Piers Vitebsky's study of religion and psychology in tribal India focusses upon a unique form of dialogue between the living and the dead, conducted through the medium of a shaman in trance. The dead sometimes nurture their living descendants, yet at other times they inflict upon them the very illnesses from which they died. Through intimate dialogue, the Sora use the occasion of death to explore their closest emotional attachments in all their ambivalence. Dr Vitebsky analyses the actors' words and relationships over several years and develops a typology of moods among the dead and of kinds of memory among the living. In comparing Sora shamanism with the treatment of bereavement in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, he highlights a contrast in their assumptions which has far-reaching consequences for the social and professional scope of the two kinds of practice.

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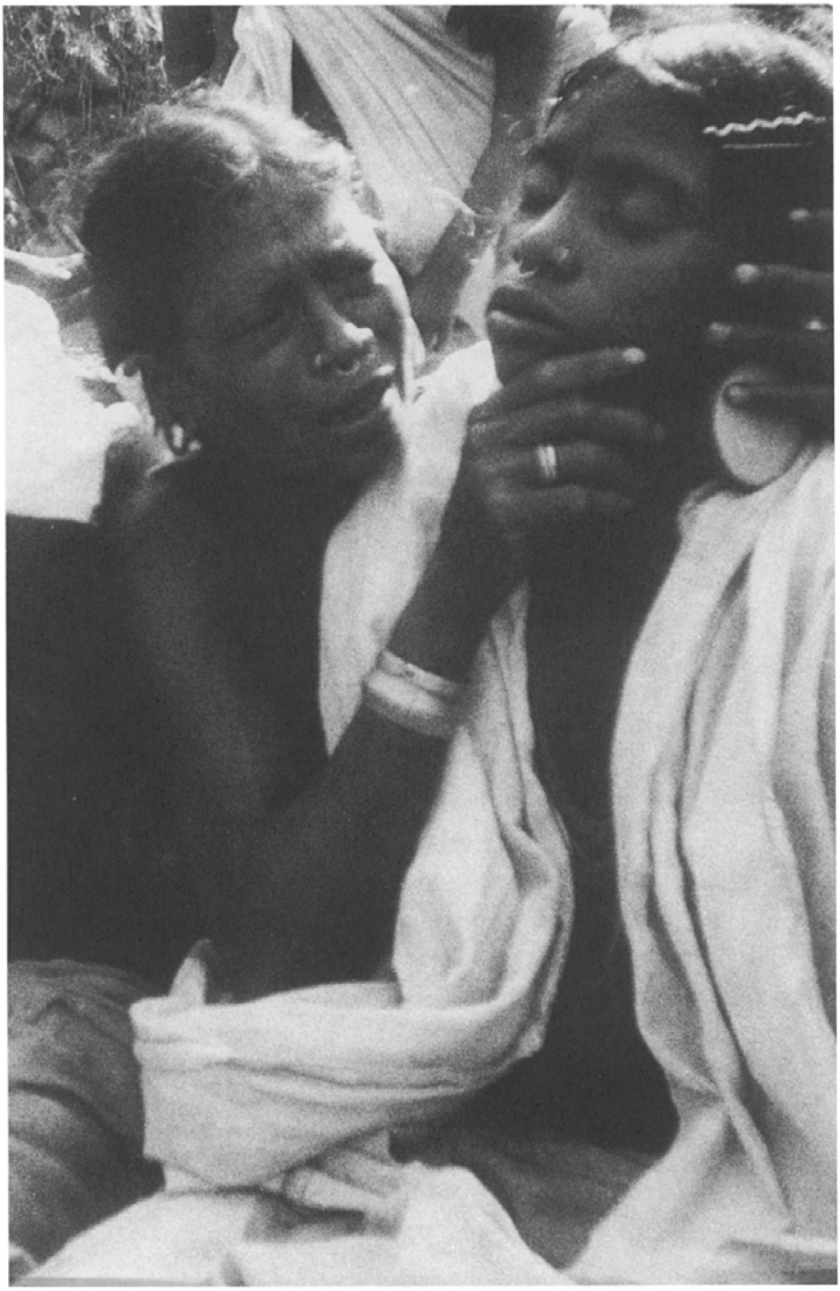
Dialogues with the dead



At a funeral: the widow speaks to her dead husband through a shaman (right).

DIALOGUES WITH THE DEAD

The discussion of mortality among the Sora of eastern India

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To my Sora friends, their ancestors and descendants
and to my own family

Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.
Macbeth, IV.iii.209–10

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The term 'text' is used to denote the main passages where the Sora speak for themselves. The texts are sometimes interspersed with commentary.

Preface

I lived for four years on the Indian subcontinent between 1976 and 1983. This book is based on eighteen months which I spent among the Sora, mostly during 1976–7 and 1979, and the ethnographic present refers mostly to the second of these periods. I also made brief return visits in 1984 and 1992.

I am indebted for substantial financial support at various times to the Social Science Research Council of the UK for an initial postgraduate studentship; to Girton College, Cambridge, for a Margaret Smith Research Fellowship; to the Perrott-Warwick Fund for Psychical Research; and to my parents. I also received supplementary assistance from the Governing Body of the School of Oriental and African Studies; the Emslie Horniman Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute; and the South Asia Language and Area Center of the University of Chicago.

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Most of all, my debt is to the numerous Sora who after initial doubts welcomed me into their homes and their lives and cared for me during long periods when I was heavily dependent on them. This book is about their relationships with each other and, given the intimate nature of the matters discussed, it seemed best to protect the anonymity of the main characters even though some of these are among my greatest Sora friends and benefactors. There is another book to be written about my own relationship with these people; but I hope that enough will emerge in the pages which follow to go some way towards explaining why my time among the Sora was a powerful formative period in my life, the lessons of which I am only gradually beginning to understand. I can do no more than dedicate this book to the Sora whom I knew, their ancestors and their descendants, along with my own family.

I worked exclusively in the Sora language. I deliberately did not take any written sources on the language with me into the field and it was not until quite late that I had an opportunity to learn something of the Oriya, Telugu and Hindi which are partly known by some Soras. This approach gave me a very slow start since I arrived in Soraland quite inarticulate. But it also gave me a much richer reward in the later stages of my fieldwork. For someone who enjoys languages, there can be few more fascinating experiences than working out the semantics of a language from the constant exploration of consistencies and variations in actual usage. Sora culture is an oral one. Villages, families and even some persons have their own distinctive dialects or ways of speaking: for example, it was often said that I had clearly learned to speak Sora in the company of Inama because of my extreme emphasis on glottal stops. Not surprisingly, there is no standard orthography among

those who have occasion to write the language down (whether in the Oriya, Telugu or international phonetic script), namely linguists, missionaries and some Soras themselves if they write letters home while working in Assam. Though phonologists might wish for many more diacritics than I have given here and the use of the *shwa*, for the sake of other readers (whom I very much want to remember certain Sora terms) I have used only *ñ* (pronounced 'ny' as in Spanish) and *ɪ*, similar to the Russian **ы** or the Turkish back vowel. I have also distinguished *ng* from *ngg*, corresponding respectively to the sounds in the English words 'singer' and 'linger'.[1] Words from other Indian languages are spelt according to generally accepted standards.

The dialogues quoted are *verbatim* translations of tape recordings and are laid out like the script of a drama. Elsewhere a speaker's actual words, or the literal translation of a Sora term, are given in inverted commas. Where I supply my own paraphrase of a speaker's words I make this clear. Square brackets are used for stage directions or other material supplied by me to make the meaning clearer. In dialogues and figures throughout the book names and remarks of dead speakers are printed in italics. Personal names are stressed as follows: two-syllabled usually as in Síndi; three-syllabled on the third syllable, as in Mengalú, Indirí, Jamanó (never on the second syllable, as one might be tempted to do on the analogy of Italian or Spanish). To remember this, one has only to think of people calling to each other from one hillside to another, their voices whooping upward: 'E! Mengal*ú*!' 'E! Pirin*ó*!'

Sora life has a strong sense of gender, though sexual roles are less sharply polarised than in much of India: men can fetch water for the house, while women can plough with buffalos. Where no specific person is meant, I have usually avoided clumsy English circumlocutions such as 'he or she' and used the pronouns 'he' for laypersons and 'she' for shamans, since the most important shamans are usually women.

My 1992 visit, made while this book was going to press, showed that Sora society is changing rapidly. The children with whom I played earlier are now young adults and many are becoming Baptists. For those young people, there are no more dialogues with the dead and the ethnographic present of this book which I was still able to share with those over thirty is already something which belongs to an older generation.