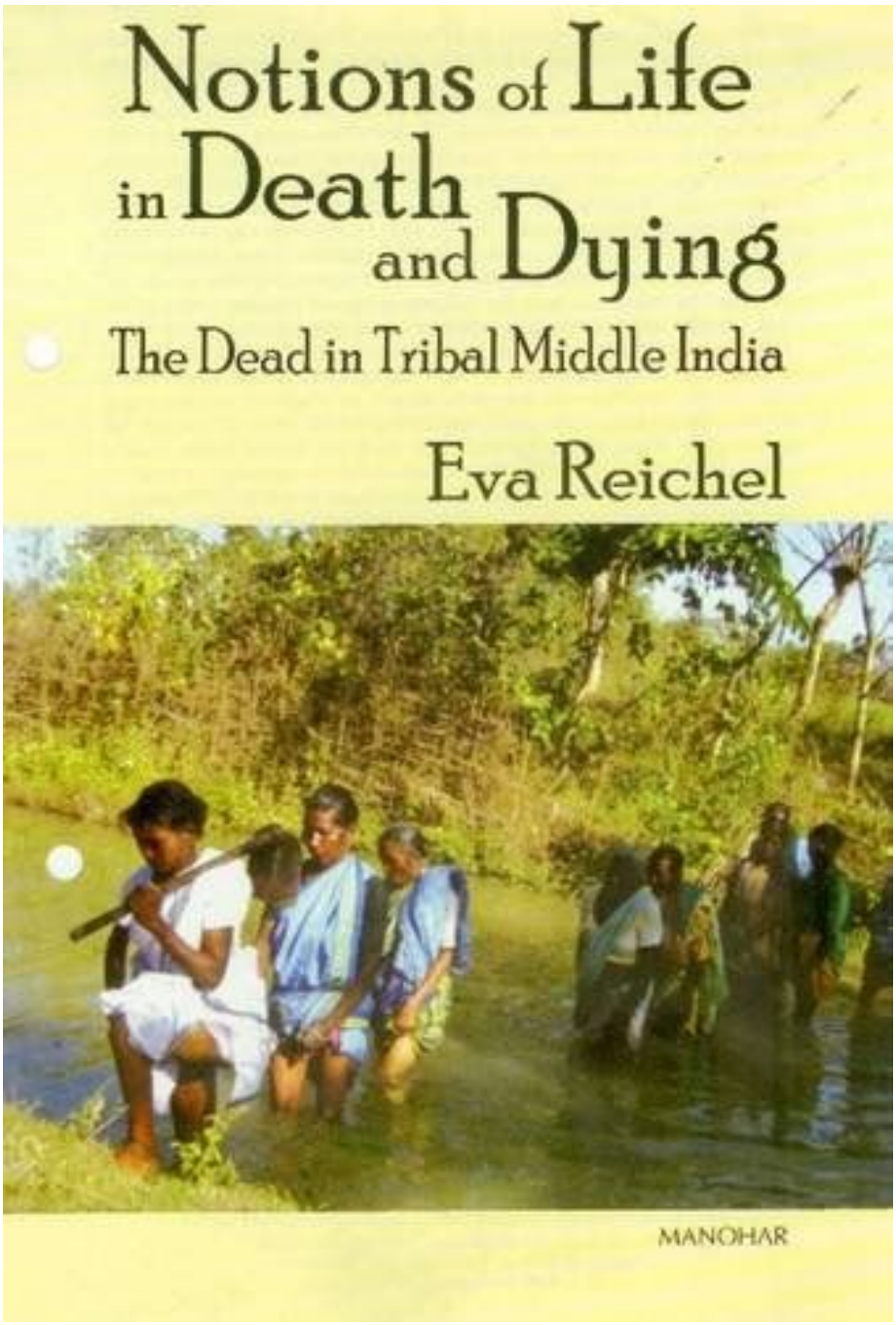

Eva Reichel, *Notions of life in death and dying: the dead in tribal Middle India*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers 2009, 118 pp.

Eva Reichel's book is a comparative account of the conceptual and ritual interrelatedness of life and death in Middle India based on the ethnographic work of Piers Vitebsky among the Sora, Simeran M. Gell among the Muria Gond, Ulrich Demmer among the Koya, Charles McDougal among the Hill Juang and Michael Yorke and John Deeney among the Ho, and interspersed with brief comparisons and contrasts from the author's own short period of fieldwork among the Ho of Orissa.

Structured in six chapters elaborating on notions of death and dying in Middle India, the book's main argument is that people's concepts of and reactions to death are culturally determined and socially constructed. Death is an essentially universal phenomenon, an important rite of passage, but its representations in ritual and mourning vary cross-culturally and are fundamentally different in 'modern' Western societies and 'traditional' societies. The argument is based on Louis Dumont's theoretical discussion highlighting the different values of individualistic western and holistic eastern societies resulting from their different types of social organization. 'Traditional' societies are holistic, i.e. they place the stress on the society as a whole and not on its individual members, who are only conceived of as constituent parts of the whole; 'modern' societies, by contrast, are individualistic, i.e. they place the stress on the individual person as a measure of all things. Hence the fundamentally different concepts of death and its ritual representation. In 'modern' societies, death and life are two distinct categories: death occurs within a delimited period of time and is followed by a ritually prescribed period of mourning, after which the corpse is removed from 'the social context of the living'. Most importantly, death is a personal and private matter affecting only a limited number of blood relatives and friends. In 'traditional' societies, death is a social event which affects the wholeness of the community. In holistic societies life and death form a continuum, a circle whereby the life force of the dead is utilised in fertility and regeneration rituals for the benefit of the living. Death is conceptualised as a transition, a transformative initiation into another form of sociality (the afterlife). Here the author elaborates on the seminal works of Robert Hertz and Arnold van Gennep on the tripartite structure of death as a rite of passage and its significance for the continuity and perpetuation of life, as well as on Maurice Bloch's and Jonathan Parry's work on the regeneration of life implicit in mortuary rituals in 'traditional' societies. Especially fruitful for the theoretical discussion is Bloch's work on the differing concepts of the person in western societies (the indivisible person) and in holistic societies (the divisible person, *dividuum*), which underpin the fundamentally different concepts of death.

The author persuasively demonstrates that in the Tribal Belt of Middle India death is not perceived in the latter sense, that is, not as a termination of life but as an ongoing transformative process which links the living and the dead in an interdependent relationship which transcends physical death. This relationship is periodically reaffirmed and reconstituted through rituals of commensality and healing, name-giving ceremonies, sacrificial offerings, agricultural ceremonies of annual renewal and village festivals, as well as in the course of everyday interaction and communication (e.g. the Sora dialogues with the dead) which require the active involvement of the ancestors. In the various ethnographies summarised in the book, the dead continue to be involved in the lives of the

living in various symbolic ways, especially through the intermediation of ritual specialists (mediums, shamans etc.) but also in dreams etc. Thus the Sora communicate with their dead (*sonum*) on an everyday basis in large public gatherings aimed at negotiating and re-negotiating the relationship between the living and the dead and at assisting the dead in their gradual ritual transformation from dangerous Experience *sonums* through the transitional category of Earth *sonums* (who might or might not be dangerous and reside in various natural sites) to become eventually the benevolent and nourishing Ancestor *sonums*. The dead of the Hill Juang pass through a similar transformation from a potentially malevolent ghost to a benevolent ancestor which might take as long as twenty years to complete and culminates in the name-giving ritual in which a child is given the name of a deceased person from the generation of the child's father's father. The mortuary rituals of the Koya serve to reinforce kinship ties between the dead, the living and their affines, who perform a crucial role throughout the three phases of the mortuary ritual (i.e. the cremation rites, the installation of a memorial stone and the ritual bringing back of the dead person's soul, which is believed to reside in a special pot inside the house). The Muria Gond distinguish between malicious and benign ancestor spirits; the former reside in the uncontrolled space of the forest, whereas the latter are believed to dwell in ancestral pots inside the controlled and sacred space of the house. Similarly, Ho relations between the living and the dead reveal matters of kinship and ancestral protection granted to lineage members (transferral of land rights, agricultural produce and cattle). For the Ho the souls of all members of the patrilineage reside in a special sacred place inside the house and provide for the perpetuation of kinship relations, as ancestors are deemed necessary throughout the process of the construction of the social person.

Notions of life in death and dying is a valuable overview of the conceptualisation of death in different tribal groups in Middle India and would be of interest not only to students of social anthropology but also to everyone who is interested in the anthropology of South Asia in particular and the anthropology of death in general. The rich ethnographic material on the Koya, Hill Juang, Sora, Muria Gond and Ho summarised by Eva Reichel demonstrates that the meaning of social phenomena cannot be revealed in isolation, but only in their interrelationship with other social phenomena within the social system of a given society. And focusing on death might in some cases provide culturally specific notions of life.

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