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Book Review: *Living without the Dead: Loss and Redemption in a Jungle Cosmos,* by Piers Vitebsky

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Vitebsky, Piers. *Living without the Dead: Loss and Redemption in a Jungle Cosmos*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 395 pages.

When anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano accused Clifford Geertz's "Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" of "stylistic virtuosity," it was a compliment of the backhanded variety. The problem, in Crapanzano's view, was that Geertz's literary abilities obscured the hierarchical nature of his method, the way he looked over the shoulders of the Balinese—Geertz's own words—and then formulated an interpretation of the cockfight that constructed his western readers as privileged knowers while providing little evidence that the Balinese would recognize his interpretation as their own. Crapanzano also faults Geertz for disappearing from his own dramatic narrative after only a short, classical entry story, just in time to make apodictic assertions about the Balinese that disregarded his own location as an anthropologist.

Piers Vitebsky's *Living without the Dead* could also be accused of "stylistic virtuosity," but in this case it would be a more sincere and straightforward compliment. The fact that he is able to avoid many of the dangers to which Geertz fell prey is related in part to the fact that Vitebsky remains very much present in the narrative, a character like any other, one who struggles, as an anthropologist and admirer of the *adivasi* Sora's disappearing, animistic "dialogues with the dead" (the title of his earlier work on the Sora of Odisha), to come to terms with their rapid Christianization. Similarly, the Sora characters never drop from view. They are frequently quoted verbatim from thousands of hours of audio recordings made by Vitebsky over multiple decades, recordings that in the book become something of a character themselves. With Vitebsky and his Sora characters all present, speaking with and at each other (sometimes even from the underworld), *Living without the Dead* creates its knowledge in the way that knowledge is created in the shaman-mediated conversations the Sora have with their ancestors: *dialogically*.

In the first half of the volume, Vitebsky goes back to his field notes from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s to introduce his readers to the near universal "animism" (Vitebsky's term) of the Sora in that era. Central to this animism was the practice of visiting shamans, most of them female, who entered trances and channeled the dead in what may well have been "the most elaborate form of communication between the living and the dead documented anywhere on earth" (1). Invited to a cup of tea or toddy, the dead would reconnect with, provide succor to, and censure or be censured by the living, while clarifying their dying wishes, the manner of their death, etc. The true power of these regular dialogues, in Vitebsky's view, was the way that they regulated the pace of mourning while sustaining and managing attachment to the dead (and *vice versa*, since in the Sora view the dead desired these dialogues as much if not more than the living).

The second half of the volume is given primarily to the task of describing the new Sora reality of near universal Christianization. The task is not an easy one for Vitebsky, both because of his attachment to older Sora traditions and because of his acknowledged distaste for the contrasting somatophobic and necrophobic Baptist Christianity that displaced them. Vitebsky even finds himself occasionally acting the resistant village elder, hectoring younger Christian Sora for disrespecting the old ways, or provocatively showing up for church in a lungi. One of the most fascinating aspects of the ethnography is how it portrays Vitebsky working his way through this transition in real time, eventually—by the later chapters—getting to the point where he can effectively apply his ethnographic abilities to this new Sora

religion, and to the transition itself. “Gradually the researcher in me got the better of the reactionary, and I started to join in and take notes” (168), he reports.

Given his earlier work, Vitebsky naturally focuses his attention on how the Sora are adjusting to living without the dead—thus the title of the book—since Christianity prohibits the kind of quotidian discourse with the ancestors that earlier generations enjoyed. Many of his old friends find the transition difficult, as it leaves them “literally lost for words” (326) to articulate their feelings about death, loss, ancestors, and the afterlife. For them, Vitebsky takes on the novel role of confessor and—given his decades of friendship with some who have passed away—living link to the now permanently lost ancestors. Other friends, however, convert to Christianity after a perceived *failure* of the former ways (198), while many young Sora experience the transition to Christianity as a “liberation” (184) from an era of oppression and humiliation at the hands of exploitative Hindu traders, government officials, and police officers, an oppression Sora youth frequently associate with their tribe’s animistic past.

Along the way, Vitebsky offers fascinating comparative observations on the effects of Sora Christianization on commerce, literacy (174), conceptions of time (168), dreams (208), the nature of religious leadership (177), and marriage as an “arena for the assertion of new values” (184). At times, the comparisons seems incomplete, such as when he places the animist dialogues of the dead alongside Protestant sermons and concludes that “where an animist ritual persuades by negotiation, a Baptist service persuades by assertion...dialogue is replaced by monologue” (172). However, to make such a generalization, one must presume that the Protestant sermon exhausts and is typical of the full range of Christian ritual. If one wishes to compare the dialogic and therapeutic aspects of Christianity and animism, one should probably look beyond the sermon to the rituals of pastoral counseling, religious education/socialization, and the everyday politics of congregational life. Nevertheless, despite minor issues such as these, *Living without the Dead* remains a monumental, impressive, and insightful work of ethnography, one that could only be produced by an ethnographer of Vitebsky’s evident skill, self-awareness, and endurance.

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