On Death and the Ho's Relationship with their Dead.

Notes from fieldwork in tribal Middle India [folio 1: titel u. untertitel]

1 Introduction (evtl. motivation: second burial/hospitality)

1.1 Introducing today's lecture

I have been invited by Dr. Peter Berger to talk to you about my on-going research in Middle India. You are students reading religious sciences who have perhaps not yet specialized in Indian religions. You have, however, been working into the vast field of Hinduism in the course of the past three weeks and you will be dealing with matters of death and mortuary rites in Hinduism and Buddhism, maybe in a comparative perspective, in the weeks to come. So I hope it does make sense to you that I am going to offer yet another perspective from and on India, as I will be discussing death – related issues as an anthropologist from within a *tribal* context based on my long-term fieldwork among the Ho about whom I am going to say a bit more in a moment.

As you will see the ethnographic scene is set in India [folio 2: topographie indiens incl. research area]. However, in many ways **tribal notions of death and the dead** are markedly different from equivalent concepts prevailing in mainstream Hindu caste India which I am not going to enlarge upon today. I will leave this to your teacher. Essential differences concern tribal concepts of the person, their constructions of ancestry as symbolizing the continuity of life after death, the continued relations between the living and the dead, conceptualizations of what it really means to them to be dead and how to adequately mourn the dead in a first and, eventually, a secondary burial.

On the other hand it goes almost without saying that **tribal notions of death and the dead** are also significantly different from Christian beliefs and certainties and, more generally, from Western 'enlightened' rationalities. About these I I feel I need to make a few remarks in chapter two since our perception of what we refer to as reality and our assessment of other realities is strongly biased by them – irrespective of whether we as individuals consider ourselves committed Catholics or committed atheists. Our culturally grown conviction of living in a rational, scientifically based part of the world is an ethnocentric conviction that is deep-rooted, unquestioned

and that informs the common sense in 'the West'. On the basis of our own culture-specific assumptions our minds tend to immediately scan and compare 'other' cultural givens and, as a consequence, often interpret and assess foreign notions as deviations, hence less progressive, less rational, at times 'backward', historically out-dated or at least less advanced.

To counteract this process and avoid the pitfalls of misrepresentation anthropologists are supposed to grasp the *indigenous* points of view with an open mind in long term fieldwork by what has been called participant observation since the 1930ies. Learning the respective language(s) is essential in this. Why - apart from practical reasons? Wittgenstein has pointed out that our **thoughts** can operate only within the boundaries of our **language** and that thinking is always a *verbal* activity, and it was Whorf who suggested that people speaking different languages effectively live in different worlds. Intertwined with and beyond the denotational level cultural meanings and specificities are embedded in a language, even in its grammar. Translating these specificities into another language thus turns into a cultural activity, into a transfer of culture.

How is this important in the context of the lecture today? Well, very important, because I intend to talk to you about death, dying, the soul, and ancestors, but in Ho there are no terms for these words. To give just two examples: grammatically a Ho person does not die, which in English is an intransitive verb and which, by definition, cannot be used in the passive voice. However, in Ho, 'die' can *only* be used in the passive voice, it is something that is done on someone, maybe by somebody else, so perhaps "he was 'died'" would be a culturally more appropriate translation. Also, next example, when Ho refer to what we call 'soul', they make a number of conceptual distinctions and they make use of different terms depending on what aspect (of 'soul') they are referring to. These examples are supposed to serve as a warning against false certainties that may/will be created in our minds – that I will create - when translating Ho notions of life and death into the straightjacket of the English language.

Having said all of this let me now show you the structure of what I have prepared for today. [folio 3: title + structure] I will next briefly introduce **the Ho** to you. The

second chapter is a more theoretical one, and much of it is very much alive in my research area. It will be about differing understandings of **death and the dead** and, related to this, different conceptualisations of the person. Much of this is helpful to come to grips with **the Ho's relationship with their dead**, with how these are ritually accompanied and with how they are transformed into ancestors. Not all of the Ho's dead, however, will turn into ancestors, and chapter four is an ethnographic **illustration** of the case of a dead girl, who will never make it to become an ancestor.

I will talk for about 40 minutes.

1.2 Introducing the Ho

No other country in the world is home to as many and as large tribal communities as India. The overall number of all *tribal* people living in South Asia may be 80 - 100 million, which equals roughly 8,2 % of the overall population. According to the census of 2001 the Ho are a tribal category of roughly one million people. It must be mentioned, however, that the official figures of the census in India are not always reliable. Ho live mainly on the plateaux and hills of the Middle Indian states of Jharkhand and Orissa. [folio 4: map of jharkhand/orissa] 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 acknowledged that they inhabited India before the advent of the Aryan people at around 900 BC. For this reason they are also known as *adivasi*, which means '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. Ho conceive of themselves as *adivasi* who in the course of their history of migration eventually settled in and near the Kolhan, an area of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, where their language and culture reigns supreme thus constituting the model for the other ethnic categories of that area. This implies that within that area the headmen and the village priests of almost all villages are Ho and all village meetings are held in the Ho language, which is also the language of the village markets. In that area Ho people claim they cleared and cultivated the formerly densely forested jungle and eventually became settled agriculturalists. [folio 5: rice fields] They grow rice as their main crop.

Ho belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. As such Ho is related to the Khmer language, for example, spoken in Cambodia, and to languages spoken especially by tribal groups in the mountain areas of Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Indonesia. As a Munda language Ho differs linguistically from the Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi and Orya which are spoken in Jharkhand and Orissa. In mixed villages Ho are often living together with members of other tribal categories, such as Santal or Munda in my research area, and also with members of non – tribal categories. These may be called functionally distinctive and professionally specific service groups such as cow-herders, potters, weavers, blacksmiths, basket makers, and tailors. They attest that they were called by the Ho "in ancient times" and have come as their clients since the Ho acknowledge and need their proficiency and craftsmanship. They feel conceptually part of those multi-lingual indigenous communities and constitute a symbiosis that has been called the '*tribal societies* of Middle India' (by G. Pfeffer).

An individual Ho finds 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. Ho children grow up in exogamous patrilineal clans where women rank high, girl children are most welcome and large dowries have to be offered by the males to the affinal side in the case of marriage. The caste system is absent as are Hindu temples, Hindu gods and goddesses. Contrastingly, Ho have their own spirit world to which *Sinbonga*, their creator god as well as their dead ancestors belong. With their spirits (mind: in Ho there is a distinct terminology to denote numerous sub-classifications of the term 'spirits'), ancestors, and deities (mind: in Ho there is no term for god or goddess) Ho are interrelated in a system of reciprocal exchanges. Elaborate and regular ritual offerings at the household and village level express and re-establish the bond between the Ho and their spirit world. [folio 6: mage porob, Badhu Sai]

2. Notions of death and the dead – 'here' and elsewhere

Cultural meanings, I have argued above, are embedded in a(ny) language. To begin with ours: how are notions of death and dying reflected in our language(s)? We talk about the *moment* of death, the *hour* of death. Scientific encyclopaedias offer as the lexical denotation below the entry *death* "the end of life", and below the entry *die*

"to stop living; to come to the end of one's life; to stop existing; to disappear". This means that in our part of the world death signifies the negation of life which is also expressed by the idiom of the "last or dying breath". An individual is considered either alive or not alive, one thing or the other. Based in a worldview of linear progression the chronology from life towards death seems irreversible. Hence life and death are two categories separated by a clear-cut boundary. How is this boundary defined? Bio-physiologically. The **process of dying** which is the period when an individual is treated as someone (still) alive is consequently accompanied by medical specialists who are supported by a technologically advanced apparatus. When eventually an individual's **death** has been ascertained reliably, i.e. by scientific means, within the shortest possible period of time the corpse is being withdrawn from its social context - for hygienic, i.e. biological, reasons, as the cultural argument goes. Death is an *organic* **event of an instant**, which is final, the end, as our Indo-European language informs us. A transitional period after death and the transformation into something new becomes a conceptual impossibility in this cultural reasoning. This holds also true for the Christian concept of death according to which the soul of a deceased person is assumed to *immediately* appear before its judge - without a meaningfully structured interval and a soul's meaningful transition. As we see it, it is a single, isolated individual that suffers death, and mourning and grieving, too, are individual, intrapersonal, and intrafamilial processes of those related to that single being.

In particular Bloch and Parry, two British anthropologists with fieldwork experience in Madagascar and Northern and Central India, highlight the interdependence between the **concept of the person** and the *concept of death and the dead* in the respective societies. In **Western society** an **in-dividuum** is considered the smallest, *in-divisible* unit that is functionally complete in itself and autonomous. It is an idea that constitutes the highest societal value and enjoys constitutional protection. A physiologically defined boundary is conceptualized around this "elementary man: both a biological being and a thinking subject" (Dumont 1970: 9), and Bloch continues: "In our logic, when an in-dividuum dies, the whole person dies" (1988: 3)

A single burial/cremation will do, and the person is gone for good, separated from the living.

Western certainties and concepts are not shared by many other cultures. Contrastingly, in so-called **holistic societies** the notion of the **dividuum,** the divisible person, prevails implying that elements which combine *within* a person can simultaneously reach *outside* and combine independently in "cross-cutting wholes" (Bloch 1988:13). The external links between dividuums are attributed ontological status and are believed to be just as 'real' as the constituent elements of the *in-dividuum*. When a person, understood as a divisible being, dies, only a part of it will die and decay materially, another part will continue to exist, and it is assumed to exist equally materially. Death then is a loss, but it is not a total loss. Bloch calls this exchange a continuous transformative process of "taking apart and putting together" (1988:17), in the course of which the differentiation between life and death becomes blurred. Holistic societies revolve around the social whole, the collectivity of beings, the cosmic-societal order as supreme value-ideas, "neglecting and subordinating the human individual" (Dumont 1986: 279). The boundary is conceptualized around the **social body** of the whole, in the case of the Ho around the tribal universe, and not around the physical single being. This has tremendous consequences for the conceptualisation and meaning of death and the dead. In that cultural logic death itself turns into a social event, acquires a social meaning, [folio 7: soial response] demands a social response, and initiates social interaction. In other words there is no concept of a "natural" death. Hertz (1907) has interpreted death as an **attack** on the social order. The completeness of the social body is threatened due to the elimination of one of its members. It would be the idea of elaborate funerary rites, Hertz argues, to **restore the social order** of the whole group**,** to fill the gap, to heal the wound, to regenerate life, to continue society. This takes time and does not happen by itself. It is achieved by the living providing the dead with a new social identity, status, and new responsibilities, by dealing with the polluting aspects of death [folio 8: poll. aspects] of all those affected by it, by disentangling the complex entwinement of body, soul/spirit/shadow, and mourners. In the Ho case the initially impure dead are 'grafted'/refined into purified, protective ancestors *in rituals*. The

transformation of the dead is sometimes compared to a long, risky, and troublesome journey, a metaphor that is also applied to life indicating that death as a second journey is just a continuation of the first, not seldom differentiated in more detail than people's empirical world. In fact, in holistic societies with a **cyclical** world-view death itself is part of a cyclical process, a transitional **process of renewal** suggesting that polluting death will be transformed into a superior state of purity/ "sabsi:", that the dead are perfected as incorporated members of the group, the local line, and the clan into which they are consequently reborn (Ho). The transformation is actively brought about by structured ritual public performances in the course of three distinct phases of a first and what has been called in anthropology a secondary burial which I could also observe several times among the Ho. It may take weeks, months, or even a year and more to complete this drawn-out process. The Ho's second burial culminates in members of the agnatic and the affinal catogories celebrating the final passage of the soul, its being integrated into the sociality of the dead, by a big feast. The mourners, who had been socially separated from the daily routines of communal life and who had to observe a number of taboos, are fully re-integrated into the community. The period of pollution has come to an end, and social life can be resumed. Post burial mortuary rituals in Ho country, though emotionally intense and highly dramatic, constitute a culturally controlled and processual coming to terms with an uncontrollable biological given within a comprehensive social frame.

To sum up: contrary to Western notions of death, but true for a great many cultures and also that of the Ho death is not treated as a final point in time, but as a period of transition. Death is conceptualized as a birth into a new phase and a superior social status. In the course of death all actors involved will acquire a new social identity. Death is considered a transition from the visible, real world into an invisible, equally real world. Death is not a matter of an instant, but a transformative process of renewal. As such it is an enrichment rather than a loss and a societal triumph over death's aleatory character. The after-death world is modelled on the social world of the living and is differentiated as such. Death is not conceived as an absolute category, and the boundary between life and death is not always clear. Death is

conceived neither as an opposite to nor as an end of life, since a dividual person is never entirely gone when dead nor entirely new when born.

It is through subsequent ritual that ancestors are made. By Ho definition ancestors are protective and beneficial – if treated respectfully. Many Ho live in big houses that their ancestors have built [folio 9: house] a hundred years ago or so, and they make a living from the fields that their ancestors have cleared and cultivated. Ho ancestors are attributed agency and will continue to involve themselves in the lives of the living as we will see in the following chapter.

3. The Ho's relationship with their ancestors

One of the things which most impresses an outsider who comes to know the Ho is the strong bond which exists between the living and the dead members of a Ho family and the **continued presence of the dead**. Ho say that those who die remain an important and active part of the 'family', as every Ho is assumed to transform into an ancestor of **her or his living descendants** (unless a particular manner of dying has been diagnosed about which I am going to say more in chapter 4.) In this logic a soul on its journey to the world of the ancestors travels, even if troublesome, towards a *known* destination. Ho ancestors remain members of a patrilineally assigned social category consisting of those descended from a known or putative common male ancestor which is reckoned as far back as people can remember, maybe 3 - 5 generations. It is the **sociality** of this multigenerational ancestry that a dead person's soul is invited and assumed to share and enjoy as an ancestor. The ancestral abode, the dwelling site of the collectivity of the ancestors, is the ***adin*,[folio 10: soul to adin]** the secluded sacred part facing east inside every Ho house that no outsider is allowed to enter in order not to pollute it and the ancestors. Only the living descendants, irrespective of age and gender, may enter. It is here where the family meal is cooked, where offerings of rice-beer, rice, and meat are made to the ancestors, where they are venerated and addressed with the utmost respect. Ho ancestors are spatially really close to the living – sheltered literally under the same roof. It is the *adin* that is associated with Ho ancestors and their beneficial presence, whereas **graves** are conceptualized as the sites assigned to a dead person's corpse left there to decay. Ho bury their dead close to their houses [folio 11/12: house iril,

P.S.]. I gained the impression that those huge slabs of stone that characteristically cover a Ho grave, gradually turn into a locus of the social, of life (folio 13: winnowing basket] after the completion of the funerary rituals.

Of course, Ho ancestors are considered to have passed over into the **invisible spirit world** and to have become invisible and spirits themselves. As spirits they are supposed to interact with the spirit world on behalf of the living and to intercede with Sinbonga, their creator god, in a more direct way than was possible in their lifetime, when their physical clumsiness limited their mobility. They are said to share with Sinbonga and other spirits and deities the capacity to hear whenever called upon. Ancestors are assumed to be able to **mediate** between the world of the living and that of the spirit world, as they are believed to simultaneously be members of both. In fact, Ho construct and personify 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 had a body that needs to be fed, sensual organs, an awareness of their social role, of their responsibilities and of what is going on in the 'family', and a mind or consciousness that can be verbally addressed.

To a Western mind all this may seem difficult to grasp. However, when looking at the Ho **language**, this analogy does make a lot of sense. In Ho there is no generic term for ancestors. Instead they address their dead in ritual as ***ham hoko, dum hoko*** which means "old *men*, sleeping *men"* or, depending on the particular ritual, *crippled and blind grandmothers and grandfathers,* or also: "listen, you old men and old women, mothers and fathers" (Deeney 40). This shows, I argue, that Ho ancestors are literally conceptualized as dividuals fashioned with human traits. Another example may illustrate how the very symbolism of Ho ancestry as reflecting and being identical with notions of growth, continuity, propagation, and fecundity is encapsulated in the language: ***hita*** in Ho denotes both a seed (for propagation) and a progenitor or ancestor.

I will conclude this chapter by giving very briefly a few ethnographic instances to illustrate the Ho's relationship with their ancestors and the ancestors' conceptual importance in a Ho's everyday life, in real life situations, as it were.

Rituals are part of the Ho's everyday life. Example one: The period of sowing the paddy seeds is initiated by a sacrifice of a goat and rice-beer addressed to the **ancestors in the fields**. Following that the head of a family will make another offering inside the adin addressed to those ancestors who due to physical disabilities, lameness, or blindness were unable to attend the sacrifice in the field. Example two: A **newly born baby** needs to establish a relationship with its ancestors. It is from an ancestor that a child will receive its name. Only *after* the naming ceremony and *after* the proper offerings to the ancestors will a child attain a state of purity, begin to acquire a *social* identity, is eligible to be given the full mortuary rites and turn into an ancestor in case it dies. Example three. At **marriage** a wife will leave her natal village and her patrilineal ancestors. For this a ceremony addressed to *her* ancestors is necessary. She will then adopt her husband's ancestors and become a member of his social unit (to avoid the term 'family' carrying strong connotations of the Western biologically defined social institution). In the course of a specific ritual she needs to be introduced to her new ancestors, given permission to enter her new household's *adin* and touch the rice pot there. The final proof of a wife's integration into her husband's patriline is when she is buried in her husband's grave site and eligible to turn into an ancestor there. Last example: Every Ho, also very young children, will offer a few **grains and drops** every day in memory of their ancestors, i.e. whenever they have a meal.

The relationship between the Ho and their ancestors is characterized by a mutual awareness of reciprocal obligations and exchanges. Thus the living become socially and permanently merged with their ancestors.

4. Sunai Kondangkel: ethnography of a 'sudden' death

There are, however, specific manners of dying that are diagnostic of what Ho call an "untimely", "sudden", "bewildering", or "violent" death. These ways of causing a person to die prematurely (of being died before her/his time!) are believed to result in a permanently embittered soul seeking to repeat its death in others. This is assumed to be the case, when someone dies from murder, suicide, a serious contagious disease or from snake-bite, when a woman dies in childbirth before giving birth to the child, or when someone has been outcast from the Ho tribe. These souls

are not given the full funerary rites and so will not transform into ancestors. Still they are ritually accompanied as long as they are remembered, and this chapter is about such a death.

Let me introduce the situation. In the course of my fieldwork I stayed in a Ho family in which I had a mother, *kaki*,[folio 14: kaki] and I had become her daughter, *mai*. This was in 2010. Of my kaki's five children Sunai was the eldest of her four daughters. In 2006 Sunai was bitten in a toe by a snake and died a few days later. At that time the girl was 16 years old.

What the ritual consequences of this particular diagnosis were, I realised only in the morning of January 14th 2010 and coincidentally. It was the time of new moon. The rice harvest and necessary follow-up work had been completed. Huge lumps of molasses were sold in the streets and bazaars. On the occasion of Mokor Porob, the "Makar Sankranti feast of the Hindus held about January 14th" (Deeney 2005: 253) popped rice and sweet bread are homemade. This was done at night in the cowshed half of which had been whitened for this purpose, and the fireplace there was used for the first time. The food was prepared solely by the 13-year-old daughter and the 10-year-old son, no adults were around (apart from me) or assisting. They had finished their work before dawn. While busy with the usual daily chores inside the house after that, I coincidentally overheard my kaki address her ancestors in the adin:

"I am offering/giving to you sweet bread of Mokor Porob. Today is Mokor Porob. I am giving you all sweet bread of Mokor Porob. Today is Mokor Porob. Ham hoko, dum hoko, I have not seen all of you. I do not know how many you are. This sweet bread here, divide it and give each his share. This is how I am performing the ritual."

Having said that, she disappeared outside. I saw in one of her hands a portion of popped rice and in the other sweet bread both filled into a cup made from leaves of the sacred sal tree. I followed her and observed this: behind the house there were about ten tall tamarind and mango trees below which, in the shade, a number of burial stones of enormous size lay. [foto 15:behind house]. Right next to these stones was the threshing ground behind which, further away from the house, there was a tall bamboo tree. Now my kaki stood below this bamboo tree and addressed that

very daughter who had been bitten by a snake. She did not address her as ancestress, as she had done inside the adin. This is what she said:

"My daughter's soul has been called to this site and is still lingering around. That daughter's soul has been called to this site. I am offering/ giving popped rice and sweet bread on behalf of that daughter on the occasion of Mokor Sankranti. This is what I am giving her. That soul has not been called inside the house. It has been called to this site."

Next to the bamboo tree there was another burial stone separated from the other stones by the threshing ground. Only eventually did I realize that this was my kaki's deceased daughter's grave. Contrary to the other graves covered by those massive slabs of stone lying flat on the ground, this grave was lavishly maintained. Instead of a flat stone covering the body there was a terraced cement construction [foto 16: grave Sunai] sealing ground and body below. And, additionally, it had an upright burial stone informing about the girl's data (name, year of birth and death) in Oriya and English chiselled into the surface of the stone. My kaki had planted a tree next to the grave which she would regularly water to make sure that her daughter be comfortable in the shade. Concerning her daughter's soul, however, my kaki was convinced that it was floating and dwelling among the branches of the bamboo tree. I was also told with an air of pride that her daughter's worn cloths had neither been burned nor left inside the grave to cover the body (as would be the usual Ho way). They had been handed over to a river instead. This was expressed by the term atu meaning "to place something in flowing water so that it is carried away"). Many people had participated in this ritual, she added, among whom were two of the girl's school teachers. Inside the courtyard a ceremony had been performed. The daughter's body had been covered by a great many sarees, also newly bought ones. "She will not be cold," my kaki informed me. On the occasion of the following two seasonal village feasts the offerings were repeated in the same order and the same way.

By having been bitten by a snake my kaki's daughter's death was classified as a 'sudden, violent' death. Her on-going dependence on the living was revealed in the ritual and gustatory treatment by my kaki. She and the ancestors were materially

given identical offerings; however, the ancestors were addressed differently, they were being served first and at a different, a sacred location. Due to the offering identical in quantity and quality, I argue, Sunai remains conceptually related to her ancestors. She is ceremoniously and materially taken care of, yet simultaneously a symbolic difference is established and made visible. The classification of a particular kind of death as sudden is a clear, mental assessment. It is not a moral statement. It is not a matter of devaluation. It is an instance calling for action.

5. Conclusion

Ho funerary rituals are about the social meaning of death. Mourning becomes a supra-individual communal activity involving a deceased's agnatic kin and those related as affines. In a person's death the social configuration of kinship is documented, (Western) biologically based limitations overcome. In the course of a drawn out transition a dead person's preliminarily restless soul has been separated from the physical body and transformed into a tutelary spirit. In its pure form it has access to the Ho's spirit world. Among the living an ancestor is accommodated in the sacred site of a Ho homestead.

I have also tried to show how the Ho by sub-classifying different kinds of death are able to keep those who have suffered a 'sudden' death at a distance and apart from the living, but to keep them for the time being - empirically, visibly, publicly, materially, and notionally.

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