

# The Silence of the Asonu

by [Ursula K. Le Guin](#)

The silence of the Asonu is proverbial. The first visitors believed that these gracious, gracile people were mute, lacking any language other than that of gesture, expression, and gaze. Later, hearing Asonu children chatter, the visitors suspected that among themselves the adults spoke, keeping silence only with strangers. We know now that the Asonu are not dumb, but that once past early childhood they speak only very rarely, to anyone, under any circumstances. They do not write; and unlike mutes, or monks under vows of silence, they do not use any signs or other devices in place of speaking.

This nearly absolute abstinence from language makes them fascinating.

People who live with animals value the charm of muteness. It can be a real pleasure to know when the cat walks into the room that he won't mention any of your shortcomings, or that you can tell your grievances to your dog without his repeating them to the people who caused them.

And those who can talk, but don't, have the great advantage over the rest of us that they never say anything stupid. This may be why we are convinced that if they spoke they would have something wise to say.

Thus there has come to be considerable tourist traffic to the Asonu. Having a strong tradition of hospitality, the Asonu entertain their visitors courteously, though without modifying their own customs. Some people go there simply in order to join the natives in their silence, grateful to spend a few weeks where they do not have to festoon and obscure every human meeting with verbiage. Many such visitors, having been accepted into a household as a paying guest, return year after year, forming bonds of unspoken affection with their quiet hosts.

Others follow their Asonu guides or hosts about, talking to them continually, confiding their whole life stories to them, in rapture at having at last found a listener who won't interrupt or comment or mention that his cousin had an even larger tumor than that. As such people usually know little Asonu and speak mostly or entirely in their own language, they evidently aren't worried by the question that vexes some visitors: Since the Asonu don't talk, do they, in fact, listen?

They certainly hear and understand what is said to them in their own language, since they're prompt to respond to their children, to indicate directions by gesture to inquiring tourists, and to leave a building at the cry of "Fire!" But the question remains, do they listen to discursive speech and sociable conversation, or do they merely hear it, while keeping silently attentive to something beyond speech? Their amiable and apparently easy manner seems to some observers the placid surface of a deep preoccupation, a constant alertness, like that of a mother who while entertaining her guests or seeing to her husband's comfort yet is listening every moment for the cry of her baby in another room.

To perceive the Asonu thus is almost inevitably to interpret their silence as a concealment. As they grow up, it seems, they cease to speak because they are listening to something we do not hear, a secret which their silence hides.

Some visitors to their world are convinced that the lips of these quiet people are locked upon a knowledge which, in proportion as it is hidden, must be valuable—a spiritual treasure, a speech beyond speech, possibly even that ultimate revelation promised by so many religions, and indeed frequently delivered, but never in a wholly communicable form. The transcendent knowledge of the mystic cannot be expressed in language. It may be that the Asonu avoid language for this very reason. It may be that they keep silence because if they spoke everything of importance would have been said.

To some, the utterances of the Asonu do not seem to be as momentous as one might expect from their rarity. They might even be described as banal. But believers in the Wisdom of the Asonu have followed individuals about for years, waiting for the rare words they speak, writing them down, saving them, studying them, arranging and collating them, finding arcane meanings and numerical correspondences in them, in search of the hidden message.

There is no written form of the Asonu language, and translation of speech is considered to be so uncertain that translatomats aren't issued to the tourists, most of whom don't want them anyway. Those who wish to learn Asonu can do so only by listening to and imitating children, who by six or seven years old are already becoming unhappy when asked to talk.

Here are the "Eleven Sayings of the Elder of Isu," collected over four years by a devotee from Ohio, who had already spent six years learning the language from the children of the Isu Group. Months of silence occurred between most of these statements, and two years between the fifth and sixth.

1. Not there.
2. It is almost ready [or] Be ready for it soon.
3. Unexpected!
4. It will never cease.
5. Yes.
6. When?
7. It is very good.
8. Perhaps.
9. Soon.

10. Hot! [or] Very warm!

11. It will not cease.

The devotee wove these eleven sayings into a coherent spiritual statement or testament which he understood the Elder to have been making, little by little, during the last four years of his life. The Ohio Reading of the Sayings of the Elder of Isu is as follows:

“(1) What we seek is not there in any object or experience of our mortal life. We live among appearances, on the verge of the Spiritual Truth. (2) We must be ready for it as it is ready for us, for (3) it will come when we least expect it. Our perception of the Truth is sudden as a lightning-flash, but (4) the Truth itself is eternal and unchanging. (5) Indeed we must positively and hopefully, in a spirit of affirmation, (6) continually ask when, when shall we find what we seek? (7) For the Truth is the medicine for our soul, the knowledge of absolute goodness. (8, 9) It may come very soon. Perhaps it is coming even now in this moment. (10) Its warmth and brightness are as those of the sun, but the sun will perish (11) and the Truth will not perish. Never will the warmth, the brightness, the goodness of the Truth cease or fail us.”

Another interpretation of the Sayings may be made by referring to the circumstances in which the Elder spoke, faithfully recorded by the devotee from Ohio, whose patience was equaled only by the Elder's:

1. Spoken in an undertone as the Elder looked through a chest of clothing and ornaments.
2. Spoken to a group of children on the morning of a ceremony.
3. Said with a laugh in greeting the Elder's younger sister, returned from a long trip.
4. Spoken the day after the burial of the Elder's sister.
5. Said while embracing the Elder's brother-in-law some days after the funeral.
6. Asked of an Asonu “doctor” who was making a “spirit-body” drawing in white and black sand for the Elder. These drawings seem to be both curative and diagnostic, but we know very little about them. The observer states that the “doctor's” answer was a short curving line drawn outward from the navel of the “spirit-body” figure. This, however, may be only the observer's reading of what was not an answer at all.
7. Said to a child who had woven a reed mat.
8. Spoken in answer to a young grandchild who asked, “Will you be at the big feast, Grandmother?”
9. Spoken in answer to the same child, who asked, “Are you going to be dead like Great-Auntie?”

10. Said to a baby who was toddling towards a firepit where the flames were invisible in the sunlight.

11. Last words, spoken the day before the Elder's death.

The last six Sayings were all spoken in the last half-year of the Elder's life, as if the approach of death had made the Elder positively loquacious. Five of the Sayings were spoken to, or in at least in the presence of, young children who were still at the talking stage.

Speech from an adult must be very impressive to an Asonu child. But, like the foreign linguists, Asonu babies must learn the language by listening to older children. The mother and other parents encourage the child to speak only by attentive listening and prompt, affectionate, wordless response.

The Asonu live in close-knit extended-family groups, in frequent contact with other groups. Their pasturing life, following the great flocks of anamanu which furnish them wool, leather, milk, and meat, leads them on a ceaseless seasonal nomadic circuit within a vast shared territory of mountains and foothills. Families frequently leave their family group to go wandering and visiting. At the great festivals and ceremonies of healing and renewal many groups come together for days or weeks, exchanging hospitality. No hostile relations between groups are apparent, and in fact no observer has reported seeing adult Asonu fight or quarrel. Arguments, evidently, are out of the question.

Children from two to six years old chatter to each other constantly; they argue, wrangle, and bicker, and sometimes come to blows. As they come to be six or seven they begin to speak less and to quarrel less. By the time they are eight or nine most of them are very shy of words and reluctant to answer a question except by gesture. They have learned to quietly evade inquiring tourists and linguists with notebooks and recording devices. By adolescence they are as silent and as peaceable as the adults.

Children between eight and twelve do most of the looking after the younger ones. All the children of the family group go about together, and in such groups the two-to-six-year-olds provide language models for the babies. Older children shout wordlessly in the excitement of a game of tag or hide-and-seek, and sometimes scold an errant toddler with a "Stop!" or "No!"—just as the Elder of Isu murmured "Hot!" as a child approached an invisible fire; though of course the Elder may have used that circumstance as a parable, in order to make a statement of profound spiritual meaning, as appears in the Ohio Reading.

Even songs lose their words as the singers grow older. A game rhyme sung by little children has words:

Look at us tumbledown

Stumbledown tumbledown

All of us tumbledown

All in a heap!

Older children cheerfully play the game with the little ones, falling into wriggling piles with yells of joy, but they do not sing the words, only the tune, vocalized on a neutral syllable.

Adult Asonu often hum or sing at work, while herding, while rocking the baby. Some of the tunes are traditional, others improvised. Many employ motifs based on the whistles of the anamanu. None have words; all are hummed or vocalized. At the meetings of the clans and at marriages and funerals the ceremonial choral music is rich in melody and harmonically complex and subtle. No instruments are used, only the voice. The singers practice many days for the ceremonies. Some students of Asonu music believe that their particular spiritual wisdom or insight finds its expression in these great wordless chorales.

I am inclined to agree with others who, having lived a long time among the Asonu, believe that their choral singing is an element of a sacred occasion, and certainly an art, a festive communal act, and a pleasurable release of feeling, but no more. What is sacred to them remains in silence.

The little children call people by relationship words, mother, uncle, clan-sister, friend, etc. If the Asonu have names, we do not know them.

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About ten years ago a zealous believer in the Secret Wisdom of the Asonu kidnapped a child of four from one of the mountain clans in the dead of winter. He had obtained a zoo collector's permit, and smuggled her back to his home world in an animal cage marked "Anamanu." Believing that the Asonu enforce silence on their children, his plan was to encourage the little girl to keep talking as she grew up. When adult, he thought, she would thus be able to speak the innate Wisdom which her people would have obliged her to keep secret.

For the first year or so it appears that she would talk to her kidnapper, who, aside from the abominable cruelty of his action, seems to have begun by treating her kindly enough. His knowledge of the Asonu language was limited, and she saw no one else but a small group of sectarians who came to gaze worshipfully at her and listen to her talk. Her vocabulary and syntax gained no enlargement, and began to atrophy. She became increasingly silent.

Frustrated, the zealot tried to teach her his own language so that she would be able to express her innate Wisdom in a different tongue. We have only his report, which is that she "refused to learn," was silent or spoke almost inaudibly when he tried to make her repeat words, and "did not obey." He ceased to let other people see her. When some members of the sect finally notified the civil authorities, the child was about seven. She had spent three years hidden in a basement room, and for a year or more had been whipped and beaten regularly "to teach her to talk," her captor explained, "because she's stubborn." She was dumb, cowering, undernourished, and brutalized.

She was promptly returned to her family, who for three years had mourned her, believing she had wandered off and been lost on the glacier. They received her with tears of joy and grief. Her

condition since then is not known, because the Interplanary Agency closed the entire area to all visitors, tourist or scientist, at the time she was brought back. No foreigner has been up in the Asonu mountains since. We may well imagine that her people were resentful; but nothing was ever said.

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