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PART I

SONUM: THE CONTINUATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS AFTER DEATH

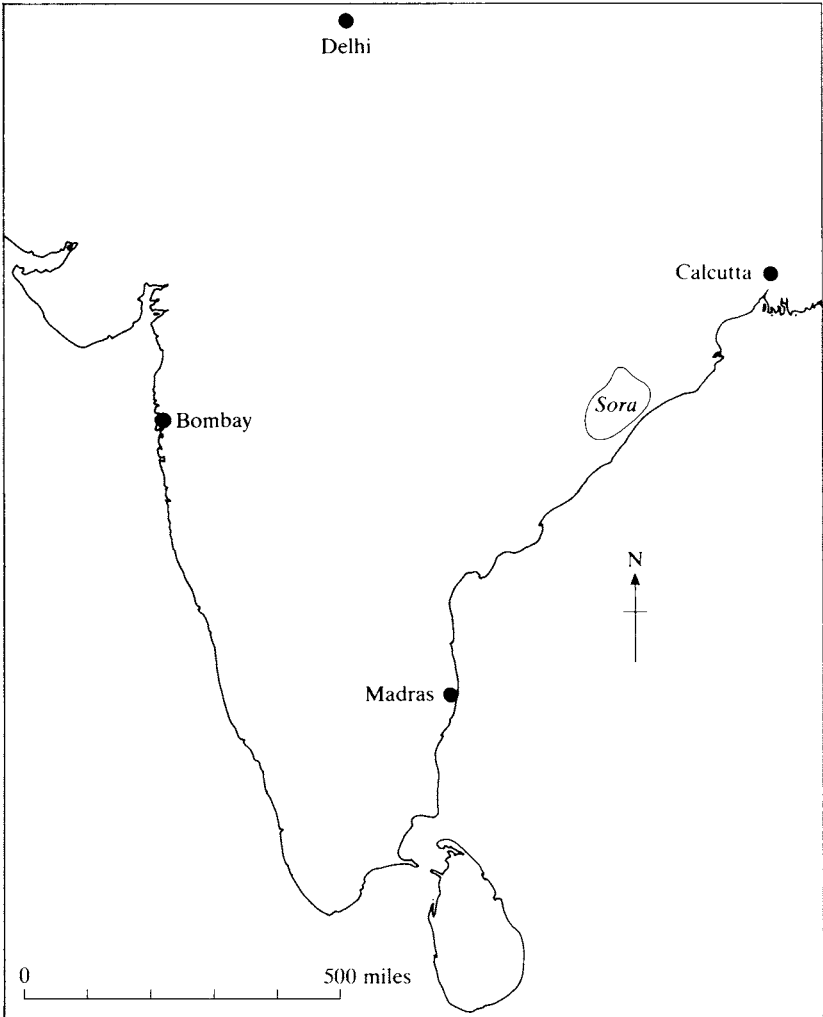
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Figure 1.1 General location of the Sora.



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Dialogues between the living and the dead

The encounter

The Sora are an aboriginal ‘tribe’ who live in the forested hills around the borders of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, towards the eastern seaboard of India (figure 1.1; see also chapter 2). In every Sora village, almost every day, living people conduct dialogues with the dead, who speak to them through the mouth of a shaman in trance. The following is a typical example, which will reappear in context in chapter 7 (lines 251–62). A little girl who died recently has returned to speak with her young mother. Her mother is too overcome with grief to respond and the talking is done on her behalf by an older woman, the child’s aunt. Here and in dialogues throughout the book, names and remarks of dead speakers are in italics.

Text 1.1 Dialogue between a dead little girl and her living aunt

Little girl: [arriving from the Underworld, faintly] *Mother, where are my nose-rings?*

Living aunt: [answering for the girl’s mother] They must have burned up in the pyre, darling, we looked but couldn’t find them. I don’t know whether they jumped to one side or what.

Little girl: [petulantly] *Why aren’t you showing me my nose-rings?*

Aunt: They were so tiny. If I’d found them of course I’d show them to you. [a pause; the aunt continues] Oh my love, my darling, don’t cause your own illness in others. Can you say that your mother and father didn’t sacrifice for you? They didn’t turn their backs or refuse to help you, did they? Think of all those pigs, all those chickens, goats, buffalos, my lovely child. Didn’t your father say, ‘Let’s

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light a fire, let her stay at home and not go out to work, look at her, she's already got the face of an old woman', didn't he say that? . . . What? Your two gold necklaces aren't here, Sarsuno's wearing them now . . .

Little girl: [addressing herself to her silent mother, and crying] *Mother, you were horrid to me, you scolded me, you called me Scar-Girl, you called me Leper-Girl, you said, 'You're a big girl now, why should I feed you when you sit around doing nothing?' . . .*

Aunt: She didn't mean it, she couldn't help saying it: after all, you were growing up and there were such a lot of chores to do.

Little girl: [sulkily] *I want my necklaces . . . I used to hobble round bent double, I couldn't stand up straight . . . [unreasonable childish tone] Why can't I have my nose-rings? . . . I have to go digging, shovelling and levelling earth [in the Underworld], all without my nose-rings. My mother came from Khond country, she gave it to me in her womb, it's in her family. I came out in scars all over, my fingers started dropping off. That illness was passed on to me, that's how I got ill. But I've been healed down below: my [father's] Ancestors redeemed me and I'm healed now.*

Aunt: So don't you pass it on, don't you give it to your mother and little sisters!

Little girl: *If I grab them I grab them, if I touch them I touch them, if I pass it on I pass it on: that's how it goes. But I'm all right now.*

Aunt: Your cough your choking, your scars your wounds, don't pass them on . . .

Little girl: *My Mummy doesn't care enough about me.* [returns to the Underworld]

This book is about Sora people's awareness of their own mortality and of the mortality of those around them. At first sight, 'mortality' suggests the organic and fleshly nature of humans, our predisposition to fall ill, to decay and to create our own replacements through sexuality. But the Sora will also force us to ask what it is that dies and what it means to be dead. The interpretation which I shall offer is that for them, death is not a negation or absence of life. Rather, 'life' and 'death' are both phases of a person's total existence and close relations between persons are maintained across the line dividing these two states.

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In dialogues between living and dead, speakers persuade, cajole, tease, remind, deceive, plead with each other. Dialogues represent a mutual quest for awareness about the other person's state of mind. At the same time, they are the medium through which each person's being is constantly moulded. Living and dead people cause each other to do things through dialogues at the same time as they are themselves changed by these encounters. Each person is an agent, but at the same time is acted upon and does not simply return to his or her previous state. Since this kind of mutual moulding of persons passes through their loss and separation from each other, this book is also about the special place which death has for the Sora in their feelings of love and resentment, grief and anger. Finally, since life and death are set within the passage of time and against the birth of new generations, this book is also about social continuity and hope.

What is a dead person? A person who dies becomes a *sonum* (pronounced with a long o).¹ This word designates both an entity and a state. There is no article in the Sora language; but following Sora usage one can say of a dead person either that he has 'become a [particular] sonum' or that he has 'become sonum' (in both cases *sonum-en gadille*). Virtually all illnesses and deaths are said by the Sora to be caused in some way by sonums. In attacking the living, the dead seek to transfer to them certain experiences which they themselves underwent at the moment of their deaths. They do this by 'eating the soul' (*puradan jum-*) of the living victim in order to absorb him, thereby causing in him a kind of symptom or of death which is analogous to that which was undergone by the attacker himself (cf. the last few lines of text I.1, above). However, the dead do not only attack the living and harm them: they also nourish and protect them. It is the interplay of these two contradictory attitudes, respectively aggressive and nurturing, which lies at the heart of Sora thinking about their dead.

Sora hold their dialogues sometimes in the open by a path, stream or cremation ground, sometimes in the shadowy interior of the house. The shaman, who is frequently though not always a woman, sits at the centre of a group of people. Sora say that her soul leaves her body and goes to a separate domestic life, with husband and children, in the Underworld (*kinorai desa*). While she is in a dissociated state of trance, her body is available for a succession of the dead who speak, one at a time, through her mouth. According to the mood of the dialogue and the degree of their involvement, their living interlocutors may squat on their haunches and huddle intently around her arguing vehemently with the dead, weep and embrace her, or else come and go at the edge of the proceedings and interpose a careless remark. A sequence of dialogues can last up to several

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hours and range from casual gossip to extremes of emotion which I could never learn to observe while remaining unmoved. But dialogues with the dead are not all tears: they often include moments of good humour and of obscene joking amidst uproarious laughter.

A dialogue is always associated with the performance or promise of a sacrifice by the living to the dead. Though in one sense the dead have power, at the same time they exist in a state of emotional and material deprivation. Dialogues are thus not only a communication but also a feeding. They are held on certain occasions: at the divination to find out the cause of a patient's illness; in some of the subsequent healings; at certain seasonal harvest rites; and at the various stages of each person's funeral rites. In a large village of 500 people a dialogue may take place from about five times a week to about ten times a day, according to season. Dialogues contain a quest for a verdict or for an increase in certainty. During divinations, living people seek the cause of a patient's illness; where a healing requires a trance, they seek confirmation that their sacrifice has been successful; while at a funeral they seek understanding about the cause of the victim's death. Whether on behalf of a recently deceased person or of a currently ill one, dialogues with the dead are largely discussions of the

1 Shamans in trance sit side by side at a funeral, surrounded by mourners.



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motivation and operation of these attempts to eat the living. Through the offering of a sacrificial animal as a substitute (*apanadu*) for a patient, they are also a means of forestalling the consummation of these attempts.

The people who take part in a dialogue are generally a wider or narrower circle of relatives. Under these circumstances, various groupings and regroupings among the living and the dead find themselves in constantly recurring contact: family conversations, jokes and quarrels continue after some of their participants have crossed the dividing line between life and death. It will become increasingly clear in later chapters how the occasions which precipitate these dialogues are not simply concerned with resolving a situation of the moment. Rather, these conversations are episodes in long-running discussions which may bear ultimately on quite different and much larger matters.

An outline of the argument

I have organised this book around a series of dialogues between the living and the dead. These dialogues involve characters whom the reader will meet in chapter 2 and whose relationships we shall then follow through the book, both while all of these persons are alive and after some of them have died and become sonums. Part I gives a general outline of Sora ideas of the person in life and death. Part II analyses a funeral dialogue in which the living discuss with a recently-dead person the meaning of his death and how it will affect their relationship with each other in the future. Part III analyses the dialogue at a healing rite, in which a family converses with nineteen dead persons who have been close to them at different times in the past. Each dead person is now seen to be in a distinct cosmological position along the trajectory of his or her overall existence. By analysing the evolution of moods in both the living and the dead, I show how a person's private feelings are linked to the unfolding texture of continuing society over a broad sweep of time. Finally, I compare the metaphysics and practices of Sora shamanism with those underlying contemporary psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, and relate each of these to the societies which they serve.

To study how a group of unfamiliar people talk about some of their deepest feelings is not to diminish these feelings in our own eyes, but to try to make them at least a little more accessible. Anywhere in the world, regardless of their metaphysics, we may expect people to love and resent each other, the bereaved to grieve and the sick to fear for themselves. But another language or culture is not simply a filter which we can remove in order to understand other people's experiences as our own. Concepts of

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emotion '[serve] complex communication, moral and cultural purposes rather than simply [being] labels for internal states whose nature or essence is presumed to be universal' (Lutz 1988: 5).

Nonetheless, having been obliged to express myself day in day out in the Sora language and having become emotionally involved with the people around me, I believe that we can begin to experience as familiar the apparently strange things said in these dialogues. Partly, this is because we can understand something of their systems of classification, in particular their classification of sonums: emotion, to quote Lutz again, is about 'seeing things in certain ways' (1988: 217). These ways of seeing are patterned within culture and can be analysed.

However, empathy does not depend on understanding the meanings and relationships of concepts alone. Though my analysis will grow out of an unfamiliar cosmology in which, for example, babies are made by a female blacksmith in the Sun, in the end it can be valid only to the extent that it can help us to reflect on our own mortality and our own feelings of love and anger, loss and continuity. In transcribing tapes with the aid of notes and my memory, I shall describe tones of voice and styles of delivery as 'ungracious', 'frantic', 'tender' or 'sarcastic' and in later chapters shall move towards a typology of such moods. This analysis of the emotional tone of dialogues will depend not simply on what was said at the time, but on my understanding of the connections between words and other gestures, actions and events, as well as of the place of these words in the sequences of episodes which make up the relationships of the persons concerned over many years. This is the understanding which Carrithers calls narrativity, the understanding of 'complex nets of ever-new deeds and changing attitudes' by which humans 'perceive any given action not only as a response to the immediate circumstances or current imputed mental state of an interlocutor or of oneself but also as part of an unfolding story' (Carrithers 1990: 269).

Just as we come to know the characters in this book only through the unfolding of their relations with other characters, so the empathy the anthropologist or the reader may achieve with the feelings of the Sora, however limited, is based on an awareness of this narrative. It is therefore far richer than whatever is implied by any notion of empathy with a supposed mental state of the moment, such as 'love' or 'anger'. Michelle Rosaldo suggested that what distinguishes feeling from thought is 'the engagement of the actor's self, . . . the apprehension that "I am involved"' (M. Z. Rosaldo 1984: 143). Even at the distance of being a reader, this involvement is with other persons and implies a sense of time. In

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empathising with others, we make an imaginative leap which involves seeing ourselves in another person's situation, a situation which represents a moment in a sequence. Thus I take feelings to be interpersonal and social as well as internal and private; and I shall conclude, partly with the help of ideas of causality which are so forceful for the Sora themselves, that they have, not just an immediate present, but also a past and a future.

Rather than seeing dialogues as being about life and death, then, I shall interpret them as being about relationships between persons over time. Death is only a phase of a person's total conscious existence. The Sora person who begins to emerge from chapter 3 onwards is therefore not the starting point of Sora metaphysics, but a hard-won and always provisional achievement. It is not the same kind of being as the sharply bounded entity commonly imagined in the West, which as it grows in maturity reaches a height of individuation and is then subject to sudden annihilation (or transportation to an inaccessible, transcendent realm). Rather, the longer the Sora person lives the more he becomes involved with other persons, as his relationships with those others bear upon his own being in more and more complex ways. Instead of being a bounded entity, the person can also be interpreted in this light as having a core, or focus of concentration, which at its outer edges diffuses into other persons. Persons partake of each other's destiny and are understood, even defined, largely in terms of each other. Virtually everything significant in a person's fate, his viability as well as his vulnerability, is interpreted through his involvement with other persons living or dead. The Sora thus appear to see a complex web of agency between persons, in which agents, even while they act on others, are themselves changed by the interaction.

Within this web of mutual agency, death plays a central role. The word 'sonum' represents the most enigmatic stage of personhood, both for the Sora and for their interpreter. I do not try to translate this word until late in the book, but meanwhile set the word free in order to see how it behaves. The essence of loss on bereavement is not annihilation of the loved one, but separation from the loved one. People who remain attached to each other are pulled apart into separate realms of existence, which the Sora represent as separate kinds of space, or rather, as separate modes within the same space. The common landscape which is occupied by both the living and the dead emphasises the ontological gulf which exists between them: even when one visits that very point on the landscape where one knows that a dead person resides, one no longer interacts with them in the same way as one did when that person was alive.

Sonums are enigmatic not only because they are inaccessible. The

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problem of loss is one of separation combined with, or even conceived as, a continuing interaction which is somehow qualitatively transformed. After death, the consciousness becomes a powerful but contradictory causal principle, nourishing its living kin through the soul-force it puts into their growing crops, but at the same time precipitating illness and death among them. This idea of causality is not simple and its implications will be developed throughout the book. In one aspect, the dead give to the living their continued sustenance and their very existence, yet in another they diminish their being as they impinge on them and consume them.

The Sora express this causal relationship through an elaborate classification of sonums. Chapter 4 presents the fundamental contrast between the two cross-cutting aspects of a dead person. On the one hand, he is an Ancestor-Sonum, retaining his role within the lineage and something of his personality and nurturing his descendants. On the other hand, he is a member of one of several collectivities which I call 'Experience' sonums. This contains many people who have died in a similar way to himself. In this latter aspect, his personality and lineage role are submerged in favour of an emphasis on the experience of pain which he has suffered and on the aggressiveness with which he tries to perpetuate this suffering among those he has left behind. Thus, to put it at its simplest, someone killed by a leopard becomes a member of the collectivity called Leopard-Sonum and then sends leopards to attack his descendants in order to cause their deaths in turn.

Different categories of sonum are located in different features of the landscape. As a living person moves around this landscape, he may encounter sonums and become involved with them. But this happens, not at random, but as a development of his long-term relationships with various dead persons. Though his encounters with sonums may cause illness, they do not constitute a medical history so much as a history of his states of mind in relation to other persons. An illness in a living person is a reflection of a mood or attitude in a dead person, and the rite which heals a sick person is also a rite to acknowledge the claims of the sonum who has attacked him. The living person's awareness of the dead is an integral part of the symptoms and of the definition of his illnesses, so that his medical history amounts to an important part of his biography.

It is the shaman who enables this awareness to be developed through verbal articulacy. By her techniques of trance and formalised verse, she creates the setting for living and dead to confront each other and to speak, each for themselves, in ordinary language. Word-play constitutes the main Sora art-form and words for speaking are often used where one might