

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture9

Lecture 09: Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives of Tribes in India

Thank you. Good evening everyone. I welcome you to this online NPTEL course Tribal Studies in India Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today we are going to have our lecture number 9 titled Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives of Tribes in India. So, by now you must have clearly understood the idea, concept and meanings of tribes and some of the categories that are popularly used to identify tribal communities in India, such as Indigenous, Adivasi, and Janjati.

Also, you must have already studied and learned about the basic ideas concerning tribal society, the social life of the community, the economic organization of the society, and the political institutions, whether they are traditional, customary, or modern institutions, which are relevant in the context of tribal society. Now, today my lecture will focus primarily on the approaches which are widely used in the context of the study of tribes. And this will take us through the colonial period up to the post-independent India. so, the approaches that we are going to discuss in this class may not be the only approaches that are available in terms of studying tribal communities, but these are some of the broad approaches that have been used and that are quite popular when the study of tribal communities has gained traction particularly from the colonial period. One of the most important discipline which have contributed to the study of tribe is Anthropology.

Or in other words, we cannot talk about the study of tribal societies, its methods and approaches without talking about Anthropology. Now, for instance, anthropology as a discipline is primarily conceived as the study of the "other" communities. Whereas disciplines like sociology, we all know that it is primarily

concerned with the study of the modern industrial society. Now, the anthropologists as well are also individuals who have devoted themselves to the study of communities not of their own. Primarily, when the discipline of anthropology developed during the high period of colonialism, we have seen that many anthropologists, whether they are administrators or trained anthropologists, have gone to faraway places to study what they call "primitive societies".

So, in that sense, the discipline of anthropology is a very, very important starting point when it comes to the study of tribal communities. So, in that way, anthropology as a field of study was involved in the shaping and defining of identities such as which group is civilized or savage, presenting a binary view of the world through us and them. Anthropology made generalizations about groups of people by dedicating themselves to the study of the "other", and the "other" are primarily small communities, small population, closely knit communities. They are primitive and they live in remote areas. Now, in this sense, all these criteria, which are being used, are primarily very relevant to the tribal communities in a sense that tribal communities have significantly lower population.

They are very closely knit where their social life revolves around kinship. They're primitive in the sense that they are non-modern, illiterate, and live in geographically isolated places. So colonial anthropology is very, very important. It plays a very pivotal role in shaping the discourse of tribal studies till today. So, colonial anthropology influenced the societies under study, including their norms and practices, which in turn continue to influence these societies.

Now, while there are a lot of problems associated with the kind of monographs and anthropological writings that are being produced in the study of tribal communities, there is no doubt that the anthropological writings or anthropologies have very much influenced the way in which tribal communities themselves understood their societies, or how tribal communities perceived and understood themselves. According to Malinowski, who is also one of the most popular anthropologists, the social scientific study of colonial society, which included theories and fieldwork methods, was primarily meant to serve as instruments of governmental planning. Now, there is a strong relationship between colonialism and anthropology. In many ways, many anthropologists, particularly from the West, were able to travel to faraway lands, to distant lands, to remote areas, and particularly dedicating themselves to the study of communities and societies

whom they refer to as savage primitives. This was primarily enabled by colonialism.

If it was not for the colonial power, if it was not for the colonial state, many anthropologists would not have been in a position to study these communities. One of the intended or unintended outcomes or consequences of this is that much of the anthropological knowledge produced about the other societies, the other societies also being the colonized societies, is that it becomes very useful for the colonial state itself in terms of governing colonized populations. So therefore, there is a strong relationship between the emergence of anthropology as a discipline and colonialism. Now, coming to more specifically in the context of India, the sociological and anthropological study of tribes in India began during the colonial period, driven by colonial rulers' need to acquire knowledge of the country. Now, we know that in the last few lectures, I have been talking about very important works by scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, who refers to the colonial state as an ethnographic state.

Primarily because one of the important tasks of the colonial state was to collect information about the colonized population. And this information in turn helped the colonial state to govern the colonized populations. And it also served as a way to justify colonial rule itself. So knowledge about the colonized societies is very very important, very fundamental in trying to legitimize and justify colonial rule and also continue domination and control of colonized societies. Now, when it comes to tribes, the discipline of Anthropology and its role in terms of the study of tribes remains significant to understanding how tribes came to be known, studied and written.

Now, name any tribal community in India, whether it is from the North East or whether it is from Central India, South India, whether it is from North India, Eastern or Western part of India, there are very few tribal communities, you know, who are not studied by the anthropologists. Now, in that sense, the contribution of anthropology as a discipline is very important. It is very fundamental when it comes to the study of tribes. Therefore, you know, one has to always go back to the discipline of anthropology to really understand the nature in which tribal communities are written about, the nature in which tribal communities are being studied, and the kind of methods that were being used by anthropologists themselves to study tribal communities. Now, I just want to

highlight one point, which is that when the Britishers, when the colonial state—not only the Britishers, but the Western anthropologists—came to study the 'other' societies, the colonial societies, what they also had in mind was that when they produced write-ups or wrote anthropological writings about the communities they studied, they also had this in the back of their mind: they were writing for an audience located in the West.

So, it sometimes created a very exotic idea and very problematic representations about the other societies. Now, in the case of India also, to a very large extent, even, you know, in the context of tribal communities, the study by Indian anthropologists themselves or anthropologists who have lived significantly with tribal communities themselves in many ways reinforces this othering of tribal communities. So, during the colonial period, various colonial agents under the colonial state took great interest in the study of tribes. They can be administrators, missionaries, anthropologists or Indian scholars who have written extensively on tribes. Now, if you look back at the kind of literature that is available on tribal communities, you will see that different agents or different individuals, whether they are administrative missionaries or anthropologists, contributed significantly to the study of tribes, and rarely are there any tribal communities or any tribal individuals who themselves may have written about, themselves in the 1930s or in the 1940s.

So, colonial adivasi or tribal anthropology in India came to be grouped under four categories. We can broadly categorize the methods and approaches into four broad categories. One is official anthropology, second is missionary anthropology, third is romantic anthropology, and fourth is nationalist anthropology. So, this categorization is taken from the work of the historian Bangya Bhukya. Now, to start with the official anthropological view.

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- Various agents under the colonial state took great interest in the study of tribes, from administrators and missionaries to anthropologists and Indian scholars who have written extensively on tribes
- Colonial Adivasi/Tribal Anthropology in India can be grouped into four categories: official anthropology, missionary anthropology, romantic anthropology, and nationalist anthropology (Bhukya, 2008).



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In the 19th century, particularly in the early part of the 19th century, the East India Company, when it began to rule India and expand its empire, barely had any interest in the tribal war. They were not really interested because all of us know that the East India Company came with a commercial interest in mind. So, knowing about the country, knowing about the societies in a more deeper way was not their priority. Their priority was to rule. Their priority was to loot.

Now, however, the gradual intrusion of the company into the interior regions naturally drew the British attention to the tribal question as a law and order problem. Now, over a period of time, when the colonial state began to enter itself in India, what they came into close encounter with is the tribals. And subsequently, what happened is that the British, in particular, had to deal with a different kind of resistance launched by the tribal communities, which they reduced to a law and order problem. Over a period of time, the notion of tribal was further refined with an increasing emphasis on racial differences. Now, anthropology as a discipline, like I said, was dedicated to the study of the 'other,' and they have significantly produced the idea of who is the 'other'. In the context of India tribes is one of the most profound anthropological subject of study.

Racial differences were very important in the making of the tribal subject. This naturally grew with the influence of the new disciplines of ethnology in Europe, which was concerned with the study of dark skin savages. Therefore, the official anthropological or racial theory perspective was concerned with racial classification based on physical traits. So, basically, classification of people or communities on the basis of physical traits, on the basis of their skin colour, on the basis of their hair, for instance. Now, one of the pioneers, a very important

figure, was, you know, H.S. Risley, who carried out the task of conducting the first census in India.

Now, the first census or census in general, we have also discussed this in the initial part of our lecture series that the census was very important in officializing distinctions of populations on the basis of caste, religion, as well as tribe. So, it was only with the census that these categories began to be used at the official level, and over a period of time, they occupied a very important place in the life of the people as well. So, Risley defined tribes as groups of families with a common name, lineage, language, territory, no fixed occupation and not necessarily endogamous. According to Risley, body measurements provided the measuring criteria for the classification of human species, and they were further divided into several racial categories. Now, in trying to apply these racial theories to the study of caste, for instance, Risley notes that, in order of the average nasal index, so that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top and those with the coarsest at the bottom of the list, it will be found that this order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence.

Now, we know that, you know, caste in India society is a form of stratification. Now, when Risley imports this idea of racial theory to the study of caste, he used racial classification based on physical traits to determine, and then he specifically made this remark that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top, whereas those with the coarser are at the bottom of the list, which to him corresponds with the accepted order of social hierarchy which was prevalent in Indian society. Now, based on the physical features, what about tribal communities? They were branded as habitual, and many tribal communities ended up being classified as criminal tribes, which is also a category we have discussed in the initial part of the lecture series. Similar kinds of studies were even performed by other Indian anthropologists such as Siraj Hassan and LK Iyer in the princely states of Hyderabad and Mysore, where the transporting primitive communities were called Banjara.

Such studies of colonial anthropology produced new forms of understanding of the tribal communities in India, and these have led to several regulations that were framed for the administration of tribal areas. And they argued that tribals cannot be assimilated into mainstream Indian society and normal laws cannot be applied to tribal areas. So even among anthropologists, whether they are of

Indian origin or from the West or the British in particular, there was this clear sense of difference between tribes and the larger Indian society. So this is the politics of difference, which has gone a long way in terms of, you know, tribalism. In terms of administering the tribal population, there are several areas and regions which were specifically declared as scheduled areas.

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- Based on their physical features, certain tribal communities were even branded as habitual.
- Similar kinds of studies were even performed by other Indian Anthropologists, such as Syed Siraj ul Hassan and L K A Iyer, in the princely states of Hyderabad and Mysore, respectively, where the transporting primitive communities were called 'Banjara'. Such studies of colonial anthropology produced new forms of understanding of the tribal communities in India.
- This led to several regulations that were framed for the administration of 'tribal areas' that argued that 'tribals' cannot be assimilated into mainstream Indian society and normal laws cannot be applied to 'tribal areas'.





And in these scheduled areas, which are now several parts of the northeast and then several parts in central India, normal laws are not applicable on the one hand. And on the other hand, what we have is that there is no scope for political representations. This led to the notion of backward areas in the Government of India Act of 1919, which contributed to the policy of segregating different tribal communities and separate administrative measures for tribal reasons. Now, a very important part is that the Government of India Act 1918 later on culminated in the Government of India Act 1935, which declared several tribal areas as backward tracts and which is sometimes popularly known as the partially excluded and excluded areas. Now, the idea of backward areas or the idea of tribes as backward began to be strongly reinforced through its legalization.

Now even till today when someone use the term or category tribe it is used in a very very negative way. This is despite the fact that the communities who are being identified as tribes have internalized and embraced the identity. But then the idea that tribe is almost synonymous with the idea of backwards is something which is still very strong. The second approach is the missionary anthropological approach. Now, the missionaries during colonial India described the Adivasi tribals as primitive and needed to be saved and civilized by converting to Christianity.

Now, there is this what is sometimes popularly referred to as the white man's burden, is that even according to the white man's burden, even colonialism is justified to the extent that colonialism actually benefited the colonized population because it gives them some sense of order. It gives them some kind of opportunities for trade, for development, so on and so forth. And it is actually the superiority of the white races that was used to justify colonial rule. Now, in some sense, in the context of tribal communities as well, it was viewed that their conversion to Christianity was a way to save them because most of the tribal communities in India practice what we call animism.

Now, the missionary view of identifying tribes was similar to the anthropometric understanding of colonial ethnographers. This encouraged missionaries to take their conversion agenda to tribal societies and they turned out to be quite successful in many areas, North East India in particular. Now in North East India, if you look at it, the history of colonialism is also very much intricately connected to the history of conversion in the sense that many tribal communities today have embraced Christianity, particularly during the colonial period. So the missionary view largely resonated with the official anthropological view as it was pushed for the liberation of criminal tribes and propagated the modernizing agenda of the colonial state. Now accepting Christianity was also viewed as being part of the larger world religion and for the people who were involved or engaged in the conversion process.

So it also signifies a kind of modernizing the tribal communities by the introduction of modern schools, the introduction of modern healthcare, the introduction of roads, improved connectivity, and so on and so forth. The third view is the romantic anthropological view. This romantic view is also widely popular particularly during the colonial period and this view has developed from the 18th century oriental western romanticism which was shared by certain colonial officials, historians, sociologists and anthropologists. These officials and anthropologists equated the egalitarian values of tribal societies with Rousseau's state of nature and depicted them as noble, honest, loyal, and independent. So when the British or any other travellers or even anthropologists were writing about tribal society, there was this sense of deep appreciation that tribal societies are egalitarian societies.

Now, this perception was established by the romantic anthropological view. So, this romantic anthropological view also establishes the idea that tribes live in close harmony with nature. So they are honest, they are loyal, they are independent. And this was the colonial celebration of tribal primitivism, which basically was a representative of domination over subordinate tribal adivasis. Now, many anthropologists have reinforced and perpetuated this view by arguing that tribes are actually protectors of forests, tribes worship natural resources, whether it is forest, whether it is land, whether it is water, and they have a symbiotic relationship with nature.

So this kind of romantic anthropological view was very popular during the colonial period. Now, in the context of tribes and their relationship with nature, there is a constant tension in identifying tribes as protectors of forests. But at the same time, there is also this tension in conceiving or understanding tribes as destroyers of forests. In many senses, tribal communities, all of us know that, you know, many of them, you know, live in areas, you know, which are predominantly not only remote but also quite forested. Now, historian Aziz Kari argues that there is this celebration of the wild, the tribal communities as the wild people.

And the forest is to be understood as an interaction of the civilized with the wildness, that is, tribes as jangli or jangli jati, the wild caste or the forest caste as opposed to civilization. So, the understanding of the tribe, even in the romantic anthropological discourse, is that tribals are opposed to civilization because they are people who live in close relationship with nature, particularly forests. So, therefore, it is more of an interaction, you know, between the civilized and the wild people or tribes, as, you know, jangli or jangal jati. The association of forests with wildness was so strong that colonial officials recommended that forests be cleared, that these communities be removed from forests as a way of civilizing them, or that they be introduced to the humanizing tendencies of settled agriculture. Now, you will see that many tribal communities in almost every part of India mostly practice shifting cultivation.

Now, shifting cultivation is considered to be something that is environmentally destructive and not sustainable. Now, this idea of tribe as wild people or this association of forest, living in a forest with wildness was so strong that many colonial officials actually recommended that tribes be removed or taken out of the forests. So that in turn this will lead them to a process of civilizing. So, there is

this very messianic tone that was inherent in the understanding or in the association of tribes and forests. So, what we see is that, as a consequence in many parts of India, there has been constant removal of tribes in the sense that there has been constant displacement of tribes from the forest, which in turn has resulted in immense pauperization, immense, you know, dislocation in the lives of tribal communities.

With entry of professional anthropologists during the 20th century, the romantic understanding entered a new phase. These anthropologists presumed that tribals were uncivilized, innocent, and honest, and were taken advantage of by outsiders. Now, anthropologists such as Christopher Führer-Heimendorff and Verrier Elwin propagated such a view of tribal societies and asserted them to be exclusive and isolated. Any intervention would cause the destruction of their simple and naturalistic lifestyle. They suggested, particularly Verrier Elwin, the noted anthropologist, who have written extensively about several tribal communities, both in Central India and in North East India.

Some of his works, such as the philosophy of Nefa or the Baigas, you know, are considered to be anthropological classic. One has to read and study to understand the work of Elwin on the tribal communities. So they view tribes in harmony with nature, and the more they are brought into, you know, closer interaction with mainstream societies, then that will result in the destruction of their lifestyle because tribes are naturally simple, they are loyal, they are honest people, and they have been exploited or taken advantage of by outsiders. Now, Elwin goes to the extent that we should leave tribes alone. We should leave tribes as they are.

And an attempt to bring them into closer interaction with non-tribals will eventually lead to the destruction of the entire society. However, on the contrary, what happened is that this kind of view contributed to stigmatizing Adivasis or tribals as extremely primitive, such as human sacrificers and murderers. Now, what happened in the late colonial period, particularly from the 1930s, the 1940s, and up to the 1950s? The late colonial period had anthropologists and ethnographers divided into two groups, the isolationists and the assimilationists. So, the isolationists, predominantly coming from the Elwin kind of position, thought that tribals should be kept as they were, while assimilation, particularly

coming from the nationalists or Indian anthropologists or Indian sociologists, who wanted to bring tribals or integrate them into the national mainstream.

So, the first group had environmentalist and romantic views of tribes that led to ecological romanticism of Adivasis. The second group was more keen to bring the tribals to the mainstream and had a more unifying, nationalistic approach towards looking at tribal communities. One part was the isolationists who wanted to keep the tribe as they are, leave them alone. The other part, which was more of the assimilationists, wanted to bring the tribal into closer interaction with the larger Indian society. Now, they don't see any kind of fundamental difference between tribal and any other communities in India.

So, for them, it is natural that tribes should be brought closer to the mainstream society and be integrated into the larger Indian collective life. Now, therefore, this view was primarily upheld by the nationalist anthropological views or nationalist anthropologists. Since the 1920s, Indian anthropologists decided to adopt a nationalist agenda in studying tribes and tribal communities. This involves sociologists such as G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, and others who propose a mainstream nationalistic view of looking at tribal communities in India. So, the contribution of Ghurye or Ghurye's idea was particularly important when it comes to the tribal question in India, in a sense that he argues that tribals were backward hindus and that the primitive tribals had been gradually civilized by the hindus.

So, he does not see tribals as any different. So, they are already part of the larger national society or national mainstream and he referred to them as backward Hindus. M.N. Srinivas opined that through the process of what he calls Sanskritization, low Hindu caste or tribal groups change their customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of the twice-born caste. Ghurye and Srinivas' view of tribes or tribal culture was dominated by nationalist ideology in the sense that they want to unify communities together, they want to bring people together. So from a very nationalist point of view, many nationalists were also against the provisions of autonomy that would keep the tribals away from the mainstream society, such as the fifth schedule and the sixth schedule as well.

So, this kind of view goes a long way in terms of determining the attitude and policies of the government of India as well in relation to the tribes. The difference

between the nationalist anthropological view and the colonial anthropological view is that the latter tended to deny any specific ideological integrity to the tribal adivasis. Basically, most of the time, what we see is that it is the perspective of the known tribals when one talks about the nationalist anthropology, the missionary view or whether it is the official anthropological view. So, over a period of time, there has been continual silencing of the tribal voice themselves. So, what happened in the post-independence period?

Did anything change when it comes to tribal studies in India? Now, the post-independence period also saw the continuation on the debate on assimilation and isolation. However, a third component was added to this debate, which was the idea of integration. Jawaharlal Nehru played a very important role when it comes to the idea of integration, which was trying to find, you know, trying to bridge these two very extreme positions. One is the assimilation and the other is the isolation.

Nehru critiqued both these views and proposed the principles of panchashila, five principles of tribal development that involved no imposition or compulsions of external forces; tribal rights to land and forests, arts, and social institutions were to be respected. Tribals were to be trained in modern administration, the influx of outsiders to be kept minimum, and lastly, to evolve a high quality of human character. Now, of course, Elwin also significantly influenced Nehru's view about tribes. There is no doubt about it. And this Panchsheel principle was also, in many ways, influenced by Elwin himself.

Anthropology in the Post-Independence Period

- The post-independence period also saw the continuation of the debate on assimilation vs isolation. However, a third component was added to this debate, which was the idea of 'integration'.
- Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the chief proponents of this idea of integration. Nehru critiqued both these views and proposed the principles of 'Panchsheel' (Five Principles of Tribal Development) that involved—no imposition or compulsions of external forces, tribal rights to land and forests, arts, social institutions to be respected, tribals were to be trained in modern administration, the influx of outsiders to be kept minimum and, lastly, to evolve a high 'quality of human character'.



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But then, to a large extent, Nehru was also trying to bridge the gap between these two very, very extreme forces and trying to find a middle part where the

rights and identity of tribes are being respected. But at the same time, an opportunity or a possibility is given that they can develop in their own way without really compromising the tribal way of life. So, although Nehru recognized the idea of autonomous identity of tribes, parallel ideas of assimilation of Adivasis continued even during the 1950s. These further led to the emergence of new identities with claims of indigeneity and rootedness, such as Vanavasis, that is, forest dwellers, and Girivasis, that is, field dwellers. These identity categories were created in such a way that they would easily serve the purpose of getting assimilated into the larger mainstream society.

Now, if you look at the kind of scholarly literature that has come out, you will see that most of the time, even for books, a title will carry something like 'mainstreaming the tribes' or 'tribes in the mainstream.' So, even in our scholarly writing, even in our scholarly work, you will see that many of us have unconsciously or consciously internalized this idea that tribes are different from the mainstream society. Tribal society is different, and the mainstream society is different. Whereas many times we define who and what a tribal society is, but then many times it is very unclear what exactly we are referring to when we are talking about the mainstream society. But what we see is that over a period of time, there has been constant interaction or closer interaction between tribes and unknown tribes as well, where tribes are being gradually integrated or assimilated into the larger national society.

Thus, Nehru's idea largely remained restricted to paper and far from reality, and the post-independence scheme of tribal development was also a derivative discourse on the colonial legacy. Now, in many ways, there is a lot of promise and possibilities in the constitution of India when it comes to tribal communities. But unfortunately, many of these things are also restricted to paper alone. And in terms of its implementation and attempt to realize the rights of the tribal communities when it comes to their identity, when it comes to their culture, when it comes to the questions of autonomy, we have seen that these provisions are either not being fully implemented or these provisions are not being respected or their rights are not being respected. Now, in that sense, what happened is that over a period of time, we have seen not only a continual assimilation of tribal communities, but also a continual violation of the rights of the tribal communities.

Now, to conclude, the socio-anthropological perspective of understanding tribes and tribal societies have evolved over time. Now, from the four approaches that we talk about, it is very clear that there is no single way to understand tribes. Over a period of time, different approaches, different methods have been used to the study of tribes. Colonial anthropology perceived tribes as isolated, homogeneous social groups, which further led to the stigmatization of tribal communities as primitive, uncivilized, barbaric, violent, and so on. Now, the idea that tribes are small, close-knit communities, isolated, living in remote regions, is something which is very strong.

And this idea or this perception has gone a long way in perpetuating a very stigmatized sense of tribal identity as primitive, barbaric, uncivilized, so on and so forth. Now, even today, many times the term 'tribe' continues to evoke this kind of negative stereotype about the communities. Post-colonial anthropology did evolve from its colonial counterpart. However, it failed to escape the framework of knowledge about tribes created by colonial ethnography. So this happened primarily because many times, many anthropologists, even the anthropologists in India themselves, reinforced the idea of tribe as the other.

Many times the tribal communities are understood from the perspective of the non-tribals. So, in a way, it marginalizes how the tribals understood themselves and how they wanted to be understood. So, therefore, there is a need to decolonize the colonial mentality to provide an ideological integrity to the tribes in India. So, of course, tribal studies in India is also, you know, something which is ongoing. Now, what is essentially needed is to really look at tribal societies from their own views, from their own worldviews, in a sense that it is important to know how to privilege the worldview of tribal communities in trying to understand them.

Now, in this lecture, what we tried to do was look at the contribution of anthropology and the contribution of sociologists in the study of tribes. We have talked about four distinct approaches that were widely popular and used. And in many ways, these approaches are not fully redundant in the sense that if anyone wants to study tribal communities in India, they have to go back to these important anthropological approaches and methods that were being used. So, the study of tribes is incomplete without these approaches. So overall, what we also see is that the study of tribes has evolved over time in terms of the methods,

in terms of the approaches, in terms of the kind of frameworks that have been used.

And today, we live in a time when we are talking about decolonization and decolonial knowledge. So, it is also very important to really look at how to actually decolonize the study of tribes and how to bring the tribal voice at the center when it comes to the study of tribes. Thank you so much.