

Tina Otten: *Heilung durch Rituale. Vom Umgang mit Krankheit bei den Ronā im Hochland Orissas*. Berlin: Lit Verlag 2006. 421 S. (Indus Ethnologische Südasiens-Studien)

Tina Otten's intention in this book is to explore the cultural and social structuring of the health system of the Ronā in southern Orissa, India. Furthermore, as no ethnographic monograph on the Ronā has been published before, she has written the first comprehensive ethnography of this group. As its title, "Heilung durch Rituale" (*Healing through rituals*; all translations from German M.S.), already suggests, her focus is on ritual healing, which for the Ronā plays the main role in staying healthy. Her work is based on eighteen months of doctoral field studies by means of participant observation and interviews. This book, then, is the published version of her dissertation.

Otten claims that the division of Ronā society into senior and junior groups is important for the health system, a point she repeats very often. This makes the book something of a challenge for the reader. In addition, the argument is an old one (see Pfeffer 1997) and is followed too closely by Otten.

In her introduction to the book, Otten presents a theoretical framework which builds mainly on Émile Durkheim (1994), Marcel Mauss (1979), and Mary Douglas (1978). In this way, she reconfirms her main argument that the principle ideas of a society will influence all aspects of it. Furthermore, conceptions of the physical body in a society can be taken as a mirror in understanding the structure of society. The first and second chapters of the book are intended as an ethnographic description of Ronā society. Besides the principle of seniority, another structuration involves divisions within Ronā society into groups of own, non-marriageable individuals versus groups of marriageable individuals. She also introduces us to the religion of the Ronā and describes

their concepts of time and space. The third chapter describes how the Ronā classify different 'healers' and their tasks. Interestingly, the Ronā give biomedicine only a minor status. The fourth chapter offers a far-reaching, comprehensive description of diagnostic methods and different illness categories, while the fifth chapter describes cases of ritual healing. The latter are partly presented in the form of stories incorporating the presentation of individual cases. This gives the reader an insight into the processes of negotiations connected with illness in the village, though the book otherwise follows a strict and debatable ethnographic realism (see Schleiter 2007, 2008). In Chapter 6, Otten describes lifecycle rituals and reinterprets them as prophylactic healthcare. Finally, Chapter 7 presents us with the 'marriage on the path'-healing ritual of the Ronā (*bāṭo bibā*) as an example of the synthesis of the therapeutic and prophylactic elements of healthcare.

Unfortunately, the author does not discuss her theoretical ideas on the basis of her scientific criticism of the authors cited, nor does she contrast her concepts with differing modes of thought. The theories she outlines are nothing more than a way of collecting ethnographic data. Her work, she adds, follows 'purely ethnographic aims' (33). Her intention does not appear to have been to question either anthropological theory or the coherence of the cultural system of the Ronā. Instead she argues that the dominant western scientific ideas can be contrasted by presenting an inner (and scientifically structured) view of 'magic' (33-37). In my view, her approach merely separates Ronā society from us, making it impossible for any critical engagement between the anthropologist and the (mostly already internally differentiated) viewpoints of the people concerned to occur. The limits of an unreflected focus on a society's own view becomes obvious in the book itself when she translates 'jāti', which are 'tribal', Dalit or 'caste' groups, as 'Arten' ('species'). She does not make it clear that this is a debatable understanding of

this pan-Indian term but goes on to explain that the Ronā use it for plants, animals and humans (55). Similarly, it seems questionable to me to denote Jagannatha, the Vaishnavite deity of Orissa's Puri temple, uncritically as a 'Krüppelgott' ('crippled god') from the Ronā point of view. 'Krüppel' is a highly derogatory German term for a disabled person. As Jagannatha is depicted without hands and feet, she explains, that is how the Ronā describe him thus disparaging disabled people and the deity Jagannatha at the same time (136–137).

The ethnographic data collected by Otten largely seem to go very deep, and the richness of details is especially impressive. In her brief reference to the Santal, however, she shows a clear neglect of ethnographic precision. Referring to the missionary Paul Olaf Boddington (1925) she summarises the Santal classification of health and defines the word 'bongās' as 'evil ghosts'. However, in this context 'bongā' means rather 'deity' ('evil ghost' is *bhoot*) (118–119). I also doubt Otten's use of the term 'boṅso' for an exogamous clan group among the Ronā, as, where I worked in North Orissa, the very similar term 'banso' is used for a smaller unit of brothers who can identify a known and common forefather (53–54). Furthermore, I disagree with her use of the term 'Adivasi' (Hindi for 'first people'), which Otten treats as a purely administrative term (9). However, 'Adivasi', first used by non-Adivasi leaders during the independence movement, has now become an important category of self-identification used by many of the groups themselves.¹

Taken as a whole, the book is slightly repetitive because of its focus on the structuring of Ronā society in the name of 'pure' ethnography. Some readers will also simply be unwilling to read the excessive quantity of ethnographic details, as their stylistic presentation is rather dry. However, a patient reader interested in South Asian regional cultures, health systems or rituals will be pleased with the many interesting details which will allow eth-

nographic findings to be reassessed. Furthermore, Otten makes two points which I regard as insightful, especially for readers interested in medical anthropology. Following Arthur Kleinman (1980), she challenges the anthropological obsession with indigenous concepts of illness, which she wants to replace with a focus on indigenous therapeutic, and especially prophylactic, healthcare. She also identifies a complex and interesting scheme for diagnosing an illness in Ronā villages, which includes the consultation of different healers. Her focus on these processes is much more important as a contribution to understanding the cultural forces which help or hinder people in staying healthy than as forming the structure for the only monograph on Ronā society.

¹ See Unnithan-Kumar (1997), Skaria (1999), van Schendel and Bal (2002).

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Almost forty years after Gerd Koch's guide to the exhibition of the South Sea Department of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology¹ and after the profound – and excellent – revision of its permanent exhibition which was completed in 2004, Markus Schindlbeck has edited an anthology that puts the exhibits in their historical context. The anthology consists of a preface, an introduction, a general overview of the collections in the Berlin museum, reports on six expeditions, and the floor plan of the permanent exhibition. All these parts of the volume are separated from each other by right-hand margins in different colours.

In the preface (7–8), the editor points out that he and the other contributors are concerned to correct the claim that the exhibition represents pre-European conditions. On the contrary, with the emphasis they place on collectors and expeditions, they clearly show that the material world of the South Seas cultures had already begun to change even before expeditions have been planned. Moreover, Schindlbeck and the other contributors also demonstrate that the collecting activities themselves contributed to these changes. This is nicely illustrated by photographs and reproductions presented in the anthology (and, to a much greater extent, in the exhibition itself, of course). The editor also points out that Koch's encyclopaedic approach represented in the earlier exhibition has now been replaced by one which highlights the main fields of the collection and which groups objects thematically.

In his introduction (9–11), Schindlbeck emphasizes that the history of the Berlin collection started with James Cook's expeditions.