



The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals (SUNY series in Hindu Studies)

Isabelle Clark-Deces

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A reconsideration of the relationship between fieldwork and anthropological knowledge.

The Encounter Never Ends offers a thoughtful meditation on the relationship between fieldwork and anthropological knowledge through the analysis of Tamil ritual practice in a South Indian village. Isabelle Clark-Decès revisits field notes taken more than fifteen years earlier, and reveals what she intended when she took the notes, what she came to understand and record, and why she proceeded to ignore her ethnography until recently. Returning to these notes with fresh eyes and matured experience, Clark-Decès gains insight into Tamil rural society that complicates anthropological analyses of the Indian village. She realizes that the village she lived in was neither a community nor a “system” but rather a loose hodgepodge of caste groups and advises that the social order is not necessarily the best place to start looking for important insights into the ways in which cultures construe ritual action. Drawing on the recent work of Don Handelman to discuss the two Tamil ritual complexes recovered from her field notes, a drought “removal” ritual and a post-funeral ceremony, the author shows how they articulate complex notions regarding knowledge, reflexivity, and action. Throughout, the author shares her own story, including the mixture of frustration and fascination she felt while conducting fieldwork, illustrating how extraordinarily difficult ethnographic description is.

Isabelle Clark-Decès is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Princeton University and the author of *No One Cries for the Dead: Tamil Dirges, Rowdy Songs, and Graveyard Petitions and Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*.



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