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Vitebsky, Piers 2017. *Living without the dead: loss and redemption in a jungle cosmos*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 380 pp. Pb.: US\$25.00. ISBN: 9780226475622.

Twenty-four years after the publication of *Dialogues with the dead* (Vitebsky 1993), Piers Vitebsky presents his second book on the Sora, an indigenous highland community of Central India. Whereas the former book outlined in detail the workings of the animist religion, focusing on the conversations of humans with their dead via ritual media (shamans), this new book unravels how the religion, within a short time, changed into something else. What both books have in common is that they are jewels in the anthropology of tribal India.

When Vitebsky refers to his new book as ‘nonstandard ethnography’ (p. 338), he has, perhaps, mainly the style and the form of presentation in mind, which makes it of interest to a wider audience. However, in my opinion, the book is ‘nonstandard’ in terms of the content as well, as it offers insights into processes that are not commonly directly in view. First, while many anthropologists have devoted themselves to the study of cultural change, few are able to document it as it happens. Vitebsky offers a close-up of these processes over a period of 40 years (1975–2015). Second, the book is not only about the changes in Sora religion but also a detailed account of the ongoing engagement between the ethnographer and the Sora. The ethnographic process is unravelled before our eyes, and Vitebsky shows us how he became implicated in the lives of the people with whom he lived, a group of individuals who we feel we have come to know quite well and

whose destinies we can follow through the decades. This engagement is reciprocal, as the author shows the impact of the Sora on his life as well as how his involvement was itself a piece in the complex mosaic of the religious dynamics he describes. Finally, the reader can trace the intellectual and emotional trajectory of the anthropologist. We participate in the unfolding process of his ethnographic quest; we observe how research questions come to be formulated and how they change; we take part in discoveries and failures.

Roughly speaking, the first half of the book introduces the reader to the animist religion. Then, right at the point where Vitebsky has made the reader deeply appreciate Sora animism, the second half of the book begins to describe its transformations. One is tempted to say that, much like the experience of *sonums* in Sora cosmology, Vitebsky wants to reproduce his own suffering (witnessing the loss of animist religion) in his readers. The first four chapters describe how the ethnographer entered the Sora world, lived in different villages and gradually began to understand the relevance and meaning of their dialogues with the dead. Readers of his earlier book will be acquainted with most of the ethnographic content of these chapters. From Chapter 5 onward, however, Vitebsky offers something new. While *Dialogues with the dead* only provided an insider view of Sora religion and did not deal with the ‘real world of the creators’ of that religion, as Chris Gregory argued (1996: 195; see also Obeyesekere 1995), here he puts the animist worldview into its specific historical and political context, also understanding it as a response to a feudal and colonial situation of humiliation and exploitation.

The chapters that follow (6–10) deal with the Sora conversion to Baptist Christianity. Vitebsky also describes his own conversion from an ethnographer

who emotionally and intellectually rejects the change, to someone who came to acknowledge the new faith as actually a Sora religion, gradually taking it seriously as a topic of research. Subsequently, he outlines and analyses the various processes, forms and implications of conversion, not only with regard to 'religion' in the strict sense but in relation to notions of personhood and time, landownership and language. Vitebsky goes on to point out the different effects of conversion. Baptist religion, the author argues, liberated the Sora from old forms of oppression. However, it also had its costs, for example on the level of personal relations (the muteness of the dead) and by introducing new forms of dominance (the rule of pastors). Chapter 11 briefly deals with conversion to different forms of neo-Hinduism. Quite clearly, this is work in progress, but it is important that Vitebsky has included it in this book, as it shows the diversity and multi-directionality of the processes at hand. After the narration of a meeting of five female shamans with the author in 2005 (Chapter 12), the book ends with closing reflections (Epilogue), including a plea for 'theo-diversity' (p. 334).

This remarkable book is great reading and will be highly relevant to those who have an interest in ethnography, religion, cultural change, Indian religions and/or indigenous religions. It is a book that offers deep reflections on and insights into fundamental questions about the predicament of human beings in times of change; beings who shape these processes as much as they are shaped by forces outside their control. Using a combination of vignettes, reflections and dense ethnography, Vitebsky skilfully navigates between the personal and the social, the micro and macro domains of social life.

Obviously, every choice has its downside. A specialist of tribal Central India interested in comparative ethnography will not find the format of the book very helpful. The relevant ethnographic findings are dispersed throughout. In addition, chapter titles at times do not provide much orientation. For example, the important analysis of changes in Sora personhood in relation to language (p. 217f) is hidden away in Chapter 9, called 'Redeemers Human and Divine', and the index is only partially of help in this regard. However, such specialists are not the main target audience, which is also apparent in the fact that the publisher decided, unfortunately in my view, to omit the 'Bibliographic Essay' (only available online), in which Vitebsky offers comparative considerations and embeds the Sora case in academic discussions of animism and conversion more generally. Nevertheless, professional anthropologists, whether Indianists or not, will still find this important book extremely valuable reading.

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