

THE MUNDA MARITIME DISPERSAL: WHEN, WHERE AND WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

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ABSTRACT

The Munda languages are the most far-flung and geographically fragmented branch of Austroasiatic, spoke in a broad zone of Central and Northeast India. It is usually thought that they must have spread by land, given the presence of Khasian in Northeast India, although it is hard to see exactly what would have driven this dispersal. Paul Sidwell (pers. comm.) has made a proposal which goes some way to resolving this problem, namely that the Munda, far from diffusing across the land, made a sea voyage across the Bay of Bengal. This would certainly resolve the issue of the geography of Munda but begs many questions about the when, where, why of such a migration. This working paper attempts to provide some preliminary answers, exploring the linguistic evidence for agriculture, the archaeology context and a note on material culture. It proposes that the Munda must have travelled in Austronesian shipping in the period 3500 ~ 4000 BP, leaving from the south of Myanmar of the Isthmus of Kra.

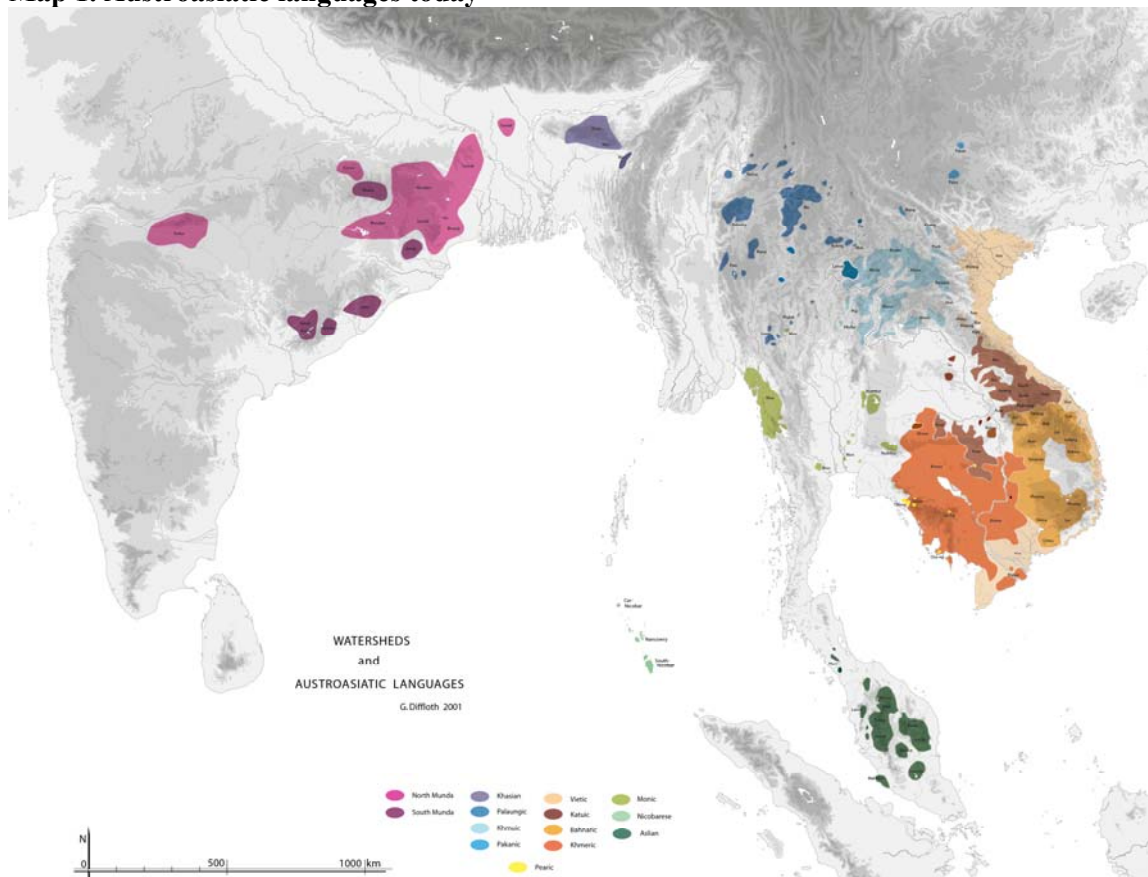
Keywords: Austroasiatic; Munda; dispersal

1. Introduction

The Austroasiatic languages are geographically fragmented, despite being a relatively coherent phylum (Map 1). It has been argued in recent times that this dispersal is to be identified with the SE Asian Neolithic, which would place its primary diversification at around 4000 BP (Sidwell & Blench 2011). The Munda languages have always constituted something of a problem, since they are scattered across a broad zone of Central and Northeast India. This geographical separation originally led researchers to believe the phylum was divided into two groupings, Munda and the remainder, named Môn Khmer after their two most prominent groups. This is not now generally accepted and Munda is one among the fourteen or so branches now recognised.

However, the geography of the branches of Austroasiatic presents a problem. If the Munda languages spread westward from a homeland in SE Asia, why do they show no specific resemblances to the nearest branches, for example Khasian and Palaungic? What drove their dispersal and fragmentation, such that they reached Central India? Paul Sidwell (pers. comm.) has made a proposal which goes some way to resolving this problem, namely that the Munda, far from diffusing across the land, migrated by sea across the Bay of Bengal, ending up somewhere near modern Bhubhaneswar in Odisha, and expanding outwards from there. Given that the Nicobarese also reached their current homeland by sea, there is nothing inherently implausible about this, although the journey of the Munda would be considerably further.

Map 1. Austroasiatic languages today



This would certainly resolve the issue of the geography of Munda, but in turn raises a whole raft of new questions. These can be summarised as follows;

- No Munda groups today are seagoing or show interest in maritime subsistence, and they are all farmers or even partial foragers. Why did their subsistence change so radically?
- Does the lexicon of Munda today provide clues to a past maritime lifestyle?

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- c) The Munda lexicon implies a rather reduced agricultural package allied to SE Asia, hence the maritime dispersal would have been post-Neolithic, i.e. after 4000 BP. But when did this take place?
- d) Where did the migration start? A ‘least moves’ version would propose modern-day Bangla Desh or coastal Myanmar, but we have no immediate evidence for Austroasiatic presence there. Equally plausible is the west coast of Peninsular Thailand, where there are Mon and Aslian and presumably the starting point of Nicobarese
- e) Such a migration would surely have consequences for material culture, both in the archaeological record and in perishable items. Is there evidence for these?

The paper aims to provide some partial answers to some of these questions.

Figure 1. Revised tree of Munda languages

- North Munda
 - Korku
 - Santali, Munda
- Sora–Gorum
- Juang
- Kharia
- Gutob–Remo
- Gta’

From the point of view of the present argument, the exact internal structure of Munda is not significant.

Map 2 shows the present-day distribution of Munda languages. The lack of a coastal population is rather striking as is the division into Northern and Southern populations, which undoubtedly reflects the expansion of Orissan [i.e. Indo-Aryan speaking] in the early historic period. The scattered populations in the far northeast, into Nepal and Bangla Desh, are known to be extremely recent, in part connected with the establishment of tea plantations.

Map 2. Distribution of Munda languages



Source: Ho Project, Swarthmore College

2. Munda farming culture

2.1 Linguistic evidence

Most of the Munda peoples, especially the larger widespread ones, such as the Sora and Santal, are subsistence farmers. However, among them are near-foragers, such as the Birhor and the Juang. As Zide & Zide (1972) point out, the original hypothesis was that this was closer to the original pattern of the Munda and the other groups adopted agriculture from their Indo-Aryan neighbours. In fact, however, the reverse is true, not only because most of India remained in a foraging lifestyle until relatively late. The Munda must have carried rice agriculture from the SE Asian mainland, since several rice-connected roots have good cognates, as shown in Table 1 and Table 2;

Table 1. Paddy rice in Proto-Austroasiatic

Branch	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Munda	Sora	səɾə	paddy
Bahnaric	proto Central-Bahnaric	*snrəʔ	early rice
Katuic	proto Katuic	*sarəʔ	paddy rice
Khmeric	Khmer	sɾəw	rice (unhusked)
Khmuic	Khmu [Cuang]	sɾoːŋ	dry (paddy rice)
Monic	Proto-Monic	*srooʔ	
Pearic	Chong [Samre]	sɾôː	rice store-house, barn
Vietic	Thavung	aləː ³	paddy rice

Table 2. Husked rice in Proto-Austroasiatic

Branch	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Munda	Proto-Munda	*r.ŋko	rice
Munda	Remo	rŋku	uncooked rice
Aslian	Sakai	rəkuaʔ	husked rice
Khasic	proto Khasic	*k ^h aaw	rice
Khmuic	Khmu [Cuang]	rŋkoʔ	husked rice
Palaungic	Proto-Wa-Lawa	*rŋkoʔ	uncooked rice
Pearic	Chong [Trat]	rək ^h əw	<i>riz blanchi</i>
Vietic	Chút [Rục]	rəkóː	husked rice

None of the other roots for domestic plants listed in Zide & Zide (1972) have clear proto-Munda forms, nor are the roots obviously connected to the same plants in SE Asia. No Munda domestic animal names show SE Asian connections except for the chicken. The Austroasiatic root *siər/N seems to reflect Proto-Munda (Table 3);

Table 3. Chicken in Austroasiatic

Branch	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Munda	Proto-Munda	*(g)sim	chicken
Khasic	proto Khasic	*sʔiar	chicken
Khmuic	proto Khmuic	*(s)ʔiər	chicken
Katuic	Katu [An Diem]	siem	chicken

This is rather surprising, since it suggests that the population which migrated carried a very reduced repertoire of domestic plants and animals, which perhaps points to the conditions under which they, perhaps forcibly and certainly not as intentional colonists.

2.2 Archaeology: the Eastern Wetland Tradition

The Neolithic archaeology of Odisha [Orissa in titles of references] could hardly be said to be well understood and even less well dated. Nonetheless, there are some indications of what Harvey et al. (2006) call an ‘Eastern Wetland Tradition’ which is characterised by an agricultural package including rice, pulses such as the mung bean and probably root crops such as taro. These are found at ‘impressive mound sites’

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such as Gopalpur, and are given the speculative date of ‘early Third Millennium BC’, although this is not supported by radiocarbon dates from stratified sites (Kar et al. 1998). Another possible site representing this culture complex is Bonaigarh (Behera 2000). A lack of well-illustrated and analysed pottery and generalised references to stone tools makes it difficult to compare these materials with the SE Asian region, but the agricultural complex identified is not incompatible with the development of lowland rice agriculture introduced by Munda speakers. Harvey et al. (2006) contrast this with the subsistence strategies in the surrounding highland areas, which remain shifting agriculture, much as they still are today.

3. Dating the Munda dispersal

If the Munda peoples already had an agricultural lifestyle prior to their migration, then this must be after the advent of the SE Asian Neolithic, i.e. subsequent to 4000 BP. However, the archaeology of the east coast of India shows no evidence of the typical signatures of Austroasiatic expansion, incised and impressed ceramics, etc. (Rispoli 2008). This points to cultural loss on the SE Asian mainland, which would be common to Nicobaric and Aslian. This suggests that a core rice-growing/foraging population was established somewhere on the southern Myanmar coast, but which had passed through a bottleneck losing characteristic Austroasiatic ceramics. The Indian side provides no evidence for SE Asian technologies in iron production, most notably the paired tube bellows and Munda rather shows that iron smelting reflects contact with Indo-Aryan speakers. The Munda word for ‘iron’ itself is highly fragmented and clearly cannot be reconstructed to proto-Munda. This means the migration was later than around 2200 BP. Plausibly, then it occurred in the window 3800-2200 BP, but presumably earlier in this window.

4. Locating the Munda dispersal

Where would this dispersal have started? We do know that the route between the east coast of India and the isthmus of Kra was exploited by Indian shipping from around 200 BC (Bellina 2017). However, the maritime cultures of the east coast of the isthmus, typically Austronesian, began circulating in the region much earlier, from 4000 BP onwards.

Munda shows no trace of an affinity for the sea in its lexicon. Words for ‘sea’, ‘ocean’, ‘boat’ show no common roots and are clearly not reconstructible. However, Blench (2018a) notes that various river species and capture techniques do show cognates between Munda and SE Asian Austroasiatic. So if the early Munda travelled in ships, these were most likely not their own and they therefore display no culturally embedded maritime tradition. Significantly, in the explosive Austronesian dispersal from southern Taiwan from 4000 BP onwards, ships rapidly reached Sumatra and also travelled between Java and Sumatra to reach the offshore islands to the west, such as Nias. From Nias to the Nicobar islands is a relatively short journey, and while the eastern Indian seaboard is somewhat further, for such experienced navigators, not inconceivable.

If the Munda were not the navigators, why were they aboard the ships? Presumably as crew, forced or otherwise. This practice would have significant parallels in the Austronesian world, as the ancestors of the Malagasy, the Barito, were also an inland people, not open ocean navigators. Yet they were taken on by Malay captains and carried to East Africa and thence to Madagascar, whereby they populated the island. Similarly, the population of the Canary Islands, the Guanche, were apparently Berbers who were landed on the islands in order to collect purple dye-shells, a trade which then collapsed, leaving the settlers isolated (Blench 2018b). In a parallel situation, the early Munda either escaped on reaching India, or were dropped to become traders and farmers. Their ancestral population must have been located somewhere on the southern coast of Myanmar or adjacent Thailand. A small number went aboard an

Photo 1. Split-tube bamboo rattle, Sora



Source: Author photo, Tribal Museum, Bhubhaneswar

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Austronesian ship and were carried to the coast of India, from where they dispersed both north and west, to reach their present destinations.

5. Material culture correlations

5.1 Material culture as an indicator

SE Asian societies have a rich repertoire of material culture, typically made of vegetable material, which does not preserve in the archaeological record. Baskets, traps, mats and other implements are highly distinctive and very dissimilar to those made by the Indo-Aryans. As a consequence, their idiosyncrasies can often provide indications of migration through their distribution. This section gives the examples of two musical instruments whose morphology and distribution points strongly to a maritime transmission. Musical instruments are good proxies for migration, since they are essentially arbitrary. As human constructs, they do not necessarily converge morphologically as natural entities do. In the case of the proposed connection, two instruments have a specific form which occurs on the east coast of India and in Southeast Asia.

5.2 Two musical instruments

5.2.1 The split-tube rattle

This instrument consists of a bamboo internode with one node cut away and the remaining section cut vertically into a series of long thin strips joined to the lower joint at the base. A segment of bamboo is allowed to remain beyond the lower joint to act as a handle. The instrument can be rolled between the hands or struck against the palm, and it creates a crackling sound as the strips strike one another. These instruments are typical of ISEA and are also found in a small area of the Odisha. Photo 2 shows an example from the island of Sulawesi, and Photo 3 shows a similar instrument from Sumba.

Source: Author photo

Photo 2. Split-tube bamboo rattle, Sulawesi



Photo 3. Split-tube rattle, Sumba



Source: Author collection

These examples may not be bamboo, but rather a long thin gourd, hollowed out and cut in the same shape. Photo 1 shows a very similar instrument from the Sora people in Odisha.

It should be noted that this instrument is found only here and nowhere else in the world, i.e. it is not something which is re-invented multiple times.

5.2.2 Monochord bowed mouth-resonated zither

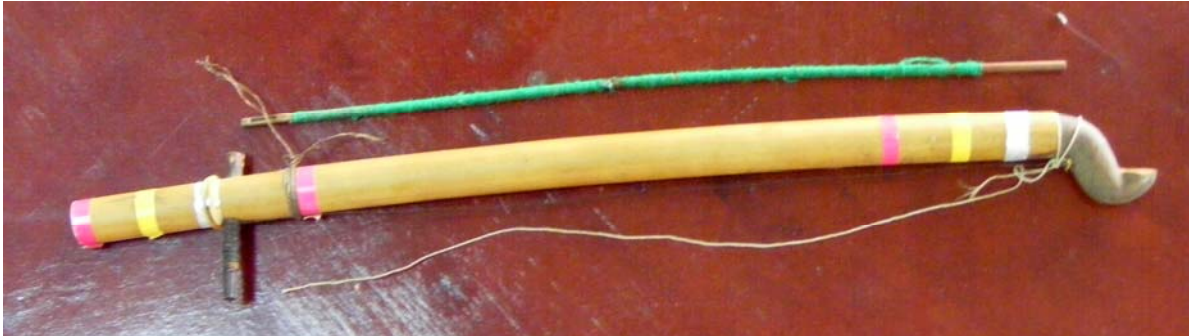
Another highly unusual musical instrument found in SE Asia and among the Sora in the monochord bowed mouth-resonated zither. There is a single string, tightened with a peg which is stretched along a wooden bar. The string is sounded by bowing, but the sound is amplified and modified by the mouth of the player. Photo 4 shows an example of this instrument played by the Sora, and Photo 5 a similar instrument played by the Bahnar in Vietnam.

Photo 4. Sora monochord bowed mouth-resonated zither



Source: Author photo, Tribal Museum, Bhubhaneswar

Photo 5. Bahnar monochord bowed mouth-resonated zither



Source: Author photo, Vietnamese Institute of Musicology, Hanoi

Like split-tube bamboo rattle, it can be underlined that this instrument is unique to these two areas, and does not occur elsewhere in the world.

6. Some linguistic counter-examples

It would be unscientific not to highlight some possible counter-arguments, especially linguistic. Munda languages do appear to share some specific links with Khasian, which would sit easily with a maritime dispersal. Table 4 shows the word for ‘sun’ in Munda and Khasic, showing an almost exact match between presyllable and root, where the prefix is different elsewhere in Austroasiatic.

Language	Attestation
Gta'	sni
Bondo [Hill]	siŋi
Mundari [Nijpara]	siŋgi
Ho [Ghatshila]	siŋ'gi
Proto-Khasic	*sŋi
Proto-Mon-Khmer	*tŋii?

Table 5 shows the word for ‘dog’ in Munda and Khasic, where both have a velar prefix, in contrast to the remainder of Austroasiatic which usually has zero.

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Table 5. ‘Dog’ in Munda and Khasic Language Attestation

Language	Attestation
Gta'	gsu
Remo	gusoo
Gutob	guso?
Bondo [Hill]	gu-so?
Bodo-Gadaba	guso
Sora	kinso:ʈ
Proto-Khasic	*ksəw
Proto-Mon-Khmer	*cə?

These may be chance. Other lexical items, for example ‘husked rice’ (Table 2) show exact presyllable matching with other Austroasiatic branches and not with Khasic.

7. Conclusions

The linguistic geography of the Munda languages has long been a puzzle, since it was presumed that their core population must have dispersed by land, passing around north of the Bay of Bengal. Munda shows no special relationship with Khasian, its nearest geographical relative, nor does the pattern of languages suggest such a migration. A more credible proposal is thus the maritime dispersal proposed by Paul Sidwell, although we have no evidence for a seagoing tradition in this region at a presumed early date such as 3800 BP. This problem is resolved if the migrant rice-farmers were carried in Austronesian ships, since we do indeed have evidence for extensive and long distance voyages from 4000 BP onwards. We do know the Nicobaric core populations arrived in their islands by unknown means at about the same period. This would also explain why no Munda cultures show any affinity for maritime subsistence. Map 3 illustrates this primary dispersal schematically;

Map 3. Primary dispersal of Munda speakers

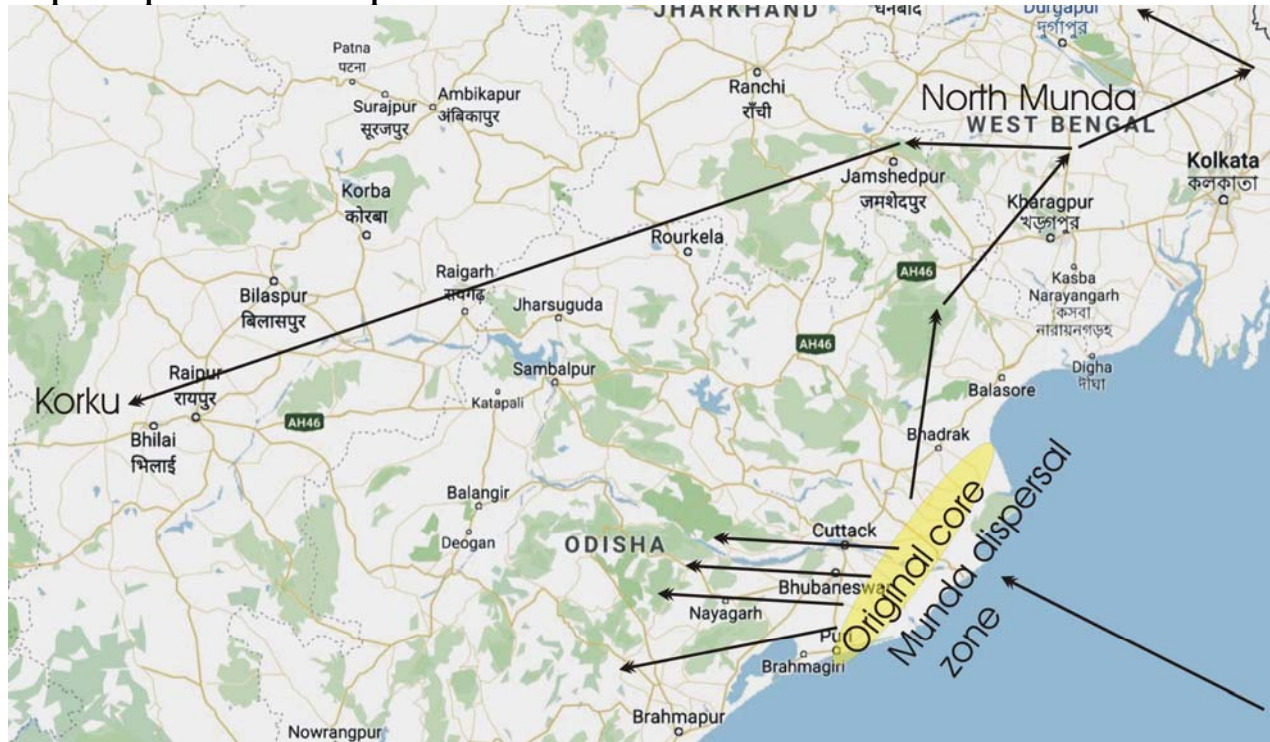


The map includes the hypothesis that the dispersal of Nicobaric was part of the same general process of migration as a consequence of the Austronesian maritime culture, although Nicobaric and Munda show no special linguistic relationship.

Map 4 is more speculative, but outlines a possible model of Munda dispersal within India, incorporating the notion that South Munda is a spurious grouping. It assumes that the newly arrived population first stayed on the coast and continued both rice production and extensive foraging. This culture was upended by the incursions of Indo-Aryans who drive them away from this core area, at the same time transforming their agriculture with new species and techniques.

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Map 4. Dispersal of Munda speakers within India



Archaeological evidence remains weak, although we do know that a rice agriculture appears in the lowlands at around the same time, the Eastern Wetland Tradition, which is implanted in a matrix of foragers and shifting cultivators. It would be feasible to connect this with the arrival of the core Munda. Synchronic material culture, although undated, provides additional evidence of the connection across the Bay of Bengal, including at least two musical instruments of SE Asian provenance, which are not otherwise characteristic of mainland India.

Much remains to be done, including rethink the dispersal of the Munda languages in the light of this new proposal, and in particular shedding better light on the Neolithic of Odisha, which would provide the material evidence to support the linguistic proposal.

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