

Folie 1 Gift exchanges between the living and the dead.

Reflexions on fieldwork in Tribal Middle India

Introduction

EASA 2014 invites us to “explore *new* collaborative practices”, approach “collaboration as relations of intimacy, as an intimate process” and study the “basic terms of our contemporary interconnected world”. The quotes from the position paper of the conference have been given here as they ask social scientists to focus on contexts suggesting revolutionary, if hidden dynamics, social networks and activism, and to allow for conceptual innovation. Against this backdrop the present paper may almost seem a minor provocation as it will take a different stance. **Folie 2** I will challenge our contemporary modern obsession with change and innovation by confronting it with an equally contemporary and modern obsession not to change - elsewhere.

The paper takes a look at the Ho, a tribal community in Central India, who pride themselves of *continuing* time-tested intimate practices of gift giving in their mortuary rites relating the living and the dead rather than innovating or revolutionizing their ritual performances. In the classical Maussian understanding gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments and compel them to make a return thus construing relations of dependence, of interdependence and solidarity. The dead in Ho country are ‘routinely’ transformed into protective ancestor- persons who are furnished with remarkable agency and who acquire added responsibilities as intermediaries between the world of the living and the Ho’s spirit world. By gift exchanges Ho death rituals contribute to creating and reproducing a dynamic web of collaboration among the living and between the living and the dead. They illustrate the social character of death and the collective making of meaning in a holistic society.

Let me begin by making a few remarks on the nature of gifts and gift exchanges, about the Ho among whom I conducted long term participatory

research and their culture specific concept of ancestry, before I'll conclude by discussing the role of gift exchanges as revealed in the course of the Ho's first and secondary funerals.

Gift, gift exchanges and the Ho

Anthropologically and sociologically the concept of the 'gift' has conveniently been defined vis-à-vis its relational counterpart, the 'commodity'. This division, of course, is an analytical and fictional one which cannot be found in every *language* as Marilyn Strathern explains in "The Gender of the Gift" (1988: 134). Referring to Marcel Mauss's famous essay from 1925 Chris Gregory points to the implications of a gift's inalienable character and its *social* properties. These contribute to creating qualitative relations between persons/subjects - as fundamentally opposed to quantitative relationships established between alienable objects/things (1983: 104) in a commodity economy. The *social* property, Mauss says (1925:1), is the force *in* the thing turning it into a gift and triggering off the accompanying mechanism of *obligatory* reciprocity. Since the Ho dead are made through subsequent ritual into ancestor - *persons*, they continue to remain an active part of this mechanism. To the Ho gift giving is no one way road from the living towards their dead. In the Ho language a gift is 'enem', a verbal noun built from the verb root 'em': to give. By infixing -n- *em* becomes *enem*. By definition a word with an infixed 'n' has a component of mutuality or reciprocity. I think it is fair to argue that the obligation of making a return gift is linguistically inscribed in the (Ho) language as such. In her introduction to Mauss's text Mary Douglas adds that "gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them...gifts are visible and invite public scrutiny" (in Mauss 1925: XIV). This is spectacularly true among the Ho when the donor's clan name as well as the gifts of food, cloth and money that are given on the occasion of a first burial are scrupulously listed by a village elder in a book. **Folie 3** What is important about gift exchanges and the Ho's mortuary rites is that notions of price-formation such as purchase and sale are absent. It is Evans Pritchard who emphasizes that gift exchanges constitute a *moral* transaction between individuals and groups as opposed to a mechanic transfer of goods within a rational economically based commodity system (in Mauss 1925: 12). All this is elementary knowledge that we have acquired in the

course of our first semesters and passed on to our students despite the criticism of the general air of evolutionism lingering around the design of Mauss's essay. What began to make sense for me only in the course of my fieldwork among the Ho, though, is Strathern's statement in her discussion of the gift and the nature of gift exchanges: ..."if in a commodity economy things and persons assume the social form of *things*, then in a gift economy they assume the social form of *persons* (adapted from Gregory 1982: 41)" (Strathern 1988: 134). Talking about gift exchange means considering the multicentric (Gregory 1982: 111) character that unfolds and gains meaning only within a social network connected by and connecting social actors.

The Ho people

Here I'll give some very brief ethnographic background on the Ho to illustrate the scene. The Ho (denoting 'man, human') are a tribal category of roughly one million people according to the Indian census. Ho people live in villages, mainly on the plateaux and hills of the Middle Indian states of Jharkhand and Orissa **Folie 4** - away from the more densely populated coastal plains inhabited by non-tribal Hindu caste people. These two states are home to almost 100 out of more than altogether 460 tribes all of whom constitute the indigenous population of India. It is largely acknowledged, though probably not by India's recently elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP, that they inhabited India before the advent of the Aryan people at around 900 B.C. For this reason they are known as *adivasi*, as original or first settlers. In terms of seniority this is a marker of excellence to the Ho - to the same extent as it is a marker of primitiveness and backwardness to the Indian government. An individual Ho today finds her-/himself in a social web of kinship based relations. The membership by birth into the local line or Local Descent Group of one of altogether more than 132 Ho clans constitutes a meaningful source of Ho identity. In the Ho language this institution is called *mandi chaturenko* or 'people of *one* rice pot' that includes the agnatically linked dead ancestors and their living descendants of a local line. Ho children gifted with the name of one of their ancestors, grow up in exogamous patrilineal clans where women rank high, girl children are most welcome and bridewealth is passed on by males to the affinal side in the case of marriage. The caste system that surely knows

different forms of gift exchanges is absent as are Hindu temples, Hindu gods and goddesses, and professional specialists such as Brahman priests.

Contrastingly, Ho have their own sacred spaces, village priests and a highly differentiated spirit world to which *Sinbonga*, their creator god, and their dead ancestors belong. Ho people are - this is the point here - interrelated with all of their spirit world in a system of reciprocal exchanges. Of the spirit world I will focus here on Ho ancestry.

Ho ancestry

At the very beginning of my fieldwork when I entered a Ho house for the first time I immediately became aware of the continued presence of the dead in the Ho's everyday lives. Ho ancestors in their pure essence are spatially really close to the living - sheltered literally under the same roof. Inside every Ho house there is a secluded sacred part, the *adin* that faces east and that no outsider is allowed to enter in order not to pollute it. This is the ancestral abode, the dwelling site of the collectivity of the ancestors. Ho assume that eventually the purified souls of those who die transform in the course of the mortuary rites into beneficial ancestors of *their living descendants* and continue to live with them inside their houses, though in a separate sacred space. In other words they remain, also after death, members of their patrilineally assigned social category consisting of those descended from a known or putative common male ancestor maybe 3 - 5 generations back. It is the sociality of this multigenerational ancestry inside the *adin* that a dead Ho person's soul is invited and assumed to share and enjoy as an ancestor. It is here where the meals are cooked, where gifts of rice-beer, rice, and meat are offered to the ancestors, where they are addressed, i.e. spoken to with the utmost respect, often in doublets and poetic parallels. In this way the living offer and practice the gift of *remembering* their ancestors on a daily basis. In this women are included who after their marriage adopt their husbands' ancestors. To be forgotten means to become socially dead, i.e. dead for good, i.e. to leave the cycle of being reborn. Similarly Vitebsky has pointed out for the christianized Sora of his research area that they have turned timid towards the prospect of being forgotten after their physical death as in the process of conversion also the tribal concept of rebirth and the continuity of life after

death changes. In the Ho case it is the *adin* that is associated with Ho ancestry, purity, continuity, fecundity and their protective presence, whereas graves are conceptualized as the sites assigned to a dead person's corpse left there to decay Folie 5. I often observed that those huge slabs of stone that characteristically cover a Ho grave, gradually turn into a locus of the social, of life Folie 6 after the completion of the funerary rites. Ho construct their ancestors, although ethereal beings, in analogy to human beings and treat them as such. They are attributed human aspirations and feelings, also ill feelings, individual deficiencies and physical handicaps; they are treated as if they have a body that needs to be fed, sensual organs, and an awareness of their social role, their responsibilities, and a mind or consciousness that can be verbally addressed. In a ritualized language Ho ancestors for whom there is no generic term in the Ho language are invoked as "old men, sleeping men, old women and mothers, crippled and blind grandmothers and grandfathers" depending on the specific ritual.

Gift exchanges between the living and the dead

Obligations towards their ancestors come as a result and return to the gifts made to the living by the dead. In the region of research most Ho people live in quite big mud houses that their forefathers have built a hundred years ago or so Folie 7, and they make a living from the fields that their forefathers have cleared and in which the living grow rice as their main crop. *Hita* in Ho denotes both a seed (for propagation) and a progenitor or ancestor. The concept of ancestry encapsulating notions of growth and generating more of its kind is clearly given in the language. This notion is not at all abstract, but very concrete indeed. In a ritual called *jom - sutam* a woman towards the beginning of her pregnancy fasts first, takes a bath, prepares cooked rice in the *adin* of which she offers to her husband's ancestors who in due time will become her own, inside the *adin*. Then she will eat a bit of this cooked rice herself and leave the rest in the *adin* for later. In this time Ho believe that the rice has become merged with the ancestors, i.e. their souls. By eating up the rice herself the following day also the woman's foetus will become en-souled. By eating, *jom*, a thread, *sutam*, is established between foetus and ancestral soul, hence *jom- sutam*. This process of the ancestral soul entering the foetus is also

called *rowa sarub* which carries the meaning of “the soul (is) taking possession of” the foetus’s body. This mechanism was explained to me as gift-exchange or *enem* between the dead and the living. This is just one of many rituals that reveals a kind of immediate gift return (feeding the ancestors - passing on their soul to a foetus).

As a soul immediately after death is considered restless, nervous, unpredictable and potentially dangerous to the living, in any case negatively affected by the fate of the decaying body left in the grave for good, the mourners attempt to socially appease it by continuous, often one-sided gift giving in the course of a first burial, but they will succeed only in the course of the secondary burial. Gifts offered by the living to the dead in the course of the first burial are rituals that contribute to separating the soul from the body, to purify it **Folie 8**, to lure it into the company of its close relatives, in Ho *haga* : literally ‘brothers’, to offer it food and toothbrush **Folie 9** and to offer it the sociality of its fellow souls inside the *adin*.

Only after the second burial, however, the souls will have fully transformed into protective ancestor persons prepared, able and willing to execute their social responsibilities and thus reciprocate the gifts that grafted them into the persons they painfully became after their physical death. In this context I speak of a delayed gift return. The secondary burial was explained to me by my Ho informants as *the* instance amalgamating and expressing core Ho values. “If you want to know what Ho-ness is all about, come and attend *diri dul sunum*, the Ho term for a dead person’s secondary burial. *Diri dul sunum* is about hospitality and that is really important in our culture.” Hospitality in Ho is *em ched*, a poetic parallel denoting give - give (back). *Diri dul sunum* may consist of up to three days, in the course of which affines and agnatic relations of a dead person meet, celebrate (*jom-nu*: eat- drink), and dance. **Folie 10** Temporary huts are built indicating the relation between the affinal visiting party and the dead, and for each party one fire site for cooking; all invited are expected to stay overnight. The visiting parties bring along food, rice-beer and cloth. Food and cloth are exchanged among those present, which is understood as a gift exchange among the living. Kinship relations become re-established in food exchanges, where people become ONE by feeding each other rice from

their plates (*mid-jom*). Whereas the focus of the first burial is clearly on the dead and the painful processes of purification (*sabsi:*) in the course of which the whole village is involved, the focus of the second burial is on the dead person's agnatic kin (*haga*) and their affinal relations (*bala*). The dual gift giving at the end of a secondary burial is done by living agnatic relations of the dead distributing gifts of cloth and rice-beer to their affinal guests in a grand farewell ceremony **Folie 11** and by female members of the dead person's *mandi chaturenko* pouring oil on the burial stones of the dead and those agnatically related to him within that Ho kin category thus obliging these dead for yet another future return gift towards the living.

Eva Reichel, 22.07.2014