resolution, is considered a single, whole utterance. It is a communicative act that responds to a prior event (an illness or misfortune) and anticipates a future response (healing or the restoration of balance).

Dialogism posits that meaning is created by the interaction of multiple distinct voices. In the *Saora* ritual, we can identify at least four key voices:

The Voice of the Living: This is the family or individual seeking help. Their voice expresses suffering, questions (Why is this happening?), and negotiation (What must we do?).

The Voice of the Shaman (*Kudan*): The shaman is not just a neutral channel. They have their own voice; they interpret, ask clarifying questions, and manage the flow of communication. They act as a bridge, speaking to both the spirit and the family.

The Voice of the Dead Spirit: This is the "other" voice from the underworld. Crucially, this voice is not dictatorial. It responds directly to the living, expressing its own needs, grievances (e.g., "You forgot to make an offering"), and desires. Its words only have meaning in response to the situation in the living world.

The Voice of the Community: The wider *Saora* community, whether present or not, serves as a "super-addressee." Their shared beliefs, traditions, and social norms provide the context that makes the dialogue intelligible and socially valid. The spirit's demands and the family's promises must make sense within this collective social language.

This is the core of the application. The voices are not isolated; they actively shape one another in a process of "heteroglossia" (the presence of multiple social languages).

Call and Response: The entire ritual is a dynamic of call and response. The family's problem is the initial "call." The spirit's appearance through the shaman is the "response."

Negotiation, Not Dictation: The spirit doesn't just issue a command. It might complain, "I am cold and lonely." The family, through the shaman, responds, "We will offer you a new cloth and food." The spirit might then agree. This is a negotiation. The final meaning, the "cure," is co-authored by both the living and the dead.

Shaman as a dialogic zone: The shaman's body and voice become a physical site where these different voices and worldviews (living and dead) meet, clash, and create a new understanding. The shaman might use different tones or speech patterns to represent distinct voices, thereby making the dialogic nature of the event explicit.

Creation of a "Dialogic Truth": The goal of the ritual is not to uncover a pre-existing, absolute truth. Instead, it is to create a new, shared truth through the dialogue itself.

The "Truth" of the Illness: The cause of the illness is established through the conversation. The "truth" becomes: "The child is sick because the ancestor is displeased." This truth did not exist as a fact before the ritual; it was created by the interaction.

The Resolution: The solution (e.g., the promise of a sacrifice) is a contract, a new meaning that re-establishes a balanced relationship between the living and the dead. Health is restored not by physical medicine but by restoring social and spiritual harmony through dialogue.

In essence, Bakhtin's lens allows us to see this *Saora* practice not as a superstition, but as a sophisticated social and therapeutic mechanism. It is a dialogue in which the community actively negotiates its relationship with its ancestors, creating meaning and resolving crises through the interaction of multiple living voices.

A *Saora* family in the *Lanja* hills has gathered for a *Guar* (secondary burial) ritual. A young woman, the household's daughter-in-law, has fallen into a state of "silent madness" (lethargy and muteness). The *Kuran* (shaman) has called upon the spirit of the father-in-law, a man known for his fierce pride and obsession with his prestige in the village.

Ancestor (The Father-in-Law): [Speaking through the shaman, voice raspy and rhythmic] Why is my stone so small? Look at the *Guar* stone you planted for me! It is a pebble, a child's toy. My name was known from here to the plains, yet you tuck me into the earth like a secret you are ashamed of.

Husband (The Son): [Trembling, hands pressed together] Father, we spent weeks searching the hills!



We hauled that stone with ten men. It is solid granite, the best we could find. We have honoured you.
Ancestor: [Spitting on the ground] Granite? It is grit. You were always lazy, always looking at the shade of the mahua tree instead of the weight of the task. And look at this girl [the daughter-in-law]. She moves through the house like a ghost. Why should she have the breath to grind grain when I have no breath to speak my glory in the Underworld?

Wife (The Mother): [Interjecting sharply] Husband, stop this! You were greedy in life, and you are a glutton in death. We have killed the buffalo; the blood has soaked your stone. We have fed the village until the granary is bare. Do you want your own grandchildren to eat dust?

Ancestor: [Laughing hollowly] I want what is mine! The Underworld is a place of shadows and thin soup. In the village of the dead, a man's status is only as tall as the stone his son plants. This girl... she has the "heat" I lack. I have tied her tongue with my cold fingers. Every time she tries to speak, she tastes my thirst.

Husband: Father, please! If she dies, who will brew the palm wine for your yearly feast? Who will keep the hearth that warms your memory? We will find a taller stone, a monolith that overtakes the others, if you only untie her spirit (*puradan*).

Ancestor: [Pause, sounding contemplative] A monolith? Taller than the headmen? And I want a pot of the first-press liquor poured into the earth every moon. My throat is a dry riverbed.

Wife: We will do it. Even if we must borrow from the money-lenders. Just leave the girl. She is young; she is not for the earth yet.

Ancestor: [Sighing, the sound of wind through dry leaves] Fine. I see the buffalo's shadow approaching. I will let go of her tongue... but remember, the earth hears your promises. I am going back to the dark. [The shaman collapses, then gasps as the spirit departs].

In the context of *Saora's* "dialogue with the dead," Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism provides a rich framework for understanding the interplay between the living, the dead, and the social fabric.

Polyphony and the "Unfinalizability" of the Self
Bakhtin argues that the self is never "final." In this *Saora* dialogue, death does not conclude the Father-in-law's personality; it extends it. The ancestor is not a static icon but a polyphonic voice that continues to bargain, insult, and demand. His identity is "unfinalized" because it remains in a constant state of negotiation with the living. The "I" of the ancestor exists only in relation to the "Thou" of the family.

The Carnavalesque and Social Inversion

The dialogue functions as a carnivalesque space. In everyday *Saora* life, an elder's greed might be whispered about, but here, the grandmother (or Wife) can openly berate the ancestor ("You were greedy in life... you make the living starve"). This is a ritualized suspension of normal social hierarchy. The "Underworld" serves as a parodic mirror of the "Upperworld," where the same anxieties about status and hunger persist, enabling a bluntness that would be taboo in standard discourse.

Heteroglossia:

The Shaman as the locus of discourse, the *Kuran* (shaman) acts as the site of heteroglossia; the coexistence of multiple languages or social dialects. The ancestor's language is authoritative, demanding, archaic, and focused on prestige. The living's language is pleading, economic, and grounded in the material struggle of survival. The dialogue is not a monologue delivered by a spirit; it is a double-voiced discourse. Every word the ancestor speaks is internally persuasive because it reflects the family's own guilt and social pressures regarding the *Guar* ritual.

Bakhtin's concept of addressivity posits that every utterance is addressed to someone and anticipates a response; it is the engine of this ritual. The ancestor's 'coldness' is an utterance that demands the 'warmth' of a sacrifice. The daughter-in-law's sickness is not a biological fact in this dialogic framework; it is a communicative act. Her silence is a 'word' spoken by the ancestor, and the buffalo sacrifice is the 'answer' provided by the son.

The ancestor leaves a way out. Bakhtin describes the way out as the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words. The ancestor says, "I will cease when the buffalo is slaughtered." This keeps the dialogue open. If the boy or woman doesn't get better, the dialogue hasn't failed; the 'negotiation' simply enters a new phase.

Saora's dialogue with the dead reveals that subjectivity is not autonomous but constituted through ongoing relational exchange across the life-death divide. In ritual speech, possession, and mural inscription, the "absent" other becomes an active interlocutor whose voice shapes moral and social order. Dialogism here is not merely linguistic but ontological: being itself emerges through address and response. Death does not terminate personhood but redistributes agency within a transgenerational network of kin and spirits. The self thus appears as a node in a polyphonic field rather than a bounded individual consciousness. By foregrounding relational subjectivity, *Saora* cosmology unsettles



Western individualism and redefines alterity as constitutive rather than external.

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