

Bibliographic Essay
**The Sora “Tribe”–
Animist, Hindu, Christian**

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/sites/Vitebsky>

Online Supplement to

Living without the Dead

***Loss and Redemption
in a Jungle Cosmos***

by Piers Vitebsky

The University of Chicago Press 2017

Details of works cited here are included in the references at the end of the book. This supplement, with its pagination, is included in the book’s index.

Further photos, films, and linguistic documentation can be found at <http://www.piersvitebsky.org>

The Sora

The Sora language belongs to the South Munda branch of the Austroasiatic family. This family includes Indian “Tribal” languages such as Mundari, Ho, Santal and Bondo, but also Mon-Khmer languages, those of Orang Asli peoples in the interior jungles of Peninsular Malaya, and those of some Montagnard peoples of Vietnam (Pinnow 1959; Zide 1966; Anderson and Harrison 2008; Donegan and Stampe 2004). The general view is that such peoples—or at least language speakers—form an ancient stratum of shifting cultivators across tropical Asia who in each country have been surrounded and dispossessed by larger, settled rice-irrigating populations. Apart from Cambodian with its anomalous Khmer empire, the speakers of these languages consistently lie at the jungle margins of the great empires and civilizations of Asian history—a zone of hill tribes on the margin of lowland states that Scott (2009), writing of Southeast Asia, calls “Zomia.” In India, such peoples are generally considered more ancient and more aboriginal than the much larger Indo-Aryan and Dravidian populations of the northern and southern halves of the country respectively. Though this picture is disputed for political as well as scholarly reasons (and it is not even certain what it could really mean), it is clear that they lie culturally well outside the Hindu mainstream.

Certainly, some Sora faces look Southeast Asian and the tone of Sora culture often seems reminiscent of the linguistically related peoples outside India described by Howell (1984), Benjamin (1967) or Condominas (1965, 1994). Yet at the same time, contact with surrounding Indian populations is longstanding and complex, and many aspects of Sora culture also seem close to village Hinduism as described by Whitehead (1921), Babb (1975), Herrenschmidt (1989), or Fuller (2004), and as shown by my adventure with Lokami in Sarda Sora territory. As one walks or cycles out of the mountainous Lanjia Sora

heartland into the plains beyond, it is hard to say quite where the flavor of Sora culture ends.

The decisive advance in studying the Sora language came from Ramamurti (1931, 1933, 1938). During the 1960s and 1970s, the American linguist Zide and his associates studied Sora phonology and syntax (Zide and Zide 1973, 1976; Biligiri 1965; Stampe 1965, 1966; Starosta 1967; see also some papers in Jenner, Thompson, and Starosta 1976), while I analysed Sora semantics and poetics (Vitebsky 1978c, 1993: 202-15, 270-2). Some of this work is summarized in Anderson and Harrison (2008).

Early historical and textual sources on the Sora are comprehensively reviewed by Elwin (1955: xiii-xvii, 1-37, 530-37). There have also been several short works by administrators and others (Petit 1974; B. Singh 1984). In the earliest accounts (Fawcett 1888; Thurston 1909; Sitapati 1938, 1940, 1943), religion and ritual are already prominent, and these are the focus of the two most substantial works on the Sora before the present book, namely Elwin's *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (1955) and my own *Dialogues with the Dead* (1993). Elwin's book, based on several visits during the 1940s, introduced the Sora to anthropology and comparative religion (e.g., Eliade 1964: 421-27). At first sight his book of 600 pages appears exhaustive, and I remain grateful to him for arousing my initial fascination with the Sora (whom he spells Saora), and for equipping me with words like *kittung*, *uyung* (sun) and *labon* (earth). Ultimately, however, Elwin seems overwhelmed by his material, and his book is jumbled and hard to make sense of. In a long review (Dumont and Pocock 1959: 60-74), Dumont lamented that Elwin's data were too confusing to help him place the Sora as a tribe within his model of Hindu society. The Africanist Turner (1967), in another long review, complained that Elwin made it impossible to grasp Sora social structure. Indeed, this monograph on what is undeniably an ancestor cult contains virtually no reference to kinship or patrilineage, which are casually dismissed around page fifty.

Elwin, a maverick Englishman who worked for Indian Independence, was the most famous and influential writer ever on Indian tribes. He was a complex character (Guha 1999) who added a humane personal romanticism to a tradition of British administrators and other observers who found the caste system distasteful and preferred the tribes for their more egalitarian ethos. He was also a vital if controversial advocate for the tribes of central and northeastern India in their relationship with the Indian state around the transitional period to Independence (Elwin 1964). Elwin's disregard for Sora sociology is linked to this romanticism ("The 'forest of joy' was Elwin's dreamland," Prasad 2003: xv). He was a renegade Anglican priest and his book is imbued with an idiosyncratic mysticism. For example, his depiction of Sora prayer (1955: 460-65) could never have been realistic, whatever one's theoretical framework (indeed, I have argued that animist Sora hardly had the genre of prayer).

This was also a consequence of his fieldwork method. Elwin knew Hindi (a language of the Indo-Aryan family) and Gondi (Dravidian family), but he did not know a Munda language like Sora and wrote somewhere (reference mislaid) that he found the Sora the most inscrutable of the various tribes he had studied. I knew some of the older characters in his photos at the end of their lives, and Monosi says that he was one of the children whom Elwin describes as scrabbling for *pika* cigars as he threw them up in the air. These Sora say that he came with a posse of assistants and cooks, and that he relied on Pano go-betweens to interpret from Sora into their local Oriya dialect, which others then interpreted for him into Hindi. His book is thus the product of several filters. If the Sora were inscrutable for Elwin, his book is inscrutable for me. It contains personal names, but none of their kinship connections; individual Sora words and long narratives somehow apparently rendered into fluent English, but no joined-up Sora phrases. Where Elwin's material harmonizes with mine, this seems like a precious historical

corroboration; but where it does not, I have no idea what to make of it (which is why it would require a separate and entirely different book to engage critically with him).

I once spent a year in a remote area of southeastern Sri Lanka, like Elwin relying on assistants who helped me gather narrative data but shielded me from having to learn very much of the local language (Sinhala). This was just about adequate for my development report on shifting cultivation (Vitebsky 1984, 1992), but for studying the local spirit possession, which I also observed (Obeyesekere 1981; Kapferer 1997), it would have been very poor. In Soraland I worked alone. I spoke only Sora (my knowledge of Oriya and Telugu is still sketchy today), and when I later worked closely with Monosi, Sora was our only common language. Even with this advantage, as documented in this book, I was slow to realize the governing role of ancestors and the patrilineage, and even slower to arrive at the understanding that virtually every aspect of sonumhood is a modality of known humans who have died. My account of the old religion is presented in my monograph *Dialogues with the Dead* (1993), which among other things gives a detailed analysis and interpretation (95-235) of the dialogues summarized in the second half of chapter 4 of the present book, and also (236-59) of the comparison with Freud, which appears briefly here on pages 124-25.

Animist

The study of comparative religion arose out of a Christian context, but remains uncomfortable for many Christians, who already have one problem granting parity to other "world religions" (Masuzawa 2005), and a further problem when faced with "primitive" or "primal" religions, which they may not even see as proper religion at all.

Before Christianity, Sora religion did not have a name. Some recent studies of Christianization among indigenous peoples use local terms, for example, *adat*

gawai (“ancestor system,” Chua 2012) or “*marapu* [ancestor, spirit] followers” (Keane 2007: 155). There is no such convenient term in Sora. Monosi called them *papir Soranji*, “old Sora” or *pirnamaranji*, “people who do sacrifices” (or as I have glossed it in this book, “who do acknowledgments”). If pressed to define themselves, non-Christian Sora say simply *Indu Sora*, “Hindu Sora.” But Hindu in what sense? This phrase may be very old, or it may be a recent answer to the arrival of *Kristu Sora*, “Christian Sora.” Either way, the Sora here seem so significantly different from any of the obviously Hindu forms encountered in chapter 11 that a separate term seems needed. “Pagan” is an early Christian word for adherents of local religions that Christianity replaces or intends to replace (and there was never an -ism as in the term “paganism,” which implies a systematically formulated and self-conscious doctrine). Although the term has recently been re-validated by Western neo-pagans, for social scientists or historians it remains tainted because it is defined by reference to a Christian anchor point, while among the wider public it is often taken to mean primitive or demonic.

The term “shamanism” too carries unwelcome baggage (Eliade 1964), and not only because of the ending in -ism. It also seems too restricted, focusing attention on the figure of the shaman rather than on a wider cosmology. By coincidence, the word *shaman* has been borrowed from the languages of the Eveny and Evenki, indigenous peoples in Siberia whom I have also studied (Vitebsky 2005). There, the soul of a *shamán* or *hamán* (stress on the second syllable, nothing to do with the English word “man”) leaves his or her body during trance and travels to other realms of the cosmos, such as the sky or an Underworld. This is probably the tightest available definition of a shaman, at the same time as it leaves open the cosmology within which it is set. Similar figures occur worldwide, with different terms in local languages (Vitebsky 1995). Some typologies of religions distinguish shamanism from possession, in

which spirits or gods make a reverse journey (de Heusch 1981). Thus, in Africa it is rare for the soul of a living human to journey outside the body, but common for spirits to enter bodies and take possession of them. I use the term "shaman" as shorthand for the Sora word *kuran*, but actually Sora kurans are unusual—in de Heusch's typology—in combining both of these possibilities: their soul leaves their body to go to the Underworld at the same time as their vacated body is occupied by sonums who come to talk. Such possession (though not with such elaborate conversations) is common in Indian popular religion, but soul-journeys are more unusual.

The most elusive and pregnant word in the Sora language is *sonum*. Elwin (1955: 68, 77-78) mentions this word rarely, and when he wrote indiscriminately and confusingly of "god", "deity" and "spirit" (xxi, xxiii and *passim*), this is definitely the word he or his interpreters were translating (not *kittung*, which he generally leaves untranslated, for example, in origin myths, though I see this as a much less important or complex term). His categories are a mess because he starts from English words like ghost, shade and spirit, then seeks their Sora counterparts, realizes they do not fit, and then mixes them up again (xx-xxiii). In European languages with a Christian history all such words carry distracting resonances anyway. Lienhardt (1961), writing of the animist Dinka in Sudan, tries to match his term for entities of this sort to local understanding, and calls them "Powers." For a while I similarly tried to find one single word in English, but in the end I decided not to translate the word "sonum" at all, but to set it free to see how it behaved and where it led. This strategy revealed that a particularly far-reaching translation would be as one person's Memory (with a capital M) of another person whom they have known (Vitebsky 1993: 199-202, summarized on 120-21 of the present book). Even this cannot completely match every aspect of every sonum, especially of the ildas, but it does convey the crucial insight that sonums are mainly an interpersonal phenomenon, and

that as such they are a principle of causality and repetition in a chain of past, present and future experiences that pass from one person to another.

If animism is defined by the idea that different phenomena have a similar human-like interiority even while their outward physical forms differ, then the Sora view of sonums is certainly animist (the -ism is an unfortunate by-product of European language: Sora animist cosmology has axioms and logically coherent chains of reasoning, but these are not systematically expounded, so that I have had to infer them from Sora discourses and actions). Sora animistic thinking seems rather different from that of other animistic cosmologies, as typically found for example in Siberia, Amazonia or the Arctic (Harvey 2013, 2014; Viveiros de Castro 1992; Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2014; Willerslev 2007; Merkur 1992; Laugrand and Oosten 2010). There, some “spirits” may indeed be dead people, but they also tend to have an intrinsically animal or elemental nature. Thus in my own experience of the Eveny of Arctic Siberia (Vitebsky 2005), the spirit master of wild animals is an old man, but this human aspect is not his main point. He is *of* the animals and *about* the animals even when there are no hunters around, just as the spirit of the land around a campsite represents the placehood of that site which engages with visiting nomads once a year but manages without them for the rest of the time. For the Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia (who happen to speak a language distantly related to Sora), Howell writes that the consciousness attributed to non-human species is “humancentric” (1984: 131), but that they can sometimes revert to a more species-specific and less “rational” (and therefore less human) behavior (131, 142-5). By contrast, it is a sign of the human basis of Sora sonums that they are not particularly rational, but conflicted and argumentative—just like the living people they once were. This messy humanity is what they still *are*, and that is why they crave human attachment and engagement. Animals can be sacrificed as substitutes for humans, but ultimately they are

only animals. Similarly, there are in effect no spirits of the wild (a concept I took as a novice anthropologist from Frazer 2000, and which I misunderstood for a long time as explaining the banishing-rite format), because everything out there is so thoroughly humanized.

The Amazonist Descola (2013) attempts to tighten the definition of animism ("the attribution by humans to non-humans of an interiority identical to their own," 2013: 129), by contrasting its logic with the logics of totemism, in which the differences between natural species are used as a model for social distinctions; of analogism, in which each being is unique and different in both its interior and its exterior physicality; and of naturalism, which supposes an ontological duality between nature and culture in which beings are made of the same material but are radically different in their internal lives. Sora fit comfortably into Descola's schema as animists, and also display aspects of one of the Amazonists' favorite supporting features of animism, namely perspectivism (138-43), as when Rattud sonums regard us as prey to be hunted or arrested. Indeed, the entire edifice of Sora dialogues with the dead can be seen as a huge performance of perspectivism, in which the living perceive their own existence from the point of view of the dead, who are the agents of the events which affect them. Sora grammar too is perspectivist, with its absence of indirect speech, so that even without going into trance one must constantly adopt other people's positions, and even their intonation, when mimicking their words.

Sora also show traces of analogism, as when each tribe or caste is thought to have its own sonums, diet and other habits. Indeed, Descola's four "ontologies" are not so much absolutes as simultaneously coexistent possibilities, which empirically can blend and morph into each other. Sahlins (2014: 281-82) notes that the "subjective personhood of non-human beings" in Descola's animism also applies to his ethnographic examples of totemism and analogism. These other two ontologies are not so different logically, since they amount to "different organizations of

the same animic principles” and “forms of a more generic anthropomorphism.” Interestingly, the Sora’s closest neighboring tribes—the Kond (Friend-Pereira 1904) and the Gadaba (Berger 2015)—both have clan totems (e.g. cobra, tiger, frog, bear) which are absent among the Sora. The significance of this totemic difference between their cultures is far outweighed by greater similarities in their animistic forms: buffalo sacrifice, shamanic trance, and for the Gadaba, even funeral megaliths and a closely related language—almost everything, that is, except the uniquely Sora dialogues with the dead.

Ultimately, Descola’s most extreme contrast is with naturalism, as represented by “science” and “the West.” Despite their new enthusiasm for clerical jobs and mobile phones, this is not (yet) a substantial dimension of Sora metaphysics. Instead, they have moved into a contrast between animism on the one hand and concepts of gods (however these are defined) on the other. This kind of entity hardly features in Descola’s book. His few mentions of Christianity (2013: 68-9, 275) are brief and refer to texts of high theology such as Augustine and Aquinas rather than to the tangled ethnography of Christian communities, suffused as these so often are with old animistic sensibilities—or with defenses against these.

By not discussing conversion from animisms to monotheisms, Descola’s schema can afford to be ahistorical, non-processual, and non-antagonistic. However, the Sora’s move away from animism has been historical, and I have lived through its phase of maximum antagonism. Ontologically, I have argued that the essence of the new Sora religions lies in ideas of divinity, with its associated hierarchical attitude of devotion to an entity that is not only different from oneself, but also superior. The shift either to the Baptist church or to forms of mainstream Hinduism tips the balance from immanence towards transcendence: the more dispersed, personalized and kinship-based forces in rocks and trees become concentrated into more generic and encompassing new

spaces such as church, temple, or Christian sky, which rearrange humans into broader social groupings. It is not quite that gods are being introduced for the first time (though my understanding certainly contradicts the well-known view of Schmidt 1955, that monotheism was the primordial style of religiosity). The role of the earlier kittungs—notwithstanding the ritual I saw in Ladde—was to create things long ago rather than to maintain them today. Now, Christians and neo-Hindus make their kittungs active in the present. Kittungs replace ancestors as causes of events; as arbiters of morality and judgment of correctness in action and feelings; as the focus of theological and emotional attention; and as the basis for political positions. This shift is particularly clear with the firmly single Baptist God (in tandem with his son), but it also applies to the Hindu gods, and especially to the Hindu fundamentalists' hegemonic cult of Rama, Krishna and Hanuman, which sometimes seems to resemble a monotheism in its tendency to label other styles as inferior or wrong.

Gods, whether Christian or Hindu, may have human-like properties, such as biographies and calendar portraits. Yet at the same time they are so much more than human. They are removed from banal levels of human experience and stand as exaggerated, cosmic exemplars of such experience (Jisu's crucifixion, or Krishna's erotic play with cowgirls). In the same discussion of Descola, Sahlins turns to Hawai'i (2014: 286) and points to a "bewildering plenitude of beings and things" that are all "encompassed in the persons of the great cosmocratic deities." He adds, "the human species is the common element underlying all natural manifestations of the divine. Thus all nature has a human dimension" (citing Valeri 1985: 31). Within this Hawai'ian picture the personhood of animals, plants, etc. is not really their own but that of one or other deity, since the former lack "their own souls, consciousness, community, ability to communicate, in brief personhood in and for themselves" (Sahlins 2014: 288). Sora animists tell us something similar, but without the cosmocratic deities.

Instead, the Sun and the Earth communicate with us through the voices of humans they have absorbed. These sonums do indeed have a personhood “in and for themselves,” and they assert this by speaking for themselves and arguing their own agendas. This strong personhood is what makes them so interactive with the personhood of living humans. The Sora ancestor cult is not just animism, but what I have called animistic humanism.

Hindu

If the French mathematician Laplace had been an animist Sora, he might well have said that gods were a hypothesis he did not need. However, surrounding Hindus do need them, and if having gods is a definitional criterion of being Hindu, then Sora animists are something else. According to the Oriya Brahmins’ own tradition, Jagannath (Juggernaut) was originally a jungle deity of the Sora before the Brahmins stole him and elevated (or recognized) him as the main god of Orissa/Odisha (Eschmann, Kulke, and Tripathi 1978; Kulke and Schnepel 2001; Schnepel 2002). Yet this does not seem to be a story originating from the Sora themselves, at least not in the 1970s in the animist heartland around Rajingtal and Sogad, where Jagannath had no role at all. Beneath the more commonly recognized domains of land tenure, ecology and economics, the Sora’s humanistic absence of gods seems like a deep locus of the boundary between inside and outside, Tribal and other.

Unlike the one God of the Baptists, Hindu gods have a multiplicity that seems almost to shade into the multiplicity of sonums. Almost, but not quite: sonums are not instantiations of deities or even just collective representatives of a particular illness or event, but ordinary people like you and me. Many features of “popular Hinduism” are also animistic, but the Sora go further. On investigation, the collective sonum categories of Sun, Leopard or Rattud unravel into a list of named ancestors.

Conceptually, sociologically, emotionally, all conscious entities are decentralized down to the level of the lineage and, beyond this, to the person. This seems like a theological counterpart to, and a Sora variant of, the wider Tribal egalitarianism sensed so consistently by observers. In actual life, it is pitched against an equally insistent feudal hierarchy, and this tension is another locus of the boundary between inside and outside, blurred and complicated by forms of internalization and collusion such as headmanship.

The category "Tribal" originated in the British administration's attempts to classify India's bewildering diversity of ethnicities and communities, and is applied loosely to groups all over India, but most extensively in the far northeast and in our area of east-central India. The term is out of favor among anthropologists and while some Tribal activists are turning towards a global discourse of "indigenous peoples" (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011; a discourse strongly resisted by Hindu nationalists), in India the term has a distinctive constitutional and ethnographic meaning (Karlsson and Subba 2006; Shah and Schneiderman 2013). Constitutionally, it is linked to legally enshrined affirmative action policies, to such an extent that Middleton (2015) even shows us Nepali migrants to India trying to *become* Tribal for the advantages this would bring. Ethnographically, the picture is less clear. The label implies a sort of marginality different from that of low "castes," and includes groups who seem to be distinct from surrounding majority populations on grounds of language, "race," or having a rather self-sufficient ecological or economic niche. The Sora qualify on all these grounds as they have an Austroasiatic language and some Southeast Asian features, and previously lived mostly by shifting cultivation. Until recently, the Lanjia subgroup comfortably met the now outdated criteria of the 1965 Lokur Committee by exhibiting "primitive traits," a distinctive culture, geographical isolation, "shyness of contact," and "backwardness."

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

India's tribes crystallized into a largely residual category (i.e., not Hindu, not Muslim, not anything), which gradually became formalized into the "scheduled" tribes, subject to special legislation. This process of categorization has been protective, for example, in trying to prohibit the alienation of Tribal land to non-Tribals such as the Pano (for our area, through the Madras Agency Tracts Interest and Land Transfer Act of 1919, and the Orissa Scheduled Areas Transfer of Immovable Property (by Scheduled Tribes) Regulation of 1956, see Pati and Dash 2002: 111-13), or in the "reservation" of quotas for Tribals in education or employment. But it has also been demeaning in its depiction of them as primitive; or persecutory in the suppression by the powerful Indian Forest Service of the shifting cultivation on which many Tribals depend for subsistence (though the two-way flow at weekly markets shows how they have long been far from self-sufficient).

The suggestion that Tribals may not be Hindus challenges a fundamental claim of religious nationalists that all Indians are essentially Hindu, and that Christians, like Muslims, have been converted away from their inherent Hindu nature. This suggestion is often advanced by foreigners, and is easily interpreted as an unpatriotic position. Elwin was furiously attacked as a human-zoo isolationist by some nationalists, notably Ghurye (1943), who saw Tribals as Hindus who were backward—literally, lost in the jungle. Ghurye's solution to the Tribal "problem" was to assimilate them more closely along with other backward groups such as disadvantaged castes, effectively turning an ethnographic issue into a class issue. Having earlier been inclined in Elwin's direction, I now have to admit that Ghurye was also right to highlight continuities between Tribal and popular, low-caste Hindu customs and rituals, at least in historical and ethnographic terms if not always in terms of policy needs. Further fieldwork in the overtly Hindu Sora areas described in chapter 11 would surely reveal important closer links.

The view of tribes as lost or backward Hindus

(*vanvasi*, jungle dwellers) has gained ground with the recent growth of Hindu fundamentalism. However, the current political agenda for their fuller inclusion within "Hinduism" comes up against at least one significant obstacle. It would have to include much that is distasteful to mainstream or orthodox Hindu practice, such as blood sacrifice, alcohol, and greater sexual freedom for women. In a striking convergence of totalitarianisms, these are fundamental elements (or maybe values, see below) of local cultures that are suppressed by both mission Christianity and current mainstream Hindu ideology. Sundar (2007: 182-83) calls the latter a "cultural imperialism" since it happens "in a situation of economic and ideological inequality" and is not "a free and unproblematic 'assimilation'." Even while opposing each other, Elwin and Ghurye both assumed that assimilation was one-way. But Sundar points to the extent to which Tribal cultures have also influenced "Hinduism." Sarkar critiques the widespread claim that Hinduism is not a religion that converts, and argues that terms like "sanskritization" and "cultural integration" do indeed amount to what in other religious traditions would be called conversion. "Semantic aggression," he concludes bluntly, "could hardly go further" (2002: 221).

Some of the main scholarly explorations of the relationships between "Tribal" and "Hindu" date back several decades (Bailey 1960; Gardner 1982; Sinha 1962). Recently there have been studies quite near the Sora, from southern Odisha (Kulke and Schnepel 2001; Schnepel 2002; Rousseleau 2004; Berger 2015; Hardenberg 2005; Pfeffer 2001) and Bastar (A. Gell 1997; Sundar 1997). These studies often focus on how local tribes were integrated into small jungle kingdoms, where each caste or tribe participated in royal rituals to act out a specific cosmological and political role. The role of the tribes was to appear as inhabitants of a distant border zone and purveyors of jungle produce, much as they still do in weekly markets. These authors give detailed accounts of how such arrangements worked, and sometimes continue to

work today in a residual, fragmented sort of way long after those kingdoms have been formally abolished. I have called these structures and their accompanying styles “feudal,” and many of the forms of oppression that I observed or heard about, such as *corvée* and bonded labor, had been an integral part of this political economy since at least the early nineteenth century and possibly much earlier.

Tribes have rarely if ever been incorporated into broader sociological models of India, not only because of a shortage of information, but also because every account and every tribe seems so different, from early studies such as Elwin (1947), through Bailey (1960), to Carrin (1986), S. Gell (1992), Hardenberg (2005), or Berger (2015). The most systematic overall model of Indian society is that of Dumont (1980). He could make little of the Tribals, and by a curious coincidence, his only serious attempt occurs in his review (Dumont and Pocock 1959: 60–74; see also Dumont 1962) of Elwin’s book on the Sora (whom they both spell “Saora”). Dumont had difficulty placing what I have called Sora animists (a term he and Elwin do not use) within his hierarchical and totalizing model. On the one hand, he concludes that the Sora are “autonomous” and “not Hindus” because they “do not imitate the Hindus in the recognition of impurity. They do not submit directly to the scheme of Hindu values” (Dumont and Pocock 1959: 61). Here, he is referring especially to the absence of menstrual taboos. Yet on the other hand, they cannot be considered “absolutely alien to Hinduism” since their relation “with their spirits is achieved through marriage of their shamans with some of the Hindu dead, considered of higher rank and greater power than their own” (66).

Dumont does not appreciate the tribes’ supposed egalitarianism. Rather, one can feel his frustration with them for failing to be proper (i.e., hierarchical) Hindus. However, this also highlights a problem with Dumont’s extreme emphasis on ritual purity. Once he has committed himself so totally to this “value,” he then ties himself in knots over whether Elwin has given him adequate data in

terms of that value. True, ilda sonums do sometimes observe menstrual taboos in the Underworld, and during cremations shamans cover the rice grains in their dedicated ilda-pots to protect them from polluting ash blowing in the air. But insofar as animist Sora have any notion at all of ritual purity, and insofar as this is a “value,” it is not a *focused* value, linked coherently to the rest of Sora life. That is, it is not seriously internalized or operationalized, but is thought about only at moments when it is necessary to please the shaman’s ildas, who being Kshatriya also share Brahmin values of purity, though less intensely (there are no Brahmin sonums at all). Dumont might have looked for other high Hindu “values” such as *samsara* (rebirth) and *moksha* (release), but he would not have found these either, since the return of the Sora name is not a return of the person, while the aspect of the person that becomes a butterfly undergoes not liberation, but social deprivation.

The alphabet worshippers, Orjuno’s “Pure Ones” among the Sarda Sora down in the plains, come closest to obliging Dumont. Rather than rows of armed guards, they have only one image in their wall-paintings and in all of their iconography: the script itself, cradled inside the sacred letter *om* (figure 11.4, page 282). Several homegrown scripts emerged among Indian tribes in the first half of the twentieth century (Zide 1999), and present a similar reformist rhetoric of awakening. In a striking parallel to the dream of Mallia the Sarda Sora, Raghunath Murmu, the inventor (or discoverer) of the *ol chiki* script among the Santal, wrote plays in which “young heroes rediscover a forgotten script written in luminous letters on a rock” (Carrin Tambs-Lyche 2007: 9), “a message of hope that they, pure as they are, decipher in order to serve their community” (Carrin 2008: 33). These plays echo Murmu’s own experience, in which he was actually the one who had a vision of the script inscribed on a rock. Murmu told Carrin (2014: 82) that the script was written by the bongas (Santal deities) long ago—before the idea of sin—and then hidden from us, and that he was able to make this discovery

because of his pure heart.

These revivalist movements based on writing share a narrative which is also found among many indigenous peoples in upland Southeast Asia (Scott 2009: 221-24), that they once had a script of their own but lost it through trickery or their own foolishness—a fall which closely echoes the story of how the Sora lost the god Jagannath. The point of recent Indian versions, which seem to date especially from the late colonial period around the 1930s, is that they can at last recover it. This recovery represents a return to civilization while preserving their own ethnic identity, with a focus on purity that flies over the head of militaristic Kshatriya power and aims straight for the top of the Brahmin scale of values.

Up in the hills, among the Lanjia Sora, this Sarda Sora dream script with its neo-Hindu cult has made almost no converts apart from the old headman of Manengul back in the 1970s. Instead, the hunger for literacy has been met by Baptist Christianity, which faces up to Kshatriya power while also introducing a substitute for Brahmin notions of purity. This substitute is less essentialist: members of the church elite earn their positions through moral superiority, but this quality is not intrinsic, and is therefore hard to sustain. The notion of hypocrisy, by which a church leader's conduct may fail the expectations of his position, is quite different from the principles by which a Brahmin's purity may be claimed, defiled or restored. A Brahmin who cheats does not become ritually impure, but a Baptist who cheats damages his moral superiority. It is the non-intrinsic nature of a Baptist person's worth that accounts for the revolving door of promotion up to the church platform and demotion back down to the floor. True, the times have recently become less judgmental, and Monosi's round of apologies to pastors and congregations (pages 296-97) went a long way to help his reintegration. But what ended his twenty-seven-year exile from the platform was, simply and mechanically, the fact that he ceased to have two wives.

In contrast to the value of purity, the bureaucratic and military imagery of state power was well focused and was carried coherently through all areas of animist Sora life. Despite the distant Tribal ancestry claimed by some Indian rajas to legitimate their hold on local territory (Sinha 1962; though I have never heard this claimed about the Sora), rajas and other Kshatriya occupations, such as warriors and clerks, were a closed shop. For Sora old-timers it was harder to become a policeman than to become a leopard. Yet Kshatriya power is not such an intrinsic quality of a person like Brahmin purity, and state power was not so much an idealized *value*, as a principle of *action* in the world. Relations between Tribal and wider society were (and are) framed within Kshatriya-related idioms such as bureaucratic literacy, enforcement of debt (Malamoud 1995), patronage (Piliavsky 2014), and—over and over again—coercion based on the threat of violence. The principle of intimidation is so overriding that I eventually came to see it as a major driver of the defensive orientation of Sora religion (page 293).

Perhaps the transition from victimhood to aspiration has itself now become a value, with conversion providing the means. Sora animist religion was based on a symbolic co-opting of alien bureaucratic and military powers. Encounters with traders and officials were cast as a scenario of helpless victims persecuted by monstrous outsiders, and shielded by shamans who could summon protective sonums who were themselves mirror inversions of their persecutors. If royal power, with its armed guards and literate clerks, also represented a Hindu "value," then this value had a distinctive political property: you could participate in it not as a subject or agent, but only as its object or victim; you could only endure it or supplicate it, evade it or satirize it. More literal attempts at manipulating Kshatriya power did not work, which is why the headman Sidorov's abusive regime in Sogad was regarded as an absurd, pretentious imitation of royalty beyond his entitlement. This lack of agency was symbolically

mitigated through two ambiguous intermediary roles. Headmen enjoyed a pale reflection of the kingly imagery of the raja from whom their authority was ultimately devolved, though this was cramped and manipulated by the bariks; while shamans married Kshatriyas in the Underworld. My understanding of the sonum husbands of my friends Ononti, Rajani, Gallanti, Taranti, Sompani and Lokami is very different from that of Dumont. Though they are sonums they are not “dead,” since they have never been alive in an ordinary sense. Rather, these ildas with their mock-Oriya names are hypostatizations, now increasingly obsolete, of a previous form of the state, precariously harnessed through a marital relationship which feels always just out of reach (pages 321-22).

Scott (2009) does not extend his notion of Zomia into central India. But actually, just as the kingdoms of Southeast Asia are Hinduized, so Indian hill tribes like the Sora are Zomian, in a comparable pattern of complementarity and evasion. Yet if there was a Sora “art of not being governed,” this was severely compromised. By any of Scott’s criteria of local “anarchy” they were also deeply permeated by its opposite: the Sora’s ecological niche of shifting cultivation was combined with their own irrigated rice cultivation (see figure 1.2, page 13); the egalitarian strands of their ethos were tempered by headmanship and the differential ownership of those paddy fields; and the intense orality of their ritual was powered by an intimate relationship with literate Kshatriya clerks and policemen in the Underworld. For Southeast Asia at least, Scott suggests that such communities may “take advantage of agro-ecological niches in trading with nearby states yet manage to avoid subordination as subjects (2009: 334).” Certainly, the Sora in feudal and late animist times acted out their upland agricultural niche in the lowland weekly markets; but they had internalized the state too deeply to avoid subordination, and indeed the weekly markets were established as a tool to ensure this result (pages 131-32). The Sora path away from subordination through schooling

and Christianization, by becoming clerks and policemen themselves, has made the Underworld compensation seem pointless. It has also involved de-Zomianizing—that is, becoming less different from the lowland populations surrounding them (pages 250-51).

The Sora lived at the intersection of leopard power and police power (pages 64-65), the awesome mysteries of the jungle and of the state, which were combined in shamans' wall-paintings. They sonumized each of these powers in order to appropriate it, and since sonums were ultimately human, they humanized them. Yet this phenomenon was set in history. When could these sonums have taken this form? Rajas, warriors, policemen and clerks could not have been so prominent in the depths of the jungle until Mughal and British times. Once they had infiltrated they could hardly be defeated by evasion, as the Sora had perhaps done in less integrated times—and they could not be manipulated or persuaded. However, the dead could. Their dialogues with the living were truly extraordinary, and I have analyzed, loved, and lost the last moments of a phase of Sora history. Yet what was that phase? Assuming the dead already had some version of the power they generally seem to have in any animist cosmology, then a situation may have arisen in which the living became very affected by their lack of agency in their relations with these newly overwhelming forces. In this highly verbal culture, no Sora could speak to any outsider except through an exploitative interpreter. To compensate, they may have developed a verbal *involution of agency*, in which their political helplessness was offset by an intimate symbolic manipulation of that power which was possessed by the dead: subaltern without, but sovereign within. The evidence is largely circumstantial, but if I am right then what I witnessed in the 1970s was not just the end of an ancient jungle religion, but also a historically contingent event. What Christian conversion has done is to *unfurl that involution*.

The way in which the victim of a sonum is transformed into a perpetrator in order to pass on a suffering undergone is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic concept of “identification with the aggressor” or with the “persecutor” (Anna Freud 1936; Fenichel 1946), in which a person once abused goes on to abuse others as a defense. However, the shamans’ ildas also exemplify another kind of defense, through a different form of intimacy with the aggressor. It is common around the world for shamans or mediums to have sexual relations with spirits and even to marry them (Sternberg 1925; Hamayon 1990: 454-90; Crapanzano 1980), but among Sora shamans this is angled in a particular way. By marrying policemen and clerks they are in effect marrying the feudal state, in order to domesticate it. The problem of domination by Kshatriyas was political, but within the feudal framework there could be no political solution. The headman and the shaman each had their own kind of authority. The headman strutted and fretted his hour upon the stage but was easily exposed as weak in the face of outsiders; the shaman masked this political problem by psychologizing and theologizing it. One can only speculate who the shamans’ sonum husbands may have been in pre-feudal times, perhaps by burrowing deep into comparative Austroasiatic ethnography across Southeast Asia. In their recent high-caste form ildas are strikingly elusive, lacking personality even to their shaman wives who do not see their faces in the murky Underworld and have no sensory experience of their embraces (pages 321-22). As Christianity and schooling threw open the gates by introducing literacy for all, this compensation too was exposed as no more than a symbolic placeholder for a political solution, even while the problem was being updated into new configurations.

In the 1970s, the raja and his henchmen were still present in the conservative imagery of songs and wall-paintings, but the kingdom itself already seemed very absent since there were no physical acts of participation and little memory of such performances. Jungle power was

becoming extinct through deforestation and development, and only state power remained. The *panchayat* system had severed the headmen from connections to the rajas, so that on the Koraput (now Rayagada) side of the district boundary their authority could go nowhere further up the line toward distant Jeypore. On the Ganjam (now Gajapati) side, Parlakimidi was nearer but the raja there lost interest anyway and moved to Madras, leaving his abandoned palace to crumble between the roots of strangling figs. Everywhere paths of officialdom led instead to the civil authorities of the modern, democratic state, which, for all its problems, was less coercive and was becoming participatory in a way that did not limit one's status or role. Before 2000 the bariks had withered away, the police had become more answerable, and some Lanjia Sora had started to join the state, becoming not only policemen, but also school teachers, revenue officers, even district magistrates ("collector") and state ministers (pages 251-52). If I do not become such a person myself, I may have a relative who is and who can help me. The focus shifts from tribe and caste to networks, class and patronage (Piliavsky 2014), from essence to effectiveness. It is not for nothing that Baptist pastors wear clean white dhotis that make them look like classic Indian politicians.

Christian

In recent years the anthropology of Christianity (Cannell 2006; van der Veer 1996; Hefner 1993) has become a major field of research, as large swathes of the world's "traditional" or "indigenous" religions have been supplanted, often by forms of evangelical Protestantism. This is the intensification of an old process from colonial times (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Mageo and Howard 1996). With post-war global American ascendancy it has left few regions untouched, from the Inuit of the Arctic (Laugrand and Oosten 2010) to the jungle tribes of

Borneo (Chua 2012) and even to long-Catholicized Latin America (Martin 1993; Vilaça 2016).

However, when one reads these ethnographies closely, they often reveal an extraordinary situation. By the time the anthropologist reaches them, the societies they describe are *already* Christian. Indeed, some of the most influential work in this field (Robbins 2004; Meyer 1999; Rafael 1993) is based on research carried out respectively fifteen to thirty years, 150 years, and several centuries after the event. These studies thus become an enterprise in spiritual archaeology, in which the pre-Christian religion must be reconstructed backwards as an opposed pre-echo of a more strongly-drawn later Christian presence.

My situation is the reverse and more like that of Tuzin (1997), in whose New Guinea field site one Sunday the men announced in church to the women that their secret men's cult had all been an illusion and a fraud. To my understanding, this was an acknowledgment that what Seligman *et al.* (2008) call the subjunctive "as if" ritual mode (or at least the pre-Christian one) no longer worked. I was not only immersed in the old Sora religion but as an ancestor-man and funeral dancer, actively practicing it. This was my starting point, from which I have had to construct the new religion forwards. Even if I was not a literal believer I had become naturalized into animism behaviorally and linguistically, so even with my background of Christian assemblies at school in England and linguistic study of the Greek New Testament, it was Sora Christianity that appeared strange and in need of interpretation. I still sometimes find it hard not to see it as an absence, as a failure to think, feel and act in an animist way. This is my own twist on Dumont's sense of animist Sora failing to be proper Hindus.

Why do sonums exist? Animists and Baptists agree that this just is how the world is. So what kind of world do sonums constitute? In Elwin's representation of Sora thinking, they oppress the living relentlessly and do nothing but persecute and make demands. Sora Baptists actually

believe this, like their former Canadian missionaries, for whom the Sora's "whole creation teems and groans with demons" (Orchard and McLaurin [1924]: 101). Why then were sonums ever tolerated? The Baptist answer is that this was through ignorance and that they should not be tolerated, and that the world can be made different and better by suppressing their power through a higher, more benevolent power.

This picture seems unlikely *a priori*: how could a population function for millennia, working productively across a landscape and laughing as well as crying, in a state of cosmic ignorance? How can there be a metaphysics that is all take and no give? This is an ideology of Christian telos, but as an empirical analysis it is fundamentally wrong. Sonums are a relational as well as a cosmological concept, and a sonum's nature comes not only from its theological properties but also from its kinship position as a person. Elwin somehow managed to write: "If the dead are satisfied, they will not interfere with the normally beneficent purposes of nature ... gods and dead alike are thought of as fertility-destroying but not as fertility-promoting" (Elwin 1955: 302). But this is nonsense. We have seen how there is no such impersonal domain as "nature," and how with the passage of time ancestors balance their demands for sacrifices by also putting their soul-force into crops. This is what time is, and also why crops grow, and specifically why they grow on particular plots of land inhabited by particular ancestors and cultivated by particular descendants (map 8.1, pages 204-05, of the present book, and Vitebsky 1993: 138-41, 221-23). The way Ononti was taken at death by her family's long-term Earth-Sonum (pages 314-15) offers a particular creative adaptation of this idea.

If there is no theological principle of absolute goodness, this is not because the animist cosmos is evil: the entire cosmology is not dualistic but cyclical, and the repetition of personal names is just an obvious pointer to this principle. Ancestors shift over time from being takers

to givers. Even Monosi did not realize how they infused their soul-force into their descendants' crops until I wrote out the chants that say this explicitly (e.g. page 90). It was Mengalu's information, which Monosi had helped me to transcribe, which allowed me to map the ancestors they both shared onto the hillsides where these ancestors reside. This animistic form of reciprocity echoes the mutual constitution between Hindu gods and their devotees analysed by Piliavsky (2015), with a crucial difference: this is not a patron-client relationship, and it is not hierarchical. Older converts like Monosi had the cultural background that might have allowed them to see things the way Mengalu did, though this possibility is now closed to young people born into Christianity. Monosi had actively forgotten it by the time he met me, but Pastor Damano had very knowingly used this knowledge against itself, in a way that was more forceful than that of his missionary Miss Munro because he was better informed.

Whence comes the ideological weight that makes it so necessary and so easy to deny the nurturing side of the animist cycle of relationships? I have come to see the answer in a disjunction between the Sora animists' perspectivist cosmology, which was cyclical and multi-positional, and their political situation, which was the site of a dualistic polarization between outsider persecutors and insider victims. Though individual encounters could be more nuanced, as a cosmological type, officials of every sort were viewed as malign (*duaing*). There seems to have been nothing like the Gond tribe's elaborate politico-ritual manipulation of the raja of Bastar (A. Gell 1997), nor were the Pano regarded as servants, as they were among the Kond of Orissa described by Bailey (1960). Political and economic relations with non-Sora, if not with Sora ancestors, really were all take and no give, and it is the analogy with this that makes the view of uncompensated sonum persecution seem plausible. Elwin, who had seen a lot in his time, all over the country, wrote (1955: 60) "The Saora's threshing floor... is indeed one of the saddest places

in India." In his autobiography he referred to the exceptionally "shocking exploitation" of the Sora by traders and moneylenders who swooped to take away their harvest, and he also called the Sora "the most religious people I have ever met" (1964: 190-91). I suspect there is a real connection between these. Each dead person's requirement for several buffalo translated into a multi-generational compound debt, so that every Sora was a multiple-bonded debtor, a *crypto-kambari*. Like ancestors, Pano too were in a social relationship, a local form of the type called in India *jajmani*, and, in their way, they too were constitutive of the living Sora person. Even while hated, they were referred to relationally as "my Pano" or "our barik." I felt them as a creepy intrusion that could materialize in any situation, hovering silently like Death in a Bergman film, but they were impossible to get rid of because they had inserted themselves into the community's internal relationships and had become part of everyone's self. It was not only sonums that repeated and perpetuated themselves as causes of death, but also the poverty caused by the need to keep servicing those deaths.

The lost police notes from the 1940s recorded that the Puttasing police station was about to be downgraded to a mere police outpost, but that this decision was reversed after the great *fituri* uprising of 1941 (described in Elwin 1945). I saw the burned-out Pano village from the last *fituri* in 1977 (page 133). Like other *fituris* it failed to change anything, but meanwhile Baptist conversion was succeeding. During the 1990s and 2000s, for the first time, any village burnings have been between Hindu fundamentalist groups and Christian Tribals, mostly among the Kond to the north. The Sora heartland is so solidly Baptist that these disturbances were unable to penetrate it; but in the neighboring, more mixed areas where they took place, they can be seen as a reaction to the Tribals' growing assertiveness. The cycle of Sora *fituris* ceased, and the security provided by the Baptist Association is probably the reason why there is little support for the Maoist Naxalites in

an otherwise Naxalite-prone wider region (Sundar 1997, 2016; Shah 2010; Bates and Shah 2014). Christians are manifestly better fed and in better health than animists, and have more money. This is not just from mission handouts, as anti-Christian activists claim, but from more prosperity-generating internal structures, and above all from becoming more immune to extortion.

In the new world of opportunity, it is hard to separate the causal roles of church and government. Certainly, the government's development programs increased the *inflow* of wealth to this area, but it was literacy and bilingualism that staunched the *outflow*. Like medicine, reduced mortality, and the restructuring of old patterns of oppression, these came from the missionaries first. Missionaries, too, trained the first Lanjia Sora to occupy the positions that the same government had reserved for scheduled tribes. On every point, the government was a latecomer, being quite ineffectual until the 1980s, when the transformative impetus of Christianity was picked up by formal schooling.

Thus conversion was not just *toward* Christianity, but also *away from* a complex web of relations. When Oransu raged at his sister's ildas for not saving his adored wife, or Ambadi rejected the entire animist cosmology in order to escape from her overbearing father, these were not just one-off events but microcosmic exemplars, expressed through particular family configurations, of a huge historical process. This supports Horton's insight long ago (1971, 1975a, 1975b), that conversion makes sense only in terms of what was already there, so that Christianization is a precipitation of something that is in the air.

Much of the literature on conversion (e.g., Keane 2007; van der Veer 1996) emphasizes a quest for "modernity." I would argue that Sora conversion is not about modernity as such, since modern things such as literacy, medicine, employment and consumer goods have been around for a long time. It is that these things had not been available *to them*. Conversion is not so much about

changing the world, as about improving one's own position within the existing repertoire of roles and opportunities. Animists can only act out symbolic fantasies of deflecting victimhood. Baptists abolish it altogether.

This interpretation supports Robbins' idea (2004: 15-16) of humiliation as a driving force for conversion. In Soraland, humiliation was politically institutionalized, psychologically internalized, and ritually performed. As I started to dress and act like a Sora, Inama dreamed that I too was humiliated for this by outsiders, just as he was (page 33). This humiliation made it easy for Christians to deny the reciprocal nurturing role of the dead, in a one-sided understanding that supports the goal of rupture as "a future... totally independent of the causal thrust of the present" (Robbins 2007:12). The shift to Christianity occurs as the Sora's humiliation ceases to be amenable to the mechanism whereby previous generations compensated for a lack of political agency in the outside world with an elaborate psychological and performative agency within. It allows young Sora to move beyond their parents' victimhood, in a rupture that is the source of a new kind of agency, but also its product.

The underlying dynamic of this kind of conversion is a shift of investment away from continuity. Unlike the "patchy continuity" identified by Joshi (2013) in Nagaland, Pastor Damano made an aggressive "investment in discontinuity" (Robbins 2007: 12), which was the opposite of Lokami's deepened investment in continuity when she took over Ononti's ilda sonums and graduated from being a healing shaman to becoming a funeral shaman. Sora Baptist rupturism matches the title of Connerton's book *How modernity forgets* (2009) in a particular way: the Sora are forgetting a particular kind of relationality in which "remembering," as that young Baptist put it, quite literally "makes you ill."

Robbins's rallying-cry (2007) is for an anthropology of Christianity that will be rooted in the concept of a Christian *culture*. All the discussants of his

paper agree in seeing rupture as a defining feature of Christian culture, summarizing this culture as “how people come to see the world in explicitly Christian ways” (23) and cultural change as “the socialization of interpretive frames, including those that define ontological commitments” (31). In a comparative article, Robbins, Schieffelin and Vilaça (2014) show how three quite diverse animist religions (two from Papua New Guinea and one from Amazonia) all home in from different directions on the heart as the focus of a new evangelical Christian self. Where the heart was already available in an old religion as a site of thought and emotion, it underwent a “hypertrophic development” (585); where it was not available, this notion was developed anew.

The fact that the word *tamongkum* (heart) has become prominent in Sora Baptist discourse despite not even occurring in the Bible (so far as I can see) suggests that an emphasis on the heart is indeed important for a Christian cultural style. However, all Robbins’s examples of conversion are from evangelical Protestantism. This is not the only response, and it is not what Bambu and his friends from Manengul were doing when they invited Father Joseph to make them Catholic (page 164). For them, the appeal of Catholicism lay in a *qualified* rupture, in what they did not have to give up *so completely*: alcohol, bigamy, and remembering.

The Sora context also suggests an extension of Robbins’s tight link between conversion and Christian culture. Despite pagan residues and the rise of modern atheism, Christianity is so old in Europe that it feels indigenous (though Sora become confused when I say it is declining there, *masuna*). As such it is “fully formed” and “a culturally integrated system” (Robbins 2007: 22), and we can add that this has happened to such an extent that it has long been the main European idiom for a conservative investment in *continuity*. However, in India a full cultural integration of Christianity is never possible because the surrounding world is so very Hindu (Robinson and Clarke 2007): the officials, the bus stands, the cinema posters, the

wayside shrines, the prayers, the public festivals, the nationalism, the loudspeaker songs, the crowds, their body decoration ... Whatever the solidarity within Baptist territory, it seems inevitable that some animist Sora would eventually start shifting, not only to Christianity, but also to Hindu sects. Detienne (2008: 32; cited in Robbins, Schieffelin and Vilaça 2014: 562-63) writes "When a society ... adopts a particular element of thought, it makes a particular choice that might have been different. The job of the ... analyst is to discern the constraints." I have shown some of the Sora's constraints, but the notion of choice is more obscure. Pettua, Gorsang and their father made the move back and forth between Christianity and Hinduism several times, and their village of Timlo is a meeting point of coexistence (or of strife) between the two religions. Outside the Baptist stronghold around Serung or the residual animist center around Sogad and Rajingtal, there are many such mixed areas. Your choice of *ompu* (group, page 265) is partly a question of where you live (so that most young Sora in the hills are Baptist by default), but also of who makes you a more attractive offer (as Catholics and rogue evangelicals sniff around the Baptist flock).

In offering a destination for conversion *away* from the old ways, the neo-Hindu movements are functional equivalents of Christianity (itself now offering a "choice" of many sects). Though the balance between coercion and collusion may vary, as may the level of conscious awareness and intention, this logic of historical rejection has parallels across revolutionary and modernist thinking more widely, from the violent conversion to communism of Siberian reindeer herders in the 1930s (Vitebsky 2005, 2012) to the "cultural amnesia" and "repeated intentional destruction of the built environment" in modern town planning (Connerton 2009: 99, 117). This reorientation coerces or seduces loyalty toward something less animistic and intimate, which somehow comes to seem more compelling. For newly Sovietized citizens this was the state and the commissars' historical materialism; for many

jungle tribes around the world today, from the Sora to the Warí of Amazonia described by Vilaça (2016), it is the missionaries' monotheistic God; for Sora turning neo-Hindu, it is a belonging to the modernist state. This shift does not simply sunder them from something old, but rather displaces it and diminishes its value. That something was a profound commitment to a particularly intimate other, which also made you who you are yourself. For Siberian reindeer herders this other was the spirits of the land; for animist Sora it was their own ancestors; for the Warí it was animals. This seems to be a widespread mechanism of conversion: spirits, ancestors and animals used to be active, vibrant persons, even if they are not living humans in the ordinary sense that we are—or especially because of this. Now they may continue to exist, but with their cosmological and emotional significance greatly reduced through a process of selective disenchantment. The Siberian landscape, the Sora dead, the animals in the Warí jungle become *merely* a meat-producing ranch, *merely* people who lived previously, *merely* wildlife. To become distanced from them no longer feels like a deprivation, because it is no longer possible to imagine being attached to them in such an intense, integrated way.

But however oppressed you are, whatever elaborate symbolic compensations you have evolved, and however ready you are to jump, you cannot do this until someone offers you a place to land. Yet once a Sora leaves the old animism, the “cultural content” between Christianity and Hinduism, its “system of meanings with a logic of its own” (Robbins 2007: 7), emerges as very different, as does the political implication. Becoming Baptist is an act of dissidence and local marginality that turns for support to a different kind of centre, a Jerusalem or Vancouver that is not directly experienced but virtual; by contrast, becoming a reformed Hindu is an act of local conformity to a program of national homogenization served up as a homecoming, with a modernizing “investment” that lies not in

discontinuity but in a reconstructed continuity through upgrading.

Though the situation has some aspects of a spiritual market, there are no situations of systematic doctrinal comparison, as in the theological debates of medieval Mongolia or in Lucian's satirical *Sale of Belief Systems*, written in the second century AD. Once it becomes a mass movement, any "choice" is no longer just about the *content* of belief. Early pioneers like Monosi and Pastor Pilipo were led to Jisu through personal visions of him pouring blood like a sacrificial buffalo (pages 137-38; a continuity beneath the rupture). Now there seems to be a significant gulf between thinkers such as church leaders (whatever their personal moral failures) who are concerned with belief or faith, and what may be called lumpen-Baptists, who often seem unable or unwilling to engage in theological conversations when I try to initiate them (pages 257-58). This is so different from the old animists, every one of whom constantly discussed sonums in detail. The more the Baptist church consolidates its position institutionally, the more it risks a dilution of theological curiosity. If the initial success of the church as a small club came from new thinking, now its success as a mass movement comes from the fact that the congregation do not need to think very much, but rather just to do. They seem not so much orthodox as orthoprax, concerned with correct actions rather than with correct belief. This is confirmed by the conduct I observe in church (pages 167, 169-71, 216), where people are drilled by a marshal to sit still, cast their eyes down, and (if female) cover their heads. Yet this is cross-cut by the new problem of sincerity (pages 219-21), which "morally privileges intent over action," as the congregation struggles to make a shift from the "as if" mode of ritual to the "as is," with its "never-ending production of new signs" of this sincerity (Seligman *et al.* 2008: 105).

Barua (2014) usefully explores the common Christian view, which also seeps into the field of

comparative religion, that the metaphysical presuppositions of Christianity should be the normative basis for encounters with other religions. He reviews the history of Western attitudes to Hindu thought, and characterizes three phases. The general nineteenth-century Western view of Hinduism was of an “absence, defect or lack” (217), epitomized in a quote from 1839 describing it as “a stupendous system of error” (217; citing Laird 1972: 207). In the late nineteenth century, this was modified into a graduated scale, in which Christianity stood at the evolutionary summit while religions like Hinduism were now encompassed within divine providence since they contained “pre-sentiments” of divine truth, though still remaining lower down the scale (217; citing Slater 1882: 112). Hinduism was now not a stupendous error but a “perfectible intimation of Christian truth” (217). By the late twentieth century, there arose a style of “particularism” among theologians that viewed Hinduism, and any other religion, as “a finely spun web” with an “internal coherence, structure and integrity” that should not be violated by subordinating it to the presuppositions of Christianity (216). The postliberal theologian Lindbeck (1984) regards different religions as incommensurable and even denies that they necessarily refer to the same truths or experiences: “theological statements are not truth-claims about a pre-existent reality,” but rather their meaning lies in “the specific discourse which constitutes it” (Barua 2014: 220).

Of particular interest to us is the notion of “multiple salvations” (219), which this last approach acknowledges, though here even Lindbeck still seems ambivalent. On the one hand he writes that “other religions have resources for speaking truths and referring to realities ... of which Christianity as yet knows nothing,” yet nonetheless, Christians may still be in a specially privileged position to help “adherents of other religions to purify and enrich their heritages” (1984: 61). The Sora animists managed their rich notion of salvation (*tandi*, which I earlier translated as “redemption”) without help from Christianity. It is the key

term that I found to be common between the Baptist and the animist views of how the suffering of death can be assuaged (pages 228-33). This is, of course, the ultimate goal of Christianity, but it will be a challenge to many Christians to recognize that it is also the main goal of Sora animistic eschatology. Most Baptist Sora deny the parallel or seek to tone it down, though the young Monosi was alerted to it by reflecting on the parallel meanings of animal blood and Jisu's blood. Do these two uses of "redemption" derive the same meaning from their own "specific discourses," or separate meanings? Not being a theologian, I cannot say; but as an anthropologist I have highlighted a social, as well as logical, difference between these two discourses. For Sora animists, redemption is accomplished not by a transcendent entity (*via* the individual's own relation with that entity) but by the dead person's own ancestors, as sung and danced by living ancestor-men. So both suffering, and release from suffering, originate from the same source, namely one's relationship with other humans and even with the same humans in their different moods. The innovation by Christianity is not (as Christians might suppose) to introduce salvation, but to understand it in a dualistic way which separates the source of suffering from the source of its reparation, into different entities rather than into different modalities of the same entities.

For all but the most ecumenical Hindus this agonizing is irrelevant: who cares what Christians think about our gods? For Hindu nationalists, this Christian fantasy of normativity is patronizing colonialist nonsense. But colonialism operates on many levels including inside the nation, as Sundar and Sarkar both point out. The Western attitudes to Hinduism in Barua's survey closely resemble high-caste Hindu attitudes to the religion of Tribals in their own country. Some, like the Brahmin teacher who told me that the Sora have no religion (pages 15-16), echo the disdain of that British commentator in 1839 and see anything different from themselves as barbarous superstition. More seriously, I was often asked

by high-caste government officers to encourage my Sora friends to give up drinking and buffalo sacrifice. These interventions were attempts to pressure people into cleaning up a way of life that was seen as primitive and inferior. Other, more flexible, Hindus believe that Tribal religions do indeed contain “pre-sentiments” and “perfectible intimations” of Hindu forms that are higher along an evolutionary scale. This (sometimes minus the evolutionary superiority and intimations of imperfection) is the view of many Indian and foreign scholars, who see the totality of what is called “Hinduism” as composed of an intertwining multiplicity of local, regional and textual traditions (actually not very different from “Christianity”). It is perhaps by avoiding master narratives about values such as purity that one can best reflect on the old question: Are Tribals really Hindu? The Tribals have probably never been fully isolated (whatever that could mean), but rather have always derived their identity from their relation to current forms of the state (Chandra 2015). As today’s parallel between Christian and neo-Hindu movements confirms, the big transition for the Sora has been, not so much from animism to Christianity, as rather from an indirect feudal relationship with local rajas to a relationship of direct participation in the democratic nation-state. Christianization is just one among several possible vehicles or idioms for this.
