

In the Shadows of Death: An Existential Approach to Mortality in the Sinja Valley of Western Nepal

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Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis explores how people in the Sinja Valley of Jumla District (western Nepal) endeavour to make sense of existence through their engagement with mortality. My epistemological approach and the argument I put forwards is framed as a phenomenology of life *in the shadows of death*. This implies the exploration of how the phenomenon of death ‘appears’ to the consciousness of Sinjali people, contributing to the formation and sometimes dissolution of their lifeworlds – or, should I say, deathworlds. Still along these lines, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced anthropology of death by moving our understanding of mortality beyond its traditional focus on mortuary rites, reframing it in terms of my informants’ experiences. After all, as a Sinjali proverb suggests, ‘like the fingers of one’s hand, people are not all the same’. Moreover, the distinction that Sinjali people make between timely and untimely deaths problematises a conception of mortality as a monolithic object of thought, underscoring the fact that the modality of a particular demise is indissolubly linked to how this is going to be experienced.

Taking such experiences into consideration therefore demands that we move away from all-encompassing generalisations about the nature of death in order to foreground its existential aspects instead. Thus, while resisting any attempt to essentialise people, my argument pivots around the lives and deaths of a number of *characters*, presenting each time what is at stake for those very people. In this fashion, each

chapter of this thesis illustrates, from a different angle, how Sinjali people negotiate the precarious equilibrium between order and chaos within a dynamic intersubjective cosmos still in the making, and thus always at risk of falling apart and disappearing. Consequently, by drawing attention to the intersubjective aspects of death through the lens of a distinct ethno-philosophical sensibility, this thesis attempts to foster a critical hermeneutics of existence that will eventually lead to decomposing nothing less than ‘death’ itself.

Keywords: Nepal, death, spirits, personhood, intersubjectivity, existence

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