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Arnold Bergstraesser Institute
Windausstraße 16
79110 Freiburg, Germany

Phone: 0049-761-88878-33
asianstudies@abi.uni-freiburg.de
asianstudies.arnold-bergstraesser.de

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Fear and Fright in South Asia Encounters with Ambivalence and Alterity in Vernacular Religion and Society

Editorial

Stefano Beggiora, Lidia Guzy and Uwe Skoda

Fear, fright and monstrosities

The contemporary era, both in the “East” and in the “West”, seems to have – in a certain sense – legitimised the theme of fear, the figure of the monster and the fright that it instils. Multiple and polychrome representations through fashionable narrative cycles – such as television and film series, comics and novels, videogames and whatever else distinguishes the mass production of the postmodern period – have now accustomed contemporary society to a certain familiarity with the theme (Levina / Bui 2013, Asma 2009). However, in these contemporary forms of representation of what we conceive of as unknown, unknowable and consequently scary, even potentially monstrous – but also prodigious and admirable – there is a certain widespread awareness of the survival of the original root of an ancient tradition. A certainly pre-modern, pre-urban cultural element that boasts a similar imagery in social and ideological complexes that are also very distant in space and time. It is important to start from the assumption that the term monster derives etymologically from the Latin *monstrum*: a divine sign, a prodigy; from the verb *monēre*, or to warn, to admonish about something extraordinary, frightening, still horrible or wonderful, that could manifest itself in order to warn or instruct the humans on the will of the gods. In more recent times this constitutive ambivalence has diminished through modern dualism between what is natural and unnatural or supernatural, ultimately relegating monsters to the status of em-

Stefano Beggiora, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy; stefano.beggiora@unive.it. Lidia Guzy, Study of Religions Department, University College Cork (UCC) / National University of Ireland, Cork, Ireland; l.guzy@ucc.ie. Uwe Skoda, India and South Asia Studies, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; skoda@cas.au.dk.

pirical non-existence as a product of superstition or fantasy, or to that of the organic anomaly in scientific terms, or even to that of generic synonym for anything inhuman, cruel, terrifying (Miyake 2014: 16). Considering this, it should however be clear today that the stories of fear constitute, in a very general comparative dynamic, a narrative and folkloric corpus that goes well beyond the old legend or pop-culture tendencies of more recent memory. To immerse ourselves in this corpus, in relation to a specific culture, means entering into a sort of intimate, secret yet elective non-place for that given culture, in which the community agrees to face the most critical aspects of its identity.

In the social sphere, this effort is transformed in the exogenous dynamics of the rationalisation of otherness: relations with all that is perceived as alien to society, the different, the foreigner, what is beyond established boundaries. Or with what, having overstepped those borders, imposes itself by contrast as a new dominant culture. This criticality, with all its intrinsic fears, re-emerges forcefully in the phases of transition and change. This happens in an introspective, existential dynamic, when the community looks within itself, examining its values, its knowledge – or the decadence of the same – and questioning, in addition, its spirituality. Or on the occasion of rites of passage: both ordinary ones and those of greater importance, such as birth, death, *post mortem*, If it is therefore true that on the one hand the amazing stories of mysterious places, monstrous creatures, spectres and ghosts respond to a constant and atavistic need that people have to wonder, to shudder, to feel that subtle sense of pleasure that fear provides, such fear is experienced outside of a real dangerous situation. On the other hand these representations constitute a sort of displacement in relation to much more concrete fears of real risk.

The theory of fear that is fundamentally based on liminality (Turner 1969, see below) is supported by the work of the medievalist Jeffrey Cohen (1996: 3–25), who is now considered the father of the field of studies known as “monster studies” or “monster theory”. He elaborated a theory of seven theses where the imaginary of the monster, clearly circumscribed by the feeling of fright and repulsion s/he or it evokes, ranges from its incorporation as an integral part of a cultural moment to its belonging to the other, or to the outermost boundaries – territorial, geographical, spatio-temporal and epistemological – of what is normally known and that it constantly patrols.

There is also, in the wide range of possibilities developed by Cohen, the aspect of monstrosity as the matrix of an ambiguous fear, which hides within itself a sort of unexpressed desire for something unattainable, in precisely the same way that the forbidden and the frightening can trigger escape fantasies: this can be interpreted as the typical dynamic of attraction-repulsion that is staged in folk/fairy tales and folklore. Moreover, figures such as the phantom, the aberration, the demon – in addition to being commonplaces or tropes – are narratives that perpetuate through other narratives, therefore requiring

listeners even more than witnesses. In this way the substantial function of the story of fear, which evokes terror even as it is experienced by staying safe, serves to exorcise a somewhat more dangerous demon. This occurs through a process that was (and continues to be) collective even in different and today much more “technological” forms (Mittman / Dendle 2012).

Secondly, an interesting question is not exactly whether ogres, dragons, ghosts and all the projections of fear really exist, but rather what these creatures really are. In other words, in addition to the exorcist-apotropaic function mentioned above, do they actually convey other meanings? In this imaginary, is it possible that ideas and elements of ancient disappearing or endangered traditions survive in those cultural images and memories of fear? Do these continue to convey and to reiterate themselves without the necessary awareness of their narrator, or of those who, by passing them down from generation to generation, contribute to the crystallisation of their content? If so, the monster becomes a figure in which the idea of such survival is linked to a world in which the earth, the cosmos and all its manifestations were themselves considered forces, deities, spirits, semi-divinities or in any case the expression of a complex and rigorous animistic, pantheistic and naturalistic order. This is generally called animism, but in its recurrent Platonic sense of *anima mundi* – of which monsters and fears would constitute a great variety of manifestations (from the subtle to the gross) – it is not so far from the indigenous ontologies of India and Central Asia.

According to a traditional perspective in the study of religions, the monster also embodies the symbolism of the rites of passage. It devours the old so that the new may be born. The treasure guarded by the monster (it would be appropriate here to say “by the dragon”) is intended as spiritual: this world is accessed only through a radical transformation, which often implies the abandonment of material values, if not exactly one’s own physical body. The monster, like the whale of Jonah, swallows and vomits up its prey after transfiguring it (Propp 2006: 345–374). Having accomplished this kind of katabasis, this journey into the realm of the dead – which in some cases is a sort of night prison – the hero re-emerges, renewed, immortal. So the fundamental character of the monster figure in different civilizations can only be frightful for the function it performs: as a psychopomp, anthropophagous, the monster tears and swallows.

Nevertheless the chivalrous quest of medieval literature substantially repeated this theme *ad libitum*: the journey, the defeat of the dragon, were initiatory proofs. The control of fear and heroism are none other than the measure of the capacity of the individual, or rather his/her merits. The hidden treasure that the monster guards is, as noted, spiritual, but is often characterised by the features of a sacralised context: the ultimate reward for those who survive is eternal youth, or immortality (Olsen / Houwen 2001). The theme is of course

very ancient; in the West there is a dragon guarding the golden fleece of Colchis, as well as the griffins that watch over the tree of life, a hideous snake tending the spring of Ares in Thebes and again a dragon guarding the golden apples of the Hesperides (Ogden 2013). This brief digression into the Greek myth requires also the mention of the famous Norse cycle of Siegfried, in which the priceless treasure guarded by the dragon is also immortality (here the “learning of the language of birds” is a clear initiatory metaphor). In Indian philosophy and religiosity the theme is equally developed in many senses, so much so that it would be simplistic to make a synthesis here. Suffice it to remember the famous cosmogonic myth of Indra: he hurls lightning at Vtra, the monster that includes everything in itself, including knowledge (Apollo killing the snake Python by flinging the arrow is probably an echo of the same symbolism). From this act therefore the *soma*, the nectar of immortality, is obtained (Zimmer 1993: 171).

(1) I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters [...] (4) When, Indra, thou hadst slain the dragon's firstborn, and overcome the charms of the enchanters, then, giving life to Sun and Dawn and Heaven [...] (14) Whom sawest thou to avenge the Dragon, Indra, that fear possessed thy heart when thou hadst slain him; that, like a hawk affrighted through the regions, thou crossedst nine-and-ninety flowing rivers? (Rgveda 1, XXXII in Griffith 1889: 56–59)

Much of Indian medieval literature is a multiplication of frightful entities, in particular of dragons and serpents, which are nothing but the echo of a much older doctrine, that of “the rope and the snake”, which had intersected the tradition of Advaita Vedānta. The hero – or the mystic, one should say – is misled by the darkness and mistakes what it is simply a rope for a snake, an imminent frightening danger, invincible in appearance. The dragon is therefore an illusion: this does not mean that it does not exist – it certainly exists, just like the rope – but we are confounded by *māyā*, a sort of metaphysical ignorance that overlaps the real, preventing us from seeing what it really is. In the Indian medieval literature of the Siddhas and the Nāths, and later in that of the Sants – in Kabir or even in Jāyasi, just to mention the influences of Sufism on this matter – this serpent wraps its coils around what was called the “citadel of the heart”, a metaphor fairly well known at the time and with a clear meaning (Jindal 1993: 40–41, McGregor 1984). The liberated or self-realised (*jīvanmukta*) one is therefore the one who faces the fright, kills the dragon, dissolves the illusion of *māyā* and acquires immortality. In this game of overlaps, the monster can be interpreted as the image of an ego, but a kind of “self” that must be overcome in order to develop a higher “Self”. Making a parallel with the symbolism of yoga, it is interesting to observe that *kuṇḍalīnī*, the self-luminous flame or the lightning of the “awakening”, is also represented as a snake asleep on its coils. The theme of sleep is undoubtedly in-

teresting because in many narratives conveying this precise symbolism, dragons or other fantastic beings can be found sleeping beside or over the treasures of which they are guardians. The hero generally must take great care not to awaken the creature, acting with cunning and skill. But it is interesting to note that that sleep, in which the monster seems immersed in its abyss, has an allegorical nature: it is not so much in relation to the creature, but rather refers to the individual who is preparing for the trial. In the fairytale transposition of the rite, theorised in Propp's (2006: 146) milestone study on this subject entitled *Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale*, the hero is called to be awake. Defeating sleep is considered the trial: overcoming the sleep of the mind and senses overlaps here with the concept of defeating fear. Only those who are able to do so will be spiritually awakened, born into a new life.

Liminality and danger

The strong metaphor of sleeping and waking leads us to a further crucial element of the cultural dimension of fear: its liminal characteristics. In her pioneering treaty on Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas (1966: 2) starts by arguing that "primitive religious fear, together with the idea that it blocks the functioning of the mind, seems to be a false trail for understanding these religions". She rightly criticises the overemphasis on fear among nineteenth-century missionaries and travellers. They viewed "primitive religion" as, rather than being governed by reason, being primarily "inspired by fear", which was additionally coupled with a preoccupation with pollution, defilement and hygiene. Rejecting any obsession with fear that could not be upheld in the light of ethnographic research, she opts for hygiene and its alter ego dirt – or, rather, purity and its concomitant threat of pollution – as an entry point for a comparative understanding of socio-cultural order. Dismissing any earlier evolutionist viewpoint, Douglas considers instead – as her book title suggests – purity and danger as complementary ideas and thereby also implicitly returns to those fears intimately tied to or surrounding (potential) dangers and the risk of pollution.

For Douglas, dirt is culturally defined disorder and its avoidance is caused not by "craven fear" or "dread of holy terror", but rather by the idea that it is opposed to order. Similarly, pollution may best be understood as a deviation from a defined order or normalcy. It is equally specific to each society and may range from "menstrual blood [...] feared as a lethal danger" to death, pollution, etc., with the body often used as a mirror to express major societal concerns, schisms and norms, while morality is defined with reference to a dangerous contagion (Douglas 1966: 3, 122). Apart from an expressive dimension,

pollution has an instrumental one. As Douglas states, “[the] ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness” (ibid.: 3).

Relevant especially for this volume is also the insight that rituals acknowledge and deal with the “potency of disorder”, i.e. that power as much as danger is located beyond the societally defined boundaries. Those venturing beyond them have access to forms of power not accessible to those confined within the boundaries – a trope very familiar, for example, in the concept of kingship in India. Here, ideally, a new king needs to conquer the wilderness in order to appropriate its powers and to establish his realm, and rulers periodically oscillate between settlement and forest (Heesterman 1998, Falk 1973).

Likewise, but fast-forwarding to the modern era, new technologies that enable space-shifts or time-shifts by creating hybrid conditions or bridges to an elsewhere or elsewhen, thereby transgressing our tidy categories, may appear as equally frightening – as Buchanan-Oliver and Cruz (2011: 288 ff.) argue. They raise questions about the established and familiar boundaries, for example, between bodies/machines (artificial intelligence, cyborgs) or human/nonhuman, past/future and here/not-here, leading to liminal tensions, ambivalences and anxieties.

Thus, the crossing of categories and boundaries is commonly considered as potentially dangerous, as are “outsiders” associated with marginality or non-structure, though their power might be dormant, while others such as witches may be clearly threatening and frightening, as Douglas describes them: “social equivalents of beetles and spiders who live in the cracks of walls and wainscoting. They attract the fears and dislikes which other ambiguities and contradictions attract in other thought structures, and the kind of powers attributed to them symbolize their ambiguous, inarticulate status” (Douglas 1966: 103).

Building on these insights of Douglas, but also van Gennep’s (1909) three-fold model of rites of passage, Victor Turner (1969) stresses the link between liminality and danger. Liminality as an undifferentiated, slippery “limbo of statuslessness” (1969: 97), on the threshold or somewhere betwixt and between social positions, defies the usual classifications. It refers not only to blurred boundaries in ritual contexts but is frequently linked to darkness, invisibility, wilderness and to death and the symbolism of the grave or subsequently to (re-)birth. Hertz (1960: 83ff.) showed that death rituals as such usually broadly follow a tripartite model, with an intermediary phase between death itself and secondary burial or resurrection. However, the symbolism of death is frequently employed to indicate a state of *tabula rasa* or a void, i.e. giving up everything and thus creating ritual orphans. Therefore, a “ritual

death” is often performed, hinting at arguably the most radical and most feared threshold: that separating us from the “other side”.

Once the initiand is detached from his or her previous status, stripped – at times literally – of markers of social positions, s/he is often expected to passively endure the ordeal of transition, before being reincorporated into society with a clear and stable new role. Perceived as “dangerous, inauspicious or polluting to persons, objects, events and relationships that have not been ritually incorporated into the liminal context” (ibid.: 108–9), liminality may present real physical threats or risks for the initiands, such as circumcision. As Douglas noted, “sisters and mothers are [sometimes] told to fear for their [the initiands’] safety, or that they used in the old days to die from hardship or fright, or by supernatural punishment for their misdeeds” (ibid.: 97).

At the same time, liminality “attributed with magico-religious properties” also has the potential for the emergence of *communitas* as anarchic anti-structure. As Turner sees it:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences and unprecedented potency. (Turner 1969: 128)

Thus, liminality implies the moment of transgression or crossing of boundaries – both in terms of time and space. As an exceptional state, it is commonly induced ritually and frequently requires the help or guidance of specialists for the return to a “norm” or “normality”. While such a transition may create fears and cause considerable anxieties, it is often, depending on the context, also an occasion to communicate with spirits, ancestors and the like. And liminality may not be confined to ritual contexts alone. In fact, in a later focus on complex industrial societies, Turner (in Schechner 1988: 159–60) also found liminal-like or liminoid conditions, detached from customary rites of passage, but collectively experienced. Created by artists, such liminoid experiences may form part and parcel of entertainment genres such as film or literature where the dead, undead or monsters may re-appear in a somewhat tamed form.

Vernacular religion, the Other and fear

The taming of the liminal, liminoid and hybrid evolves then through systematisation and institutionalisation, the radical change of ontologies or the change of religions by conversion. Institutionalised religions as well as non-systematised indigenous ontologies all deal with individual and collective fear of the

cultural and the extramundane Other. They deal with the fear of death and the dead. “Do not fear!” is the leading promise of all proselytising religions.

Cultural fright can be regarded as a driving force for religious change. Conversions in Indian tribal areas are a good example of this phenomenon: conversions to Christianity have been very successful here as entire tribal communities, such as the Sora, have adopted the Christian faith (Vitebsky 2008). In particular, the symbolism of baptism with water, the vows and the orientation towards the charitable European foreigners have made a strong persuasive impact on tribal populations. Apart from Christian missionaries and their medical institutions, Hindu ascetic and reform movements have also been active, including Mahima Dharma (Guzy 2002) or individual Hindu *babas*. The success of Hindu missions is apparent in that in many places the consumption of meat and alcohol has been given up or *tulsi* (holy basil) trees have been planted.

A cultural element of fright can also foster the rejection, escape or alteration of one’s own cultural and ontological frame. For example in tribal India the act of conversion to an Ascetic/Reform Hindu or Christian faith can also be interpreted as an indigenous attempt to control emic, culturally specific and traditionally uncontrollable ontological elements, such as evil spirits, monsters or post-mortem personalities (Vitebsky 2008, Guzy 2002, Mallebrein 2011). Fright can thus also be seen as a socio-moral regulator and counterbalance to the ambivalence of the emic concepts of social, cultural and ontological alterity or political otherness.

Indigenous ontologies are substantially different from the dualistic nature-culture divisive worldviews encountered in monotheistic traditions of one truth, one entity and one god, which differentiate clearly between “good” and “evil”. Indigenous worldviews are embedded in analogous ecological knowledge systems relating to their own cosmologies and ontologies (Kopenawa / Albert 2013). Indigenous, shamanic worldviews can be commonly understood as value systems that are based, on the one hand, on cultures of orality, and on the other hand on the non-dualistic perspective towards benevolent and malevolent human and non-human agencies (Guzy 2017: 165–180) in a mutually shared world and cosmos (Descola 1992, 2013; Viveiro de Castro 1998), which Guzy labels “eco-cosmological” worldviews (Guzy 2019).

Indigenous cosmovisions – exemplified in shamanic worldviews – are neither unified nor peaceful systemic entities. They are potentially conflictual and violent – with the shaman as a religious specialist who is particularly equipped and specialised in trans-empirical flights/journeys and battles with unseen, other-than-human agencies. In their ground-breaking work on *Shamanism and Violence in Indigenous Conflicts*, Diana Riboli and Davide Torri (2013) discuss the dangerous, frightening and violent aspects of indigenous worldviews on a global scale. This particular perspective has often been overlooked

in comparative research on Shamanism (Vitebsky 1995, 2005), which has tended instead to focus on the oral, poetic (see Vargyas 1994, Walraven 1994), aesthetic (see Oppitz 1981, 2013), ecstatic (Eliade 1951) and healing aspects (see Kakar 1982, Sidky 2019) of shamanic cosmovisions and of their ritual practices.

Sudhir Kakar's (1982) analysis of shamanic specialists such as local Indian healers emphasises the ritual use of metaphorical, symbolical language in order to relieve and heal fears and psychological anxiety. Piers Vitebsky's monograph on *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality among the Sora of Eastern India* (1993) highlights how shamans handle the most overwhelming fear of ontological alterity, namely dealing with the dead. Based on his prolonged ethnography among the Sora, Vitebsky describes the dialogical, narrative, oral alternative personality and mortality concepts of the Sora, which, through dialogues with the dead, reveal existential alternative concepts of continuity between death and afterlife, between the living and post-mortem personalities. Sora ritual specialists of these dialogues with the dead are trance mediators – the *kuran* (Sora shamans) – the ritual mediators between the worlds of the dead and the living and communicators of the spiritual, *post-mortem* alterity. These shamans, mostly women but also men, place themselves into a dissociated trance state, thereby becoming receptive to possession by a post-mortem personality. The dead person then speaks through the female or male shaman. The living participate in the dialogical ecstatic mediation ritual, while embracing the dead person (embodied by the shaman), arguing intensely with him/her, crying, laughing, hitting or caressing him or her. The shaman is thus confronted with extremes of emotions and has to mediate them dialogically and emotionally. For Vitebsky, such dialogues represent not only expressions of communication with the afterworld, but also the feelings of the collective, which are dealt with by the Sora shaman. Among the Sora there are two types of shaman: funeral shamans (usually women), who take over more important roles, and divining shamans (men and women), who heal through sacred oracles or auguries (divination). Male and female shamans of the Sora undertake “journeys” that a “normal” person only experiences once – namely the departure from the body at the time of physical death. The shaman, however, travels to the underworld and begins dialogues with the dead in order to confront the emotions of the living and dead and thus to comfort and heal the living as well as the post-mortem personalities.

Shamanic cosmovisions and ritual performances are dynamic, changeable, unpredictable and – in their uncountable agencies of other-than-humans – highly frightening. Spirits, animals, deities, ancestors, collective memories and emotions need to be mediated, balanced and appeased. In eco-cosmological worldviews of vernacular Hindu traditions, fear is often associated with the alterity of animality (Ferrari / Dähnhardt 2013). The fear of illness is, for ex-

ample, personified by the donkey (Ferrari 2013: 236–257). In textual, iconographic and ritual Hindu traditions, the crow signifies a proximity to inauspiciousness and death (Zeiler 2013: 200–201). In Tantric Hindu traditions the crow symbolises the dangerous ambivalence (Zeiler 2013: 204) of life and death embodied by the goddess Dhumavati.

The worship of Indian vernacular goddesses in particular is a fascinating example of ontological and ritual handling of fright and fear. The Indian goddesses (Kinsley 1985) called Devi (“goddess”) or Ma (“mother”) are viewed as both the creators and potential destroyers of the eco-cosmological entity between the human and non-human world and cosmos. A Devi or Ma is believed to be omnipotent and is associated with the idea of *shakti*, the sacred female energy in South Asian religious and spiritual traditions (see Tambs-Lyche 2004). *Shakti* as the indigenous concept of embodied and spiritual female power has an extremely ambivalent character, as the goddess simultaneously personifies a creative and a destructive power: she can kill and she can create (Guzy 2017: 175). Vernacular Hindu goddesses manifest themselves in aniconic forms – in stones, quarries, eruptions of the earth, waterfalls, rivers or other natural phenomena (Stietencron 1972), personifying the eco-cosmological nature of vernacular Hinduism. Frequently, local cults of goddesses are integrated into the pan-Indian worship of goddesses such as Kali or Durga (Mallebrein 2004: 273–99), which then gain iconic status and power in a local region.

The life-giving and life-taking powers and energies of goddesses are conceived as an uncontrollable, frightening, bewildering and wild force. In her manifold manifestations the goddess is believed to be responsible for one’s personal fate, which can be changed benevolently through advice given in dreams or through destructive intrusions in the form of dangerous illness, as for example chicken pox (Ferrari 2014). Only the correct ortho-practic ritual worship may appease and positively influence her.

In India, the agency of human trance mediums, as exemplified in the musical and ritual *boil* tradition of the Bora Sambar region (Guzy 2013: 41–47) is a widespread mode of communication with a goddess (see Assayag / Tarabout 1999). *Boil* as ritual goddess spirit possession and embodiment is characterised by particular rhythmic sequences of ritual *ganda baja* music and wild folk dance movements of *dalkhai* (Guzy 2013: 54–71). Ritual goddess embodiment is thus codified by trance, ritual language and often ecstatic forms of expression such as dance or other ritual performances. Ritual goddess spirit possession, which entails a dynamic of fright and risk within the ritual, is always accompanied by ritual music, performed exclusively by initiated male musicians on highly symbolic instruments – such as drums (see Roche 2000: 288–95). In greatly dynamic ecstatic musical and dance performances, musicians and specialised male or female ecstatic priests provoke and indicate

spiritual transformation within the ritual – a ritual transformation that, with its liminal and temporary character, is frightening as such.

This special collection assembles perspectives on different concepts of fright and fear within diverse Indian cultural contexts – introduced primarily through the lens of anthropology, religious studies and folklore studies. The articles are based on a workshop held at Aarhus University's Conference Center in Sandbjerg in May 2017, which brought together senior and junior scholars from Europe and India, all engaged in long-term field work in South Asia.¹

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Of Fear and Fright: Reminiscences from the Bangladesh Sundarbans in Colonel Ershad's Time

Harald Tambs-Lyche

Abstract

In these reminiscences from the Bangladesh Sundarbans in the early 1980s, I recall the climate of fear that reigned in the area. Among the poor, every spring presented the threat of starvation and death, as their rice stocks became depleted and the price of rice became impossibly high. Rice became scarce, too, since much was smuggled to India at an even “better” price. For those who had a little land, there was the danger that rich neighbours would dispossess them by bribing the village accountant to change the title to the land. For the land-grabbers, there was the fear of vengeance from the Mukti Bahini, the clandestine freedom fighters from the time of the war of independence, who would sometimes kill the wrongdoers. For those who sympathised with the Mukti Bahini, there was the fear of the police. Even the schoolmasters were afraid, for the state coffers would run dry in the summer, and they would not get paid until the arrival of foreign aid money in January. And yet, in the midst of all this, there was the Jatra, the folk theatre, whose rehearsals were held clandestinely in spite of the curfew – proof of the people's determination to enjoy life and art in spite of everything. This article, then, is a reflection on the courage exhibited by the residents of the Sundarbans in defiance of the omnipresent spectre of fear.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Sundarbans, fear, fright, fieldwork, Mukti Bahini

Introduction

As an anthropologist, I have seldom had occasion to be afraid in the field. It is here that my experience of the Bangladesh Sundarbans, in the early 1980s, stands out. At that time and place, fear was a constant and fundamental element of existence for the people around me. I shall describe a situation where violence and deprivation, mainly due to what might be described as the “political situation” – the balance of power and violence combined with the hunger experienced every spring by the very poor – produced a permanent and

Harald Tambs-Lyche, Department of Sociology (Emeritus), University of Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, France; <http://haraldtambslyche.academia.edu/>.

very real sense of insecurity. Though this was in the early 1980s, the situation was certainly “post-colonial” in the sense that violence was not a state monopoly, but distributed among several actors. This differed from a forest camp farther south in the Sundarbans, where the monopoly of violence was squarely in the hands of the forest guards, unlike the particular “balance of power” I observed in the village of Rayenda. The existential condition of permanent fear did not exclude moments of fright, when particular elements suddenly combined to threaten imminent death or destruction.

I distinguish, then, fear from fright: they are not the same. Also, I believe, we must distinguish the frights that result from otherwise enjoyable and voluntarily chosen activities such as a dangerous sport (not to speak of the “pseudo-frights” of a horror movie), from those that stand forth as involuntary moments of crisis while living with fear – as described here but also, perhaps, as associated with dangerous occupations and ways of life, such as underground mining or deep-water fishing, to name only a few. Fright of the latter kind is peculiarly characterised by being, so to speak, the sudden realisation of what we already knew only too well.

Of fear and fright

He has not learned the lesson of life
who does not every day surmount a fear.¹

I shall speak, here, mainly of fear – not of supernatural forces, but of the wheels of a society gone wrong, wheels which might and sometimes did crush anyone in their way. Such fear was not a passing emotion, but a constant presence. Occasionally, fear might turn into fright, when a particular situation of danger arose. But the background, all the time, was the fear of losing livelihood and life in a situation where violence was endemic to social life.

The setting could have been idyllic – the green forests and fields of the Bangladesh Sundarbans, with water everywhere, leading to a cleanliness of the environment I never knew in Western India: here, even poor houses had their own latrine, perched over the water. In Western India, no such luxuries were known: where the fields were distant, the back lanes served as the toilets, with scavenging dogs as the main street-cleaners. The huts in the Sundarbans might be small and poor, but they were picturesque: there were palms everywhere, and at dawn and dusk, birdsong mellowed all other sounds. Here, in the Ganges delta, it was easy to understand why Bangladesh should be the most fertile country on earth.

¹ “Courage” by Ralph Waldo Emerson, from the collection “Society and Solitude”; see *Emerson’s Prose Works*, Volume III, Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co., 1879 (original talk held in 1859), p. 156.

In October 1982, there were several ways to get from Dhaka to Rayenda, the centre of Sarankhola Thana, far to the south in the Sundarbans of Khulna District, Bangladesh. I chose the steamer “Rocket”, which left Dhaka at ten in the morning among a host of river craft, most of them under sail, mounting the river in the fresh morning breeze. In the afternoon, downriver, we passed others at anchor, waiting for the next morning’s wind. The pulse of the river still followed the rhythm of the current and the winds. But the steamer pressed on, and at four in the morning I went on deck to see Morellganj, one of the first settlements in the Khulna Sundarbans, founded in 1830 by the two Morell brothers. Like others who followed, they had bought their land from the East India Company and, unlike the others, grew rice rather than opium – with its attendant horrors – on the land cleared by their dependents. In spite of the enthusiastic description of the Gazetteer (KDG 1976: 53, Rao / Rao 1992, Oddie 1999), Morellganj looked sad now: the river had recently taken away part of the village. A couple of years later, it was to swallow the house of the Morells too, and with it the valuable archives still to be studied for the history of the area.

We were in the “moribund” delta, where silt is no longer deposited to form new islands and enlarge the land, as it is in the “active” delta to the east. Here in the West the salty seawater floods the rivers in winter, so the rice beds must, above all, be kept dry. This prevents farmers from growing a winter crop of rice: still, the quantity of rice grown well exceeds the needs of the population.

As you travel along the rivers, only the high banks are seen, with the tops of the palms behind. You can see the roofs of houses, too, but not the fields, always well below water level. The villages here all have the same origin. The land belonged, at first, to pioneers who brought along with them a whole troop of workers, to clear and till, but also to defend their lands. There was nobody else to protect them. A tradition of violence was there from the start. Gradually, the land was leased to tenants, then there were sub-tenants: subinfeudation led to the division of the land into an infinite number of small plots, with some large farms in between. Merchants and artisans arrived later (KDG 1976: 300–301, Tambs-Lyche 2017: 173–176). The large farmers, merchants and artisans were still there in 1982, but most farmers were still tenants, though some of them had gained ownership of small plots after the war of independence in 1970–71. Others, increasingly, were landless labourers. The result was a society sharply divided by class (Datta 1994): the majority of the people came from the ubiquitous ex-untouchable community of Namashudras (Bandopadhyay 1994), while most of them, converted, now described themselves simply as “Muslims”. Only the smattering of higher castes – and some artisans – designated themselves by a specific caste name. About a fifth of the population remained Hindus.

We arrived at Khulna, the capital of the province, at ten in the morning. A rickshaw from the steamer's quay took me to the ferrymen's place where I negotiated a passage by canoe to the south side of the river. Here you might get a seat in a minibus for Bagerhat – halfway to Rayenda downriver – but you could also, as I did, take the train: slow but safe. Once on the way up, later, I took the bus: I remember a cyclist throwing himself into the rice fields as we heard the crackling noise of the bike crushed under our wheels. The bus did not stop.

I passed two nights at Bagerhat waiting for the opportunity to travel further. One evening, in the street, I was surrounded by a gang of some thirty young boys, eager to get at the American imperialist – me, in effect – who just managed to slip back into the hotel and persuade the owner, with some difficulty, to close his door on the gang. Perhaps this was my first “fright” in the Sundarbans. Then, at six p.m. the next day, I boarded the boat for Rayenda, and, with a quick passage downstream, arrived in the evening. Luckily the Public Works Department bungalow was free, and I got a nice little place to stay.

I was glad to have chosen this itinerary, though a faster one exists – 28 rather than 33 hours of travel, plus intermediary waiting – for the little more than one hundred kilometres as the crow flies. This is the direct Dhaka-Bagerhat launch. But the night before my arrival at Rayenda, the launch had been taken by “dacoits”, who had looted the passengers – though nobody had been killed this time, as they said. This happened from time to time, but the “dacoits” had never attacked the “Rocket”. There was other news: that morning, a corpse had been found floating in the canal that forms Rayenda's port. The body was beyond identification, but, it was said, “we know who killed him.” Who that was, was never said. But there was again vague talk of “dacoits” and of the fortress the police were building as a defence against them, somewhat further south. When people used the term “dacoits”, however, there seemed to be some irony about it, as if the “dacoits” were not really to be despised.

I was at Rayenda to study the problems of infrastructure, transport and agriculture, with a small grant from NORAD, the Norwegian development agency. I was to indicate possible measures to ameliorate the economic situation in the area. To do so, I did a series of interviews among the poor – a rather melancholy task, as many of the interviewees were in a state of hunger and bad health that made one doubt their capacity to last until the next monsoon. Lack of food was not the problem: there was plenty of rice. But merchants and the few large landowners hoarded the rice in the autumn, and when it was sold in the spring, it would bring a profit of more than one hundred per cent – at which time, it would be far too expensive for the local poor. Considerable profit, too, was gained by smuggling the rice to Kolkata, where the superior

Bangladeshi variant fetched a high price. Crossing the border was not entirely without danger, however.

Here in the moribund delta, the salty river water prevented a winter crop of rice. But what about vegetable crops that did not need irrigation? The local market was too small to grow them on any scale. But what if they could be brought to town? Thus, I started wondering about the potential of a road from Rayenda to Morellganj – or even all the way to Bagerhat – to transport and market the vegetables that, it seemed, the area around Rayenda might be able to produce. Agricultural activity during the winter would provide work to at least some of the starving poor.

Mukti Bahini

Then one day, somebody knocked on the door of my bungalow and I was confronted with some fifteen women, of all ages, come to see me. “We have come to tell you we have no use for a road,” they said. “There is a path already, and we can go there by walking. A road for vehicles would help only the rich – and the police. We do not want that road.”

I wanted, of course, to know who these women were. “They are the women’s branch of the Mukti Bahini,” explained my best friend and informant. This was the corps of volunteers of Mujibur Rahman, dating from the war of liberation. I knew that organisation already. One day, as we were walking towards a forestry village some twenty kilometres to the South, we had been stopped on the road by half a dozen armed men. “The Malik wants to see you,” one of them said. They led us to a school rather incongruously placed in the midst of the rice fields. A few minutes later, we were standing before a small assembly in the classroom. This, I think, may well be described as another fright. But then I recognised the malik, or “commander”, seated at the teacher’s desk. He was playing the part of Tipu Sultan in the piece of Jatra folk-theatre that was being rehearsed in the village, and I had already been told that he was the head of the Mukti Bahini in the area, and of their military wing, the Mukti Judda Sangsha, both formally banned in Bangladesh at that time.

The first question – translated into English – was neat and clear: “We just want to know what your connection to American Imperialism is.” Other questions, rather less general, followed. In fact, once I realised that they had decided I did not really represent the enemy, I began to feel rather at ease with them. Were the “dacoits”, in fact, these Mukti Bahini? Unsurprisingly, I could obtain no clear answer to the question. Certainly, they were among those the

police was supposed to fight, and certainly, arms and all, they were not supposed, officially, to exist.

I should explain that these freedom fighters – who had played an important part in the war of liberation – were not universally popular. Many high-caste Muslims had opposed the separation from Pakistan, and there had been a series of bloody massacres of those suspected of supporting Bangladeshi independence. The latter, represented by the Mukti Bahini, had fought back. They may be regarded as Bengali nationalists, and in a nutshell, one could see the conflict – still very much alive – as one between those who are Bengalis first, Muslims second, and those for whom it is the other way round. Colonel Mohammed Ershad, then dictator of Bangladesh (1982–90), could be seen, at the time, as having steered a course of compromise: he had banned the Mukti Bahini, which had gone underground, while he also seemed to view them as a useful counter-force against the Islamists. As a true Bengali, Ershad was also a romantic and a poet: every day a poem of his – on subjects such as “the village of my youth” – appeared on the front page of the national newspapers.

The presence of the Mukti Bahini was strongly felt at Rayenda, and their malik enjoyed both popularity and a degree of prestige. It was also said of him, that he knew all the important officers in the army. The army, mind you, not the police, which was a different matter altogether. The malik was tall and handsome and enjoyed a reputation for honesty – something that was rare in Rayenda.

In fact, the lands of the village often changed ownership, without any notice being given to the peasant who supposed himself to be the owner. As one informant recounted, one day he had seen the henchmen of his neighbour, a rich Islamist farmer, ploughing what he knew to be his own land. He could not fight them: they were several, and they had a gun. So he went to the village accountant, to check that the land was still in his name. “Sorry,” said the latter, “there is no land in your name.” Clearly, the rich farmer had bribed or coerced the accountant to change the owner’s name in the land register. “It happens all the time,” said somebody else. In such cases, the only recourse was the Mukti Bahini. Sometimes, they would succeed in coercing the accountant to have the land restored. Sometimes, they would kill the land-grabber. Perhaps, but nobody said so, the corpse in the canal was one such case. That the ownership of property was a matter of force and political clout, and not a question of law, was in any case abundantly clear.

I had, in fact, recruited a young man as my assistant: he had recently lost his land and was in dire need of money. But when I visited the District Commissioner, accompanied by my new assistant, he at once told me to get rid of my aide. “He is too political,” said the D.C., and indeed, I learnt that my ex-assistant was a member of the Mukti Bahini. I found another assistant, the

son of a merchant who had a sawmill. The mill was inoperative since it depended on electricity, and there had been no current for a long time. Diesel, as an alternative source of power, could be had only at impossible black-market rates. So he was free, and proved invaluable, since he was on speaking terms with the D.C., as well as with the malik of the Mukti Bahini, and even with the head policeman, as with almost everybody else.

He was not with me, however, when I visited the most important landowner of Rayenda, the very one, in fact, who had grabbed the land of my first assistant. He invited me to stay overnight with him – not a pleasure, assuredly, but all went well until we were returning to the village in a canoe escorted by one of his henchmen with a gun. There he presented me with a bill for lodging with him, at a price equal to some of the best hotels in Dhaka. I told him, then, that this was the behaviour of a dacoit: he had invited me, and I was certainly not going to pay. The henchman was shocked, the assistant I had brought from Dhaka was terrified, and the landowner began to cry. “How can you call me a dacoit,” he said. This situation, too, I would qualify as a fright. But the henchman did not use his gun, and as I returned to Rayenda, the word had already spread. Strangely, most people seemed to be smiling at me, some shook my hands, and even the D.C. seemed to be amused. Clearly, I had scored a point, answering back to a man they hated and feared – but it may be understood that the general situation was somewhat tense.

Those who still had a little land were afraid of losing it, and, as we have seen, and as they well knew, becoming a landless labourer could in fact be just a slow way to die of starvation. Resistance might bring death more quickly. For the land-grabbers, the threat of vengeance – perhaps by the Mukti Bahini – was a real danger. The police hardly offered protection: they might stage an attack on the “bandits”, but even if they should manage to kill a couple of them, this would in no way guarantee future security. More likely, it would lead the “bandits” to kill some of them. The police, too, were known to have killed troublesome people – or rather, it was said, people said to make trouble – the truth of the accusation did not matter if the police could be seen to act. Such cases of setting an example hardly assured anyone and the police were not discriminating in their choice of victims. After all, the policemen were afraid too, hoping to survive until they could return to the city, and to less dangerous pursuits such as tear-gassing demonstrating students.

Social fear

Here we are clearly talking not of individual fears but what Tudor (2003) calls social fear. This is an important point, since fear was for a long time the do-

main of psychology. In sociology, fear was at first approached in terms of constructionism (Harré 1986). But later, Lyon (1998: 43) argued that emotions like fear should also be understood in terms of their foundations in the social structure. In our case, we should realise that people in Rayenda had real cause for fear: it was not a case of projections, as Glassner (1999: xxvi) held of the “culture of fear” in American society. Nor does Furedi’s stress on the importance of “the precautionary principle” in late modern societies (1997: 4) seem pertinent here. The source of fear in Rayenda seemed to lie, as Tudor puts it, in “the unanticipated consequences of changing social structures” (2003: 249). A structure of land tenure is supposed to exist, but who knows if the land will be yours tomorrow? Officially, the state and its police are supposed to monopolise and control violence, but in this case one might be killed by the police, by the Mukti Bahini, by the landlord’s henchmen, by unidentified “bandits” or simply by the free market forces, through starvation. Fear in Rayenda, then, was clearly caused by the failure of the social structure, as well as the social organisation, to provide basic security.

This generalised fear was different from what I had experienced in Praj, a Saurashtra village where I stayed for some time. There, the agricultural labourers and the low castes were afraid of violent raids by the Rajputs, when their huts would be burnt, some of their women raped, and – sometimes – a few of their men killed. But such raids only happened when there was a conflict, such as a dispute about agricultural wages. In Praj, then, fear was part of the power structure of a relatively stable, unequal society, and violence would generally take place only when that structure was felt to be threatened.

Jatra rehearsals: the policeman and “Tipu Sultan”

But then, there was the theatre. There was, of course, a general curfew, and nobody was supposed to be out after dark. One might have thought people would be afraid of assembling illegally. But when my assistant – the son of the sawmill’s owner – assured me there would be no problem, we went to the theatre. The company was rehearsing a couple of pieces, among them “Tipu Sultan”, in which the malik of the Mukti Bahini played the title role. The symbolic link between the king who had fought the British and the malik who fought the authorities was abundantly clear. Still, apparently, the head of the local police had decided to tolerate these rehearsals.

I was enchanted by the performers, and by the art of Jatra – so different from the realist theatre of the West. In Jatra, every performer is a specialist of certain sentiments: the female star, a professional, was reputed to be the best weeper in Southern Bangladesh. The rehearsals went on from nine in the

evening until two in the morning every night, and the most impressive of all the personalities was the director, a fruit-seller who owned his cart and, apparently, a single set of well-worn clothes. He knew all the pieces more or less by heart, though he had a little book in front of him: when directing an actor, he would jump to the middle of the scene, show how he wanted it done, and have the performance repeated until he was satisfied. The actors, professionals as well as amateurs, had great respect for him, and only occasionally proffered an alternative interpretation. When I talked to him, he admitted to having heard the name Brecht – unhappily he had not been able to find his books. The Jatra was not a small operation: the company included some fifty members.

The people who came to watch the rehearsals – I estimate there were about two hundred to two hundred and fifty of them – were all there in defiance of the curfew.² Their safety lay in numbers; there was nobody else to be seen in the village streets at night, where only the dogs ignored the curfew. Thus the curfew was effective, except for the Jatra.

One night, to our surprise, we found the chief of police seated in the director's chair. The vegetable-seller kept himself on the sidelines. We learned that the policeman had threatened to ban the rehearsals, which were, of course, illegal, taking place as they did during the curfew. But then the officer had added: "All my life I have dreamt of directing a theatre piece. Thus I will allow the rehearsals if you let me direct the company." There was the hint of a smile on the vegetable-seller's face: "Let us see," he seemed to be saying. And indeed, the atmosphere was very different that night. The policeman did not demonstrate how a role should be played: he shouted orders. The actors seemed to obey, even Nilima the star: executing her role precisely to the policeman's orders, she presented a perfect caricature of her own play. Sosanko, the comedian, managed to play his role without compromising himself. But Nomita, the actress specialised in silent protest, became the favourite of the spectators that evening. Every time she received an order from the policeman, she would play her role of voicelessly saying no, to perfection. The louder the officer cried, the more perfectly she played her protest. In the end the policeman had to dismiss her, finding her performance unsatisfactory. In the shadows, the vegetable-selling director smiled. So, I think, did most of us, when we were out of the sparse lights and the view of the policeman.

Now it was Tipu Sultan's turn, played by the Mukti Bahini's malik. He played the "freedom-fighter" king with mastery. But the policeman, hurling his instructions at him, was not satisfied. Like Nilima, the malik started to follow the instructions to the letter, turning the Sultan into a caricature: there were giggles at the back of the audience. Furious, the policeman threw himself on the actor and started to kick him with his heavy boots. The Mukti Bahini

2 Rayenda Thana had about 3,000 inhabitants at the time, but many of them lived too far away to frequent the theatre. Attendance must have accounted for some fifteen to twenty per cent of those who lived within reasonable walking distance.

commander leapt from the stage and into the woods, followed by the police officer: we could hear them fighting in the dark. Nobody smiled: there was a fright, this time on behalf of the popular malik. Would he be killed? Many, in the audience, may have seen him as the only protection they had.

A little later the policeman returned, and tried to continue the rehearsals. But the minds of the actors and spectators were elsewhere. A little later, the malik returned too, alive but bruised, his clothes torn and covered with mud. The chief of police gave the order that the rehearsals were over for the night, and we all went home.

Later, when I returned to the theatre, the policeman had withdrawn and all had returned to normal. Yet the events of that evening continued to intrigue me. They seemed to illustrate a certain balance of power. The policeman, of course, might be seen to represent authority. He well knew that the Jatra rehearsals were going on during the curfew. Normally, he should simply have turned up with a troop of policemen and closed the theatre. But probably he also realised how unpopular this would be, and the police needed a minimum of cooperation from the people. My ex-assistant once said that the chief of police was known for his “social work”, but he said this in the policeman’s presence, and the nature of this “social work” was even more obscure than when the term is used – ubiquitously but imprecisely – in an Indian context. The policeman may have been trying to gain some cooperation by joining the rehearsals, which he probably hoped to control. His role as director, in fact, gave him the opportunity to humiliate and publicly beat up his main adversary, the malik of the Mukti Bahini. In a way, then, the policeman did manage to prove that he was the boss. But it did not really work: everyone else clearly sympathised with the malik, though they could not defend him there and then. They also knew that the malik, bigger and stronger than the policeman, must have decided it was more prudent, politically, to let the policeman win the fight. There was no sign, in fact, that the malik’s popularity was reduced by this incident – and so the policeman’s efforts were in vain.

In the forest

You will remember that our trip to the forest camp in the south, a few days later, had been interrupted by the Mukti Bahini and the malik’s interrogation of me. I had wanted to know more about the forest economy. As we arrived after a walk of some twenty kilometres, we were soon surrounded by the locals. The foresters were absent, they said: they were having a meeting at one of their posts in the jungle. Thus I received a rather full account of the foresters’ activities, how they would sell off valuable timber to contractors who

would smuggle the logs across the Indian border. For the locals, there was repression and badly paid forest work. In fact, I was asked to write the complaints down and bring them to Colonel Ershad himself (I did not get past his guards, but they assured me he would get the letter). Needless to say, we walked very quickly back to Rayenda, since the forest guards would soon return and “there was no telling what they would do to us” – the guards were said to have killed some of those who denounced corruption. Again, I would say we had quite a fright. There was no police in the forest village: the forest guards have police authority. There, too, fear was pervasive, but the forest village seemed to lack the counter-balancing forces that, however imperfectly, made possible the co-existence between land-grabbers, police and the Mukti Bahini at Rayenda.

Living in fear

I have tried to give an impression of a society where everybody lived, every day of their lives, in fear. First, there was no security of property or livelihood: land belonged to those who could grab it. Every time a large farmer chased a neighbour from his land, the other small farmers – or tenants – knew they might be next. And life without land was precarious, to say the least: there was not enough work, and every year some labourers and their families would succumb to starvation. Moreover, those who protested were rumoured to be “troublemakers” – say, suspected of sympathising with the Mukti Bahini – and would have great difficulty in finding any work at all. Again, such rumours would make you an excellent target for the police. If, on the other hand, you succeeded in making peace with the land-grabbers and work for them to gain a living, you might become the target of the Mukti Bahini’s counter-violence, as well as your boss. Moreover, as shown by the case of my assistant’s father, the sawmill-owner, being an “independent” entrepreneur was not easy either. If he had the money or power to save his business, he might become the Mukti Bahini’s target, and if he was in difficulty, some powerful landowner might take over his business. Even the teachers were in trouble, since the state’s coffers were empty in July, and there would be no pay until the next instalment of international aid, some time in the New Year. No wonder the only teacher I met looked so thin and hungry.

Fear for property and/or life was endemic, then – and sometimes broke out into real frights. Bangladesh at that time already represented what we would now call a typical postcolonial situation, where central state processes (Krohn-Hansen / Nustad 2005) as well as the agency for violence (Comaroff / Comaroff 2006) were distributed among several actors, rather than concen-

trated in the state. These factors were at the roots of insecurity, as violence and pressure might come from many sides.

What impressed me most, however, was the capacity to live with fear: in short, what I can only call courage. It was not the courage that comes from ignoring or minimalising danger, but rather the kind that recognises that fear can destroy everything and must therefore be fought, continuously and consciously. Without the courage to stand up to fear, life in Rayenda simply would not have been tolerable. This kind of fear, which reminded me of stories told by my father's generation about the German occupation (1940–45), must not be confused with the fright of singular, dramatic situations, though the latter are certainly no less frightening when lived in the context of quite rational and endemic fear. The latter provided the rationale for being frightened: danger was real. It is against this background that the Jatra was significant: not just in defiance of the curfew, not just because they staged the drama of Tipu Sultan's resistance, but also since the people of Rayenda had the courage to insist on art and enjoyment in the midst of fear. This, to me, was real courage.

Did not Emerson say: "Fear is an instructor of great sagacity, and the herald of all revolutions"?³ I certainly felt that the situation at Rayenda strongly resembled what my Maoist friends in Norway would have called a revolutionary one. Once, I put that question to one of my friends in Rayenda. "We already tried that," he said, referring to the war of independence of Bangladesh. "It did not work." What was left for most people, then, was basically what Scott (1985) calls silent resistance – backed by the presence of the active but illegal Mukti Bahini.

Thus fear was generalised, and it spread to me too. This was the ever-present fear, very different from what I felt one night in Moradabad, in the mid-1970s. I had been invited to stay with a Muslim acquaintance, but when I arrived at their house, they quickly escorted me to a guesthouse. In the night, a crowd was banging on the guesthouse's gate: there was in fact a communal riot going on, and having got wind of it the Muslim family did not want to be responsible for my safety. This was a fright without previous fear, though I did notice the tense atmosphere in town as my friend took me to the guesthouse and asked me please not to go out. An anecdote of yet another fright I had, however, illustrates the contrast between fear and fright, and also shows how the time and place had rendered me rather nervous.

One night, as I had gone to bed early in my little bungalow in Rayenda, I woke up to the sounds of a roaring crowd. Angry? It seemed so. It sounded as if the crowd was spoiling for a fight – violently, by the sound of it. I remembered the gang of young boys in Bagerhat – was the crowd again looking for the American Imperialist? I kept my lights out and hid in a corner, experienc-

3 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1898): Compensation. In: *Selected Essays and Poems*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon (first published in 1808), p. 15.

ing a real fright. Then, in the early hours of the morning, the noise died away, and when the Chowkidar, the keeper of the bungalow, came, I asked what all the noise had been about. “Oh that,” said the Chowkidar, “that was the televised transmission of the Ramayana. They had put up a generator and brought a television especially for that. Everybody was there.” It need hardly be said that this, too, was in defiance of the curfew.

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The Mystery of the *buru*: From Indigenous Ontology to Post-modern Fairy Tale

Stefano Beggiora

Abstract

This article offers an overview of the pantheon and religion of one of the most distinctive indigenous populations of Arunachal Pradesh in North-Eastern India: the Apatani. In particular, through an ethnographical field study on the distinctive culture of this ethnic group, the study aims to explain the symbolisms and functions inherent in the mythical figure of the *buru*, a kind of animal-chimaera, which plays a key role in the myth of the origins of the Apatani. At the same time, this study proposes a critical analysis of the results of Ralph Izzard's exploratory expedition shortly after WWII, which discounted any possibility of investigating a cosmogonic myth, but strove to trace a legendary extinct saurian. The misinterpretation of the British expedition in the 1950s gave rise to a series of beliefs that in contemporary times (mostly in the West) have aimed to prove the real existence of the *buru*, extrapolating it from the folklore record. For this reason today the *buru* has become a sort of post-modern legend, or better a classical figure of cryptozoology, understood as pseudoscience and sub-cultural product. This essay tries to explore the issue through a religious and anthropological investigative approach.

Keywords: India, Himalaya, Apatani, Ziro, *buru*, Izzard, Stonor, Cryptozoology

The length of a *buru* was about three and a half to four meters, and it was “long shaped”. The head was about fifty centimeters long, and was elongated in to a great snout, flattened at the tip. The eyes were behind the snout. The teeth were “flat like those of a man”, except for a pair in the up and lower jaws, which were large and pointed “like those of a tiger or a boar”. The neck was rather under a meter in length, and could be stretched out or drawn in (this was vividly explained by pantomime). The body was roundish. [...] The tail was rounded and tapering, and about one and half meters in length. It was fringed “from where the animal excreted” with broad and deeply fringed lobes which run the whole length on either side, and sprang from the dorsal surface of the tail. (Izzard 2001: 23)

The *buru* lived entirely in the water, and never came to land. They were not often seen as they lived in water deeper than the height of a man. They used to put their necks up put of the water and make a hoarse bellowing noise. Sometimes they were seen nosing in the muddy banks of the lake, and when doing so they weaved their head and neck from one side to side. (ibid.: 24)

Stefano Beggiora, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy; stefano.beggiora@unive.it.

The extraordinary environment of the northeastern border

The complex system of the three thousand kilometres composing the Himalayan ridge originated from a massive tectonic collision that is assumed to have occurred forty or fifty million years ago. The energy developed by the majestic meeting between India and Eurasia was of such magnitude that it helped create many of the most distinctive geographical features of Asia, such as the Tibetan plateau, the highest on our planet (Rowley 1996: 1–13). The ridge that today is commonly referred to as the Eastern Himalayas crosses Nepal, Bhutan, the northern section of Bengal and the mountainous states of Northeast India, such as Sikkim, Assam and all of Arunachal Pradesh, ending with the slopes in the extreme north of Myanmar (Burma). This region forms a sort of wall that separates the humid plain of the Indian subcontinent from the dry plateau of Tibet. The climatic variability and a wide range of altimetric gradation have led to the formation of an incredible region: a corner of nature that includes the highest peaks in the world, deep gorges, subtropical jungles, temperate forests with tall trees, savannahs and prairies (Roy et al. 2015: 182–89, Chatterji et al. 2006: 27–33).

Different forms of knowledge and religion such as Hinduism, Buddhism (and, only recently, Christianity) have arisen over the centuries alongside the indigenous traditions of the different ethnic groups of the area, which still today boast their own distinctive culture, in many cases with distinct shamanistic traits. Many of these communities that the Indian Government today defines as “tribal” have lived for centuries in a condition of relative isolation, with their lifestyles, traditions and customs, as well as livelihoods, fundamentally based on the surrounding environment. The social substratum of the multiple villages, the sort of connective cultural fabric that seems in some ways to assimilate ethnic communities even at a distance from one another within the Eastern Himalayas, is still today deeply dependent on the natural resources of the region (Beggiora 2014c: 180–81). This wealth – including a great abundance of water, an aspect of enormous strategic importance also from a contemporary geopolitical perspective – is the source of livelihood for all those who inhabit the foothills overlooking the plains of the Indian subcontinent.

Considering flora and fauna, it is adequate to say that this region is one of the world’s most biologically rich areas, a world-class biodiversity reserve inasmuch as very few places on earth can match the manifestations of its majestic nature. The most interesting territory in this respect is the state of Arunachal Pradesh, nestled between the plains of Assam and the borders of the states of Bhutan, China and even Burma. Under the long shadow cast by the overhanging mountains, here the northernmost rainforests of the world contain an

extreme landscape that may boast almost half of the flowers and species of birds known in India (Ministry of Environment 2016: 12–18, 72ff). It is believed that this ecological niche may host globally endangered species or even as yet undiscovered plants and animals, including mammals, reptiles and amphibians, some of which could probably also benefit from the status of “at-risk species”, but which have not yet been surveyed by science. In a world in which, through the new means offered by technology, there is the ephemeral belief that there is nothing left to discover, no more of the earth’s surface yet to be explored, it is extremely interesting to note how many poorly known grey areas still exist. Testimony to this are the WWF reports that from 1998 to 2008 – later extended to 2015 – highlighting the discovery of 353 new species, including 242 plants, 16 amphibians, 16 reptiles, 14 fish, 2 birds, 2 mammals and over 60 invertebrates (WWF 2015: 7–43).

In addition to these novelties from the perspective of biology, Arunachal Pradesh presents considerable surprises in the fields of anthropology and human sciences, as well. In fact, not only is the culture of the numerous indigenous communities poorly studied, at least in comparison with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, but also many ethnic minorities and subgroups – with diverse traditions, lineages and languages – in many cases do not appear in the governmental cataloguing of the Census of India (Briand 2010, Morrison 2010). This has occurred because of an anthropic geography that is actually very complex: several indigenous communities have sometimes been summarily and mistakenly merged with others in the census operations. This means that if some micro-ethnic communities have never been registered, at least legally, they would seem not to exist.¹

All of this is of great importance, since in contemporary times there is a general tendency to re-evaluate traditional indigenous knowledge as an unwritten heritage of national culture (Ramakrishnan et al. 2012). The so-called “indigenous knowledge on the forest”, an expression perhaps abused today, contains in itself precious and unique information, not always known to science, often including knowledge of plants and medicinal herbs unfamiliar to conventional medicine, whose potentially synthesisable and patentable principles are of great interest to pharmaceutical companies. Similarly, unknown, seemingly fantastic animals, as described in the tales of indigenous people, have always aroused the fascination of outsiders, leading over time to the morbid fashion for perversely exploiting local fauna through hunting trips in order to gain unique and somewhat exotic trophies. Moreover, during the colonial pe-

1 The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List (Modification) Order of 1956, as inserted by “Act 69” of 1986, explicitly catalogued twelve tribes, asserting however that this list was not exhaustive as all the tribes of the state (twenty-six major groups and over one hundred sub-groups including those on the list) should have been part of the Scheduled Tribes (Census 2001).

riod, myths and tales arose about legendary animals, fantastic creatures deeply rooted in local folklore – and today relegated to the sphere of cryptozoology.

This happened and happens because these animals, an expression of a parallel universe intersecting with the human dimension, have always played a fundamental role in indigenous religiosity. The sublimated or symbolic animal form is one of the main elements of South-Asian animism and shamanism (taking into account that only certain aspects of Arunachal Pradesh religions can be considered shamanistic in the strictest sense); manifesting and revealing itself in the cosmogonic myth, this form also configures the spirit world through appearances and colours. Contextually these visions are inspired by the shaman's traditional knowledge and direct experience of the forest, but in most cases they must be analysed in light of the function that they play in the religiosity of the indigenous culture. This sometimes produces misunderstandings, due essentially to a literal interpretation of individual fragments of local folklore, generally extrapolated from their context; thus, even in recent years there have been reported sightings of fantastic creatures, precisely in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the yeti, the wild man or something else. Once again, the perspective of scientism in contemporary thought has imposed a pragmatic and empirical interpretation upon phenomena that, instead, to be fully understood should be contextualised in the religiosity and culture of the people who have always lived in the Eastern Himalayas. Such modern misinterpretations arise in an extraordinary environment that has helped to nourish the romantic and decadent fantasy of fascinating adventures in exotic and mysterious places.

Towards the end of World War II, then, in addition to the already known testimonies concerning the yeti and other lesser-known Himalayan mysteries, the story of the *buru*, or rather of a gigantic reptile of an unknown species, hit the headlines, ostensibly witnessed by the tribes of the Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh (including, among others, the Apatani). Ralph William Burdick Izzard (1910–1992), British agent of the Naval Intelligence Division during the war and the *Daily Mail's* foreign correspondent, managed to get funding to organise an exploratory expedition in pursuit of this mysterious creature. Decisive in the organisation of the enterprise was the report of a zoologist-naturalist named Charles Stonor, who claimed to have collected cross-testimonies of the sightings of the animal and related myths in the oral tradition of the Apatani (the description in the epigraph of the present essay is perhaps one of the most detailed testimonies, even if there are some variations in the reported sources).

It is interesting to note that for the British, at the time of World War II, the Apatani area was familiar, as it hosted a government outpost, but many of the surrounding areas were partially unexplored. Following these rumours of a discovery in Arunachal Pradesh, the idea spread of the survival from historical times of a mythical, perhaps even prehistoric, reptile. The contemporary taste

for the sensational clearly encouraged the approval of the Izzard mission (a possible analogy with the famous Loch Ness monster was certainly a factor). But the adventure was in many ways unsuccessful and ended up leaving many questions unexplained and uncertain, both as to the existence and the meaning of the *buru* myth. Despite this, on 5 May 1947, the *Hindustan Standard* of Kolkata, trying to cope with the scarcity of news trickling in from the expedition, published:

From our Shillong office: A Dinotherium, a member of a race of huge mammals, till now believed to be totally extinct, has been seen perambulating in the Southern side of Himalayan Range bordering on Assam, according to reports reaching here. Tribal people of the frontier tract of Balipara recently came across this moving mountain of flesh wandering majestically and happily plucking the tops of huge, ancient trees. (Izzard 2001: 168)

After the several decades of silence following the unsuccessful conclusion of the expedition, during which only a few scholars tried in retrospect at least to hypothesise a taxonomic position for the mystery of the *buru*, I noticed how this story has recently come back into vogue as a driving motif in cryptozoology. Having personally had the opportunity to undertake field research² in the same area where the expedition of Stonor and Izzard took place and having had the opportunity to collect interviews and insights on this topic, in this study I intend to propose certain considerations of the case. In particular I will try to illustrate how any attempt at scientific interpretation has thus far led to poor results, whereas instead the solution of the mystery resides in the religious symbolism of the indigenous communities of the Eastern Himalayas.

The shaman, the dragon and the lost valley

The heart of the Lower Subhansiri district, in the central section of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, is the abode of the Apatani, one of the many ethnic minorities that populate the region. Probably thanks to a comparatively accessible environment, in contrast to the dense, impassable surrounding jungles, this small group is considered one of the most culturally distinctive and well known in the region. According to the censuses of the 1980s the Apatani population slightly exceeded 16,000 persons, whereas the data previously collected by Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the first anthropologists to carry out research in the area, indicated only a few thousand residents in the period after the Second World War. The Census of India today reports a demographic boom that has brought the population to over 43,000 (Census 2011). The largest settlements are about a dozen in all: these are villages along a forest

2 In particular, in the period 2002–2003, two research missions in Arunachal Pradesh.

belt known as the Apatani Valley (or Ziro Valley from the main town in the area) that climbs up the slopes of the eastern Himalayas. Here, as a consequence of the heavy rainfall during the monsoon season, the territory is densely covered by jungle and crossed by streams flowing from the slopes of the surrounding mountains. The maximum altitude is 1600 metres. There is also a waterway, which locals call Kele (today Tabyu Kiile) that descends in the direction of Ziro, and which plays a fundamental role in our case study.

According to the sources in the field,³ the legends and cosmogonic myths that the Apatani have handed down from generation to generation tell of an ancient ancestor, Abo Tani, who gave rise to three lineages that followed different directions, migrating from the northwest or from Tibet and subsequently settling in India. One of the most interesting aspects of this myth is that it is shared by related indigenous groups in the region, the so-called Tani groups – the Nishi, the Mikir, the Hill Miri, the Adi, the Sulung and the Tagin. These groups thus share a sort of meta-narrative about the time of their origins, feeling related to each other and united by an ancestral bond to the territory in which they live.



Figure 1: Apatani woman, Ziro valley (Fulvio Biancifiori, 2013)

3 Informants in the Hang community were, in detail: Tabin, Hoda and Dolian, *nyibus* of the Hibu clan, of the lineage of Tai, Tabu and Taran. The shaman Nabin and only secondarily Tabin and Tajo were informants about the Kago clan. For other information, interviews with the Tapi Tabo and Pugno Narunichi groups were very important.



Figure 2: Apatani house, Hang (Fulvio Biancifiori, 2013)

These populations still maintain their own language, articulated through different local dialects, yet all originally of Tibetan-Burman stock; the idea, therefore, of a hypothetical origin from the north, through ancient migrations, is therefore plausible, even if not immediately evident. Moreover, the shamans of the tribes, the *nyibus* in the Apatani language,⁴ are the custodians of a secret knowledge that is called *miji migung*: literally “singing” and “prose”, two genres that through the (also sung) narrative constitute the epic cycle of the history of the tribe, handed down orally from generation to generation. It is interesting in this regard to note that to define shamanic power, the Apatani

4 Tibetan-Burman stock, ISO 639-3 (Apa), Ethnologue classification: *apt*. Language considered endangered (see Ethnologue Languages of the World, <https://www.ethnologue.com/>).

do not place particular emphasis on the thaumaturgical abilities of the *nyibu*, but on the knowledge of the foundational myths through the recitation of the *miji migung*. Several rituals, celebrated both privately in the hut that houses the family unit, and collectively on the *lapang*, a stilted platform where the assemblies of village leaders are held, include the recitation of cosmogonies or legendary events depicting the time of origin. The narrative here thus assumes a cultural value that on the one hand is a guarantee of the renewal of the world, as well as the maintenance of its equilibrium, and on the other hand, when shared, serves also as a meeting point for the group identity of the different local communities (Singh 1995: 141–50).

This background to the Stonor report is necessary because the mystery of the *buru* is rooted in this context. According to the *miji migung*, the first descendants of Abo Tani came into conflict with the *burus* and were only able to live in and cultivate their new land after having won it from the monsters in some kind of cosmic battle. Thus, first and foremost, the *buru* functions here as a miracle, or a symbol taking on the role of *monstrum* in the Latin sense of the term – this is regardless of the fact that its external appearance could have been inspired by a creature that actually existed. Secondly, it is clear that at the time the British did not take this aspect into consideration, but discarded it *a priori*, as we will see.

There were not many among the English scholars, agents or explorers who first travelled the area during the first half of the last century who did not soon in a certain sense idealise the heart of Arunachal Pradesh. The gentle and luxuriant territory occupied by the Apatani contrasted with the intricate and untamed expanse of the impenetrable surrounding jungle, barely crossed by difficult and forbidding paths. The idea of the isolation of the Hang basin, the main settlement, and of the neighbouring villages, had contributed in the colonial era to the creation of the romantic myth of a lost valley, identified with the mythical Shangri-La (Graham Bower 1953: 28–38). A. P. F. Hamilton, of the Indian Forestry Service, was to say to Izzard himself: “Now down in Shillong there’s a fellow named Stonor who claims to have discovered a ‘Lost Valley’ up in Northern Assam” (Izzard 2001: 10).

On the other hand it must be considered that the “Western” discovery of the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*), dating back only a few decades earlier (1910), was followed by a period of frenzied collecting of varanids, especially from the Indonesian area. European travellers, explorers, missionaries, ethnologists and colonisers often competed for the hoarding of museum relics, over which there was certainly considerable speculation at the time. A dynamic haggling over specimens was driven not only by science, but also by the industrious urge to solve, through the search for the modern dragon, some of the mysteries about stories and legends of sea and terrestrial monsters (Eberhart 2002: 77, Coleman 2003). “Conan Doyle sort of stuff,” Hamilton

writes in his correspondence with Izzard, before adding: “[...] there may be a Saurian there, which buries itself in the mud during the winter and emerges when the summer monsoon comes [...] good fellow Stonor, reliable sort of chap” (Izzard 2001: 10). This seems to be the mood at the rise of Indian Independence, so dearly bought, after the horrors of an unprecedented world war, yet still imbued with a romantic exoticism and a colonial flavour. A mood that remains unashamed, thanks to the peculiar environment of the frontier, of dreaming despite everything of a lost valley inhabited by prehistoric saurians.

The Stonor & Mills report

The first, at least indirect, reference to the existence of the *buru* dates back to the period 1944–1945 when Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, professor of anthropology at Osmania University in Hyderabad, conducted his first survey of the indigenous populations of the Assamese and Burmese border, with a special focus on the Apatani group (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962). Although his discoveries were still unpublished at the time, he shared his notes with two English explorers: zoologist Charles Stonor and James P. Mills (1890–1960), an anthropologist and administrator who was District Commissioner in some tribal areas of the Northeast. Stonor and Mills in turn visited the Apatani territory in the late 1945 and 1946, gathering interviews and testimonies in the villages about the local traditions and the existence of the creature in the surrounding lake and marshy areas. They finally made a report that was published only in 1951 along with the results of the subsequent expedition.⁵ Stonor’s analysis, more than simply providing a motivation for the challenge, offered some kind of scientific basis for the project, so much so that the journalist from the *Daily Mail* reported it in full. The essay actually has an academic structure, which provides preliminary data on the territory, ethnographic data on the Apatani, the case study with the interviews and a conclusive discussion section.

On the mythical function of the *buru* narrative, however, Stonor seems immediately contradictory. In fact, he recognises that the version reported by Fürer-Haimendorf refers to a foundational myth: the Apatani, arriving in the Eastern Himalayas after a long migration, at some time immemorial, settled on today’s site, but found it initially swampy, unhealthy and inhabited by snakes and monsters. The anthropologist made no direct mention of the name of the mysterious creature, but Stonor later became aware of the fact that he had translated the term *buru* as “monster”, without however giving a more detailed description of it. The origin myth was then also confirmed in a leg-

⁵ J. P. Mills / C. R. S. Stonor: “A Traditional Account of the Survival within Historic Times of a Large Aquatic Reptile in the Outer Himalayas of Assam” (Izzard 2001: 19–43).

end, reported by Stonor and Mills, about the area, which was initially a swampy expanse in which the *burus* roamed. The “cosmic” battle between the first men and the monsters, with the consequent defeat of the latter, would have coincided with the attempt to reclaim the area and the subsequent birth of agriculture. The Apatani would have tried to divert the course of the river, which Stonor calls Kal, in order to lower the water level in the swamp and reduce the habitat of the *burus* by forcing them out to fight. The water thus channelled would then be used for irrigation for the submersion of the rice fields in the area. Despite this logical explanation (and other recurrent elements during the investigation) the zoologist, perhaps influenced to a greater extent by his discipline, seems to discount this data, letting himself instead be seduced by the hypothesis of some existing or extinct beast wandering through those marshlands.

If Furer-Haimendorf is considered an accredited source by virtue of long service in the field, Verrier Elwin, who was an authority in India regarding studies on the *ādivāsī*, as the indigenous populations of the Subcontinent are called (Carrin / Guzy 2012: 1–18), is strangely never mentioned. After Indian Independence, in 1947 to be precise, Jawaharlal Nehru himself invited Elwin to collaborate in the attempt to find a solution to the problems that emerged in relation to the indigenous peoples, especially in the Northeast.⁶ He therefore became a government agent and anthropological adviser for Arunachal Pradesh in particular, which at the time was called NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency). With Furer-Haimendorf, Elwin always had an excellent relationship: in his autobiography he expresses words of friendship and esteem for his colleague and his wife, although it should be recognised that it was above all thanks to the actions of Elwin that Furer-Haimendorf was saved from an embarrassing diplomatic situation and was appointed Special Officer and Assistant Political Officer for the NEFA during the difficult war years (Elwin 1998: 175, 318).⁷

From an anthropological perspective, the data collected by Furer-Haimendorf and Elwin were disclosed after Izzard’s publication. Elwin wrote the famous and monumental *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*, consisting of an archive of about four hundred myths, legends, fairy tales and stories gathered in abundance from the indigenous traditions of Arunachal Pradesh.

6 The first decade and a half of Indian policy for the northeastern region is conventionally called Nehru-Elwin policy, according to which rapid administration expansion was pursued in conjunction with a revivalist-protectionist approach to the development of tribes in hilly areas (Elwin 1960).

7 Furer-Haimendorf was Austrian in origin and was arrested by the colonial authorities in 1938 as a possessor of a passport of the Third Reich. Confined in Hyderabad, he managed to be released by virtue of his studies, through the intercession of colleagues and government officers who acted as guarantors, and for having shown that he had no sympathy for Nazism. The fact that he was then designated as a government officer in a particularly hot border zone, which was part of the Japanese directive and in the path of the Indian National Army invading India from Burma across the Northeast, clearly reveals the importance of the role he played in those years.

The book was published in 1958, not long after the report of Izzard's mission, which is only fleetingly mentioned. The only myth reported concerning the *buru* is related to the Apatani: although the roles and functions of the narration are respected, the appearance of the monster is radically different. It is worth taking an excursus:

When the Apa Tanis first came to their country they found it all mud and water and surrounded by forest. We cut the forest and guided the water into channels and drained the swamp, so that we were able to make our fields there. When we were doing this three burus came out of the swamp. They were like enormous pigs and their bodies were covered with white stripes. We killed them and buried them. They were not animals but Wiyus.⁸ (Elwin 1993: 478)

It is interesting how this variant of the story transposes the species from reptile to mammal (but not the *genus* of the creature, which is still vague).⁹ The animal described here is radically different. But analysing all the variations on the subject shows that even in the first reports there were many different descriptions. Stonor again depicts the *buru* as a water snake or eel, enormous in size, digging into the muddy bottom of the swamp. The bifurcated tongue of the animal is a rather indicative detail (Izzard 2001: 27). At other times the animal is described as something large, majestic, that emerges puffing from the murky water with a head provided with horns (ibid.: 45–46). The theme of the horns, more frequent than the reptile crest and the black-and-white colour, often returns in the collected testimonies, so that the juxtaposition of the *buru* with a completely different animal like the *mithun*, the majestic semi-tamed bison of these Himalayan regions, is at least plausible.

The *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*) is considered in some ways related to the *gaur* (*Bos gaurus*), the largest wild bovine of India and Southeast Asia, now almost extinct. Although most of the time they are left free to roam the forest, the possession of these beasts is the yardstick of wealth for families in many tribes of the Eastern Himalayas. They are not used to produce milk or dairy products, but are slaughtered for their meat. This always happens in a ritual context; the sacrifice of the *mithun* – which here in some manner replaces the buffalo (*Bubalus aquaticus*) sacrifice in India – is a sumptuous celebration that represents the highest religious and shamanic celebration (Beggiora 2003: 120ff). Among the Apatani the sacrifice of this beast is an offering to the gods and is at the same time the fulcrum of funeral ceremonies (*kirikilo*) in which it is believed that the soul of the *mithun* accompanies the deceased in the after-life. For all these reasons and for the symbolic and cultural value of the animal in the traditions of the local populations, today it is in fact the emblem of the State of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁸ With this anglicised transcription the author clearly refers to the Apatani word *ui*, or spirits. The story says clearly that they were not animals, but spirits.

⁹ The witnesses say that the *buru* do not lay eggs like most of the reptiles, but that they give birth to living whelps. This data, if taken literally, would further circumscribe the previous taxonomic assumption.

Given such a vast range of testimonies, it is not possible now to show that the *buru* was actually a wild bison, but the hypothesis of the saurian/reptile seems uncertain as well, given the puzzle of elements that implies a sort of chimaera or composite animal. Nonetheless, the religious dynamics of the sacrifice of the *mithun*, according to which the beast is tracked in the forest, harnessed, captured and brought back to the village to be killed, certainly recalls a kind of primordial sacrifice. Perhaps it is a question of enacting a kind of hunting with a cosmogonic value.

Another important element reported by Elwin and Stonor is that originally the *buru* were three, defeated three times by the Apatani thanks to the help of a magic weapon known as the *mamla* (or *myamya*), or a sort of disk. Stonor claims that this heavy brass disk was kept as a sacred relic in a secret place and that no foreigner was allowed to see it (Izzard 2001: 25, 28).¹⁰ In contemporary times Stuart Blackburn of SOAS in London managed however to photograph the relic in Kalung in 2002 (Blackburn 2008: 294, figure 12).

The ecosystem of the *uis* and the *burus* within the indigenous ontology

As seen above, the religiosity and cults practiced by the great majority of the indigenous communities of these regions are basically animistic or shamanic – if the vast Buddhist or Hindu cultural background has not already incorporated these local realities. The forest is therefore the home of deities and ancestral spirits, while the cosmos in its entirety is imagined to be bipartite between the world of the living and that of the dead. The subsoil, a sort of dimension turned upside down compared to the surface, as if it were an image reflected in a stretch of water, is called *Neli*, the kingdom of the dead for the Apatani, within which the souls of the deceased are destined to become ancestors and tutelary entities of the tribe. The offerings for the dead and the memory of the ancestors constitute the backbone of ritual life, which despite its varied phenomenology, is found quite commonly in the cult of the ancestors of many *ādivāsī* communities of India, from the southern regions to the Himalayan chain. The destiny of the soul in the *post mortem*, the chthonic path to the afterlife, the “rebirth” of the soul in the realm of the ancestors, the entire funeral ritualism – ranging from cremation to the memorial erection of megaliths¹¹ – as well as the sacrifices of animals, exorcism and healing rituals to

10 One or more, kept in different villages as part of ancestral history or in relation to the killing places of each of the three monsters.

11 An archaic use in this region (Fürer-Haimendorf 1939: 215–22) still practiced in some cases by individual *ādivāsī* groups also in the subcontinent (Beggiora 2003: 108–133).

restore a troubled order, confirm the fervid flow in these cultures of ancient and yet still living elements in constant transformation and adaptation.

Concerning the Apatani eschatology, we can see that all those who have experienced a good death, namely one that is both natural and timely, and who are also able to receive the special ritual in their honour, will naturally be destined to migrate to Neli where they will begin a new life. Those who are victims of bad, sudden, violent, accidental, but above all premature death – especially if the corpse cannot be found in order for the mourning ceremony to be performed – will be destined to wander like souls in pain on earth. These spectra, ghosts, remains of gross or psychic elements that are no more than the evanescent appearance of what they were alive, rise into the atmosphere, remaining imprisoned in the intermediate layer of sky called Tali. This is a peculiar idea of local populations: however heavenly, Tali should not be imagined as a celestial dimension, but is more properly an atmospheric space set between the earth's surface and the sky. It is not an otherworldly dimension, though inaccessible to the common man, but is part of the empirical world, with which it maintains a certain permeability. Such troubled souls naturally tend toward the earth's surface, seeking consolation or revenge in the community of the living. For this reason the shaman's task is to pacify these entities by redirecting them from Tali to Neli. In other words it is a process of normalisation that transforms the "memory" (Vitebsky 1993: 223–24) of a deceased into a guardian-ancestor. The group's relations with the Neli community are much more relaxed. As stated above, the first funeral ritual is inaugurated with the sacrifice of the *mithun*, the psychopomp animal, the "pass" to the afterlife, a material inheritance for a world that seems to be gradually more immaterial. This is another topic of great interest: in the cult of the ancestors there is often the idea that the abundant offerings of plants, animals and libations are somehow a sort of nourishment for the progenitors of the clans. They, in exchange, will provide protection to the village against demons and evil entities, but above all, as guardians of the territory, they will guarantee abundance for future generations.

In fact, if the forest and the wild territory that delimit the borders of the villages are the dimension of the spirits of nature and the forces that preside over its cyclical manifestations, then the fields and rice terraces, as well as all the places assigned to agricultural work, are considered under the protection of the ancestors of the clans. For the Apatani, the boundary between the village and the forest is guarded by a series of fetishes made of grass, straw and bamboo, representing precisely the ancestors of the place. Stylised with anthropomorphic features, they often display the relics of the sacrifices, or they are adorned with a set of miniature objects, made of vegetable fibre, which represent assets and attributes of the past, essentially identifying them. *Ude-mik* is the name of these artefacts; made in large numbers and placed next to

each other almost like an army of silent sentinels, they rise just outside the villages, preserving the area from malign external influences.



Figure 3: A *buru*, an apotropaic woven-straw fetish, Ziro Valley (Federico Ceratto and Linda Gerbaudo, 2018)

On the eschatological level, the second life *post mortem* is destined sooner or later to be exhausted, as an authentic reflection of real life. The term of this cycle generally coincides with the dissolving of the remembrance of the deceased in the memory of his or her descendants. It would therefore consist of a generation or two, except in the case of legendary leaders, important personalities, etc. About the fate of the soul (*yalo*) of the dead after the second *post mortem*, the local informers were generally vague, reflecting the fact that the shamanism of these people does not simply follow a doctrinal outline but is based on a cosmology that does not concern itself with attempting to transcend the physical world. The *nyibus* said, however, that the soul, having lost its identity, would face a process of rarefaction, losing all of its distinctive elements until it vanishes into the subsoil. Like a butterfly, once it returns to the surface world, it transmigrates into the body of an animal. Following further questions on this subject, these animals were generally described as wild prey (and not predators) such as deer, wild boar, some bird species, reptiles and rodents.

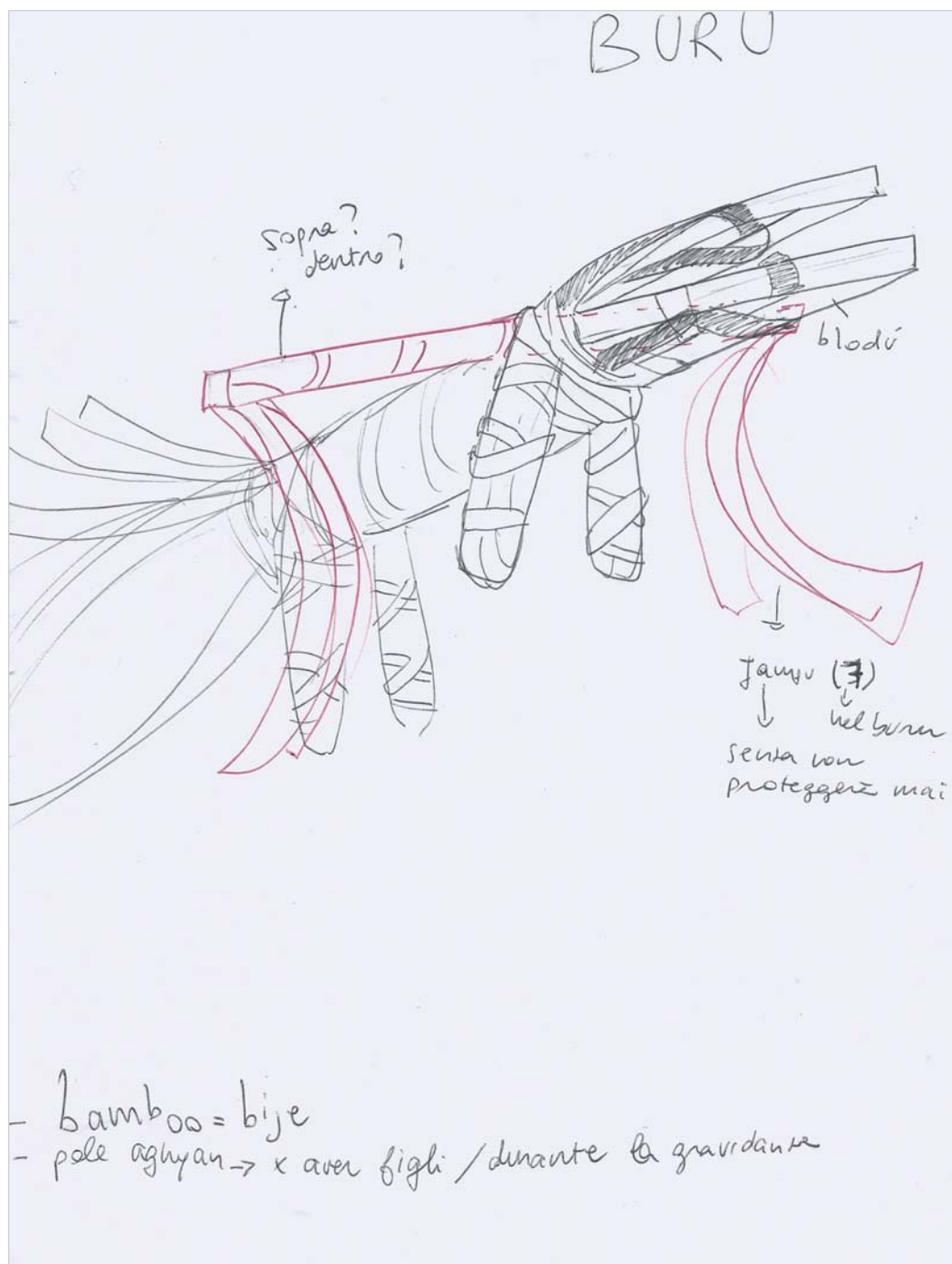


Figure 4: Making of a *buru* fetish, taken from the field notebook, Ziro Valley (Federico Ceratto and Linda Gerbaudo, 2018)

This concept is interesting because it introduces the theme of rebirth, somewhat common in the religions of India. But the idea of a possible return to an ancestral level linked to the theme of hunting is also very intriguing. When the cycle of transformation of the ancestors is completed, there is something of them that remains in the territory and will make it rich. The ancient theme of hunting over time becomes agricultural, i.e. the abundance of crops, but the link with ancestors is a crucial dynamic for the sustenance of the future community.

A second cosmological element is extremely interesting: just as the aerial dimension of Tali exists in the surface world, so too in Neli, the overturned world of the deceased, there is a hanging and rarefied space, in turn upside down. This is the Pinulemba or the village of the so-called *pinus*, the primaeval spirits of every race and species of men, animals and plants to have been born on earth. Some shamans said that the Pinulemba was a sort of village-forge, a kind of limbo in which the souls of those who are not yet born would be waiting to take shape.

This is a truly complex cosmology, made up of numerous superimposed and opposed worlds in a sort of very precise geometry. The space is therefore divided vertically and horizontally where everything, like the jungle itself, seems to be in precarious balance and constant movement and transformation. The sky of the Sun (Donyi) and the Moon (Polo) is imagined as two opposing hemispheres, acting as celestial vaults that contain this cosmos and constantly revolve around its continual metamorphosis.

But on the level of horizontal terrestrial representation, the worlds of the people and the surrounding forest seem to reproduce a sort of antinomy between order and chaos, whose balance is guaranteed by the careful custody of the shamans and the tutelary gods; nevertheless, also in this case the two dimensions are not completely impermeable. Counterposed against the *udemik*, in the jungle, far from the inhabited centres, there is the territory of the natural spirits and the deities that in the Apatani language are called *ui (uhi)*. These may display a benevolent or, more frequently, a hostile attitude towards man; thus the shamans celebrate rites in their honour to appease their anger or to secure their protection. *Uis* may be the supernatural cause of negative events affecting the community, for which reason animals, usually domestic livestock such as chickens, pigs, etc., are offered as substitute victims.

When a man is ill and loses consciousness, his soul or Yalo may leave his body and stray to Neli [the Underworld]. A shaman priest, called to minister to the sick man, may trace the errant soul to the house of one of the many gods and spirits who dwell in Neli and are ever avid to draw unsuspecting souls to their sphere. Once the shaman has located the Yalo, he offers to ransom it with the sacrifice of an animal; if the spirit accepts the ransom, the Yalo returns to its earthly body, and the patient regains consciousness. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962: 147)

Based on the field interviews, some names of major entities that occur more frequently in the Apatani pantheon will be mentioned below, with a focus on the documented rituals of the area around Ziro. Probably the most striking aspect is how these spirits are linked to a concept of liminality also with regard to relationships with other human and non-human entities. This can also be interpreted according to the theory of liminality of Arnold van Gennep (1981), as the spirits interact or are themselves catalysts of those rites of passage that determine the change of the individual from one socio-cultural status to another, as during the shamanic initiation, as well as the metamorphosis in the entire cycle of the life of being, of which earthly death is only a stage. Also the liminality of the *uis* should be understood as a relationship of relevance to the territory, a mapping of space and sacred geography and a continuous negotiation of its borders with the entities that populate it.

A guardian deity that lives alongside the entrance to the villages is Hilopiot. Also called Hillo (*Yullo-Pyotii*), if revered it can warn the community about imminent dangers or natural disasters. Hinu on the other hand is a spirit of the woods, but, while being able to take on a benevolent attitude, its manifestation is somewhat terrifying: like a *vetāla* of the Hindu tradition, assuming vampire-like attributes, it is believed that it can attack travellers, causing cardiovascular problems, headaches, epistaxis and haemorrhages in general.

The Doji spirit is considered the very essence of the forest, a deity that presides over the manifestations of nature. In a benevolent form it takes the name of the deity Miole, while in its irate manifestation it is known as Mioin. Jivuka (the “black”) is considered an incarnate form of the deity Doji: it is considered to take control of a large feline, such as the tiger or leopard. It is believed that these animals never naturally attack human beings, so if this were to happen the incident would be interpreted as the punishment for the violation of a taboo or even an attack of an angry deity. Therefore if Jivuka, having assumed the form of a tiger, attacks a village, this can be technically explained as a case of possession in which the controller is an ancestral spirit and the controlled body is a non-human animal: in this case a predator, a feline, like the leopard, the tiger, etc. (Beggiora 2013: 93–107).

Miglia, on the other hand, is the spirit of the wind: wandering through the hills it manifests itself with strong gusts or drafts: it is a benign entity, that if it took residence in the home – almost like the air flow that makes the fire flare up – it would become the protector of the house. Another entity associated with the custody of borders – the limited area between the settlements and the thick forest – is known as Ponku. This spirit too is intended to manifest a double character: as Ponku it can induce violent death and tragic accidents to travellers; in the form of Mioku, however, it guarantees the wellbeing of the villages, so that a special ceremony is celebrated annually in its honour.

But the spirit most feared of all the Apatani magic-religious tradition is Gandaui, or the entity that presides over the crossroads. It is well known that the crossroads are a magical place in all cultures: symbolically the passage between lands, it is understood as a point of access to different dimensions and worlds. In this liminality of human space, the extra-human is plausibly explicated and all the manifestations intended as a projection of the subtle world are materialised with greater predisposition. Apart from the specific regional characteristics, therefore, Gandaui embodies the concept of an evil spirit widespread in many traditions of Asia and the Subcontinent in particular (Buddhist, Hindu, *ādivāsī*, popular folklore in general). This malign entity embodies the collective psychic carcass of the souls in pain, or the revenants: those who have suffered a violent death and who are precluded from the normal passage to the world of the dead, remaining suspended and imprisoned in a sort of liminal space between the worlds. The crossroads, therefore, are in some way connected to the Tali dimension, a dangerous place because it is universally understood as the place of passage of *bhūta*, *preta* and *piśāca*:¹² larvae, ghosts and other frightening spiritual presences.

Ultimately, the boundaries of the world – even a sort of non-place where day meets night – are the territory of the Yachchu deity, who presides over madness and mental disorders in general. Apparently similar to the shaman's initiatory spirits, Yachchu seduces its victims by assuming the characteristics of the opposite sex and tormenting them during sleep through dreamlike visions and recurring dreams. There is a strong erotic component in the manifestation of this demon that can lead men and women to madness, interpreted as a real phenomenon of possession, if not adequately appeased by the shamans (Beggiora 2014b: 207–226).

This cosmology demonstrates that Apatani religion is a complex, articulated system, which for the depth of its elements can at least be compared to other religious systems of India and not a jumble of beliefs and superstitions, as so much literature of the colonial period attempted to demonstrate. However, from this picture it also emerges that the survival of the group is fundamentally based on the assumption of a ferocious Nature, which almost seems to be against human beings. Even if in some cases almost benevolent, the *uis* are always a menacing force, constantly ready to prey on people, or to claim their space. On the other hand, the struggle of the *nyibus* against the spirits, though replete with possible successes, seems to result in a state of constant tension, which is the dimension of a battle that can never be definitively won. Philippe Ramirez emphasised a certain ambivalence about this, observing the principle according to which men hunt animals as *uis* hunt men. He writes: “By essence, no spirit is strictly malevolent or benevolent. Of course, the spir-

12 These categories are clearly Hindu, but they are adopted in the common language of the tribes (in particular the term *bhūta*, used in a generic sense).

its of the wild world are more feared than those residing near or within settlements” (Ramirez 2005: 6). So we are far from that fantasy that indigenous peoples are the keepers of harmony and peace with nature and the surrounding environment, as assumed to a certain extent for example in the discussion of animism by Graham Harvey (2005).

In this complex negotiation with the supernatural, made up of checks and balances in the scrupulous control of the dynamics of liminality, water seems to have enormous importance. Moreover, here as elsewhere, water is the symbol of purity and life, essential for subsistence, but in the social and religious sphere it marks that liminality on which the whole Apatani cosmology hinges. As we mentioned earlier, the sacred geography that distinguishes the territories is structured around the waterways; the ablution with water sanctions all the rites of passage; the vision of the afterlife seems in a certain sense the reflection of the world on a mirror of water. In a series of comparative studies (Tripathy 2005: 249, Saraswati 1995: 70–74) it emerges that the religious symbolism of water is strongly shared between Hindu traditions and indigenous cosmologies. One of the most recurrent elements in many other religious systems is the theme of the flood. The deluge is essentially a moment of transition from a previous, ancient era to the present age of current humanity. Just as in Hinduism there exist the different *pralayas*, or dissolutions, which divide one *yuga* from the other, or one temporal cycle from the next in the manifestation of the cosmos, likewise the deluge is also frequent in the Indian tribal world. Water destroys, overwhelms, annihilates a previous state, but it is the generative principle of the next stage (Vitebsky 1993: 234).

In general, in the tribal world, the succession of elements conceptually and alchemically opposed can be traced: water and fire. In shamanism this symbolism alludes to the world of blacksmiths and metallurgy, according to which fire melts and shapes matter, while water cools, quenches and moulds a new subsequent form (Eliade 2005: 499–503, Stutley 2004: 25–27); even in the Himalayas it is possible to find correspondences in this context (Sidky 2008: 42, 76). In the field of eschatology in many religions the theme of ekpyrosis, or destruction by fire – followed by flood – is frequent; these concepts are often reflected in a more or less defined way also in local folklore and indigenous religion (Beggiora 2014a: 128). The sacredness of water in Hinduism consists precisely in this: the passage through water is a sort of passage through time, from one era to another; or, better, beyond time, as in the progression of a saint who approaches the transcendence of the manifested world.

Excessively focused on the search for a prehistoric lizard,¹³ the English explorers and the zoologists after them did not take into consideration the mystery

13 From the picture outlined in this anthropological survey, it is interesting to note that if the *buru* is an animal both water-bound and land-bound, it could be considered a creature endowed with a liminality in terms of Levi-Strauss's (1963) analysis.

of the *buru* in the temporal and eschatological dimension of the Apatani myth. The *buru* story has all the characteristics of a cosmogonic myth: the events of Abo Tani and the migration of the primigenial community go back to the “Time of the Origins”, a sort of non-time precisely because it belongs to a before, a previous era. Here the deluge is not explicit, but the new earth discovered by the first men is clearly indicated as an expanse of diluvial and non-habitable waters. Moreover, the peculiarity of a sub-tropical environment, bordered to the south by the alluvial plains of the Brahmaputra, which annually become an impassable expanse of water during the rainy season, renders this mythical scenario concretely conceivable by analogy. The conflict of the first people with the *burus* takes on the value of a cosmic, primordial battle that marks the advent of a new world. The theme of the daily battle with the *uis* is then replicated and sublimated as a primal event that, through the memory of the forefathers, confirms the ancestral right acquired by the Apatani to their territory. In fact, this region was previously an expanse of water and inaccessible mud, while after their advent it became the microcosm of the current complex ecosystem, in which colonial explorers even saw a sort of romantic and exotic Eden.

In confirmation of this theory, Stuart Blackburn noticed that the killing of the monsters is made possible thanks to the magic disk; clearly it is a *cakra*: the influence of Hinduism here is quite clear, and this raises the event to a mythical level (Blackburn 2008: 117–118). Finally, it is interesting to note that the animals used to describe the *buru* or figuratively composing its mysterious chimaera all have the common feature of a strong relationship with water. Although most of the testimonies refer to reptilian animals, the variants are so many that it seems to be rather its environment – the lake or the swamp – that is the backbone of the myth.

Amphibian reptiles and water snakes recall *nāga* and *nāginī*, deities and spirits of the waters of classical Hinduism that consistently find their counterpart in folklore and tribal shamanism. Or perhaps an even better embodiment of a theoretical comparison between Hindu mythology and our case study is to be found in the *makara*, an ophidic creature, the crocodile-fish, which like the chimaera combines in itself attributes of different terrestrial and aquatic animals. The *mithun*, too, as well as the water buffalo, with their shy characters, prefer shady and humid places, where it is possible to immerse themselves in marshy and muddy areas. Finally, also the pig/boar is described as living in an expanse of water, vigorously digging with its snout in the middle of the soft mud of the marsh, as is actually the habit of such beasts.



Figure 5: Hang village (Fulvio Biancifiori, 2013)



Figure 6: A *nyibu* while performing a rite with sacrifice, Hang (Claudio Mattolin, 2017)



Figure 7: Apatani tomb, Hang (Federico Ceratto and Linda Gerbaudo, 2018)

As for the field research, two *nyibus* at the village of Hang (Nabin and Tabin of the Kago and Hibu clans) provided some additional information. They confirmed the history of the *buru* by describing it as an *ui*, and placing it temporally in the ancestral myth and spatially in the heart of Apatani territory, though it was at that time a swamp and not yet a village. But they agreed on the concrete existence of the creature: concrete and absolutely real, as real, in the eyes of the *nyibu*, as the other spirits and subtle entities that populate the forest. Moreover, although circumscribed in its mythical function, we will observe however that, precisely by virtue of its liminal function, in certain circumstances, upon the occurrence of particular conditions that determine some crucial moment of collective transformation, the *buru* could return to manifest itself in one of its many forms. One day, perhaps, it will be possible to relate this myth to an actual currently or previously existing animal. But those who do not recognise that this is a cultural product embodying the Apatani religiosity and the relationship of this community with the surrounding environment, will – like Izzard and his companions – continue forever hunting an empty chimaera.

The expedition disaster

Della stoltezza e semplicità di quelli che insistono nell'affermare che questi animali (marini) si trovino in luoghi così distanti dal mare perché qui trasportati da Diluvio; come della stoltezza di quell'altra setta di ignoranti che affermano la natura o gli astri la causa della loro creazione, dovuta ad influssi celesti [...] (Leonardo da Vinci, Code Leicester, folio 10, recto, in Calvi 1980: 230).¹⁴

Izzard's mission proved to be a total disaster even before departure. Almost immediately, the initial enthusiasm seemed brutally quashed by a bad horse fall, which forced the correspondent of the *Daily Mail* to re-evaluate the entire mission, as well as casting a dark omen over the project (Izzard 2001: 53). The real failure, however, was both in terms of strategic research programming and on the actual scientific level.

In fact, the project of the expedition originated from the scientific article of Stonor and Mills on their study in the Apatani area. Izzard's text includes a second report by Stonor,¹⁵ much shorter, in which he collected rumours that the *buru* might have been spotted by the neighbouring indigenous community of Daflas.¹⁶ Given the presence of a marsh in the area, detected in the maps of the time, Izzard and Stonor decided to aim directly for the more inaccessible territory of Daflas, ignoring the Apatani area. Instead of starting the investigation from the place where more testimonies had been gathered, where it would have been possible to learn something more about this tradition, they sought a short cut. From a merely zoological perspective, they drew the conclusion that the *buru* was recognised to be a reptile in the flesh and, eager to film the monster as soon as possible and then to sell the result to the world press, they unfortunately went to a comparatively impenetrable area, trusting to rather fragile and as yet unproven testimony. After their arrival in the Dafla area, in fact, the evidence for the *buru* became inconsistent and the mission ended with two clumsy attempts to cross a marshy and muddy area inhabited mostly by mosquitoes. At the end of his text, Izzard himself admits the foolish mistake of failing to listen to the true and unique voice of the local indigenous peoples who could solve the mystery of the *buru* (Izzard 2001: 149–150).

14 "On the folly and simplicity of those who insist on affirming that these (marine) animals are in places so far from the sea because they were transported here by the Deluge; as the folly of that other sect of ignoramuses who attribute to nature of the stars the cause of their creation, due to celestial influences [...]" (translated by Stefano Beggiora).

15 Izzard claims it was in a separate envelope attached to the first report. Without title, Izzard renames it *The Burus of Rilo Valley* (Izzard 2001: 44–48).

16 This is the old denomination for the Nishi groups, adjacent to the Apatani, located in the Lower and Upper Subhansiri districts (Singh 1995: 276–80). They belong to the so-called Tani groups and are considered descendants of the same mythical ancestor. The Nishi territory is, however, much more impenetrable compared to the area of Hang and Ziro, not fully suitable for agricultural activities and substantially much less developed. According to the most recent data (Census 2011), the Nishi today have a population that does not exceed 300,000.

On the scientific level too, the expedition proved to be a disaster in the sense that, even though the search was unsuccessful, it did not fall back onto other types of investigation, failing to bring back any data of scientific importance. Yet the expedition was supported by adequate funding and equipped with optical instruments and cameras, and the participation of renowned scientists guaranteed an academic presence within it. In the second section of the book there is in fact a long ethnographic account of the habits and customs of the Dafla population in the broader context of the Northeast of India, but the whole appears fragmented, not well contextualised and very superficial. The phenomena described remain uninterpreted: there is a reference to religious rituals, but it lacks any comment or search for meaning. The tribal culture is evidently of little interest to Izzard and his companions, serving at most as an exotic scenario that provides a background to the deeds of the British. Izzard seems too focused on himself: he describes his horse fall, the papers, his slow progression sinking into the jungle and his frustration in the face of a once-again unsolved mystery. It is clear that the expedition had clearly failed to grasp the true meaning of what it was going to study. While losing the precious opportunity to produce a good ethnography, the book at the same time seems to aim, with a notable self-celebrating tension, to be a piece of travel writing of a more didactic nature.

The result is a text that, despite having had the potential, is not scientific, or is at most pseudo-scientific. But although the popularity of the travel narrative was still far from exhausted, the certain smug romantic taste for the civilising mission should have been obsolete by now in post-colonial English literature, at least after Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) (Said 1993: 22–31). The awareness of the irreversible socio-anthropological mutation undergone by the “journey” and the “exotic” in modernity had not yet emerged (this was to develop in particular after World War II) but nonetheless, fifty years separate the work of Izzard from the anti-odyssey that constituted Conrad's masterpiece. It is obviously not possible to compare the two genres: Izzard's text remains a journalistic account of an adventurous journey. However, the Conradian premise had in the first place already elaborated a critique of colonialism in general and the mentality that moves it; moreover, by coincidence, the search for the “darkness” in the depths of the jungle (or for a monster, in this case) revealed in turn the Western matrix of the novel. As a third point in Conrad's account, the theme of power, or rather a sort of delusion of omnipotence – which we must presume still held sway among many Britons still in India in the early post-war period – had proved capable of corrupting even the most irreproachable minds, leading them towards a monstrous metamorphosis (“The horror!”).

Izzard's book seems to intersect nearly all these themes almost unconsciously, while remaining anchored to an old vision of the world. The text therefore remains a sort of hybrid, which finds its sense of being perhaps only as a

post-modern fairy tale, or better in the niche of cryptozoology, a discipline that not coincidentally flourished in the 1950s, but which struggles to survive in contemporary times. The story of the *buru* becomes tragically something pseudo-zoological, if not fantastic, and spreads across the world while completely losing its origins and its cultural contextualisation. Its luck, however, is limited by the fact that the *buru* does not have the anthropomorphic appeal of Bigfoot or Yeti and, although falling within the category of saurian cryptids, has less appeal than the Loch Ness monster, which is allegedly much larger. It is no coincidence that Izzard and his companions would later embark on the chase of the so-called “abominable” Himalayan Snowman (Izzard 1955).

An interesting paradox is that Izzard’s expedition was resolved to follow the path of a zoological interpretation of the mystery, setting aside from the beginning a possible mythical interpretation. Stonor, as diligently reported by Izzard, proceeds rigorously to an examination of every interpretative possibility of the object of study, a rigour that ultimately betrays the heavy prejudices, if not the open underlying racism, that marked the colonial age and for a long time also the period that followed. He sensed some relationship of the *buru* with a mythical function in Apatani religiosity: he comes to hypothesise a parallel between the saurian cryptid and the dragon/snake of the traditional symbolism of the East and West, or even with the *nāgas* in India. Nevertheless he a priori discarded this hypothesis, based on the preconception that the indigenous communities of India would not have possessed a culture capable of imagining a myth so rich in symbolism, nor substantially any form of religion:

The dragon is of its very nature a symbol, and not a legendary monster in the real meaning of the term. [...] For a people such as the Apa Tani tribe, with a culture far lower than any people known to possess the dragon, even to know it would be remarkable enough: for them to transform it into a tradition such as that of the *buru* would, in our opinion virtually impossible, and would involve a religious and mythological background comparable with a high civilisation (Izzard 2001: 39).

Not satisfied with such a rough approximation, the zoologist then proposes hyperdiffusionist interpretations, which for the time we can also consider conceivable:

The dragon myth is of very great complexity, and has, in the words of Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, “evolved along with civilisation itself”. It is a myth of civilised people only: and although it occurs in every civilisation of the past in Europe, Asia, Africa and America, there is no known instance of a culturally primitive people practicing a simple form of animistic religion, possessing the myth. The dragon is essentially associated with the myths of peoples of high cultural level. And is altogether out of place in a modern neolithic culture (Izzard 2001: 43).

There are other vague arguments¹⁷ to confirm what Izzard's expedition had already a priori deduced: the Apatani, as well as the neighbouring indigenous populations of the area, were nothing but a band of primitive savages, unable to govern themselves and possessing a minimal system of beliefs and/or ethical/religious traditions. Like children who play with the sand on the shore of the lake they would have found the remains (fossils?) of the skull of an unknown beast and would have built a legend upon it. This vision caused Ralph Izzard some regret: like the British palaeontologist Arthur Tindell Hopwood (1897–1969), who claimed that the Nordic and Germanic legends of the Lindwurm were linked to the ancient discovery of fossil bones of some large extinct animal of proto-historic age – or that the myth was essentially an attempt to rationalise the existence of the evidence rather than a vague memory of the *monstrum* in flesh – by analogy he explained the *buru* among the Apatani. Izzard's conclusion is that it would have been better if they had attempted to find some kind of unknown prehistoric relic and to rejoice at this scientific discovery, rather than throw themselves into the hurried and unconvincing chase of a living fossil.

Conclusion: The “real monsters”

There is ample literature concerning the study of the indigenous communities of northeast India, and an excursus on this is not possible here for reasons of space. It might be enough for the moment to say that throughout the nineteenth century, British scholars, as well as military or even administrative officers, long raised questions about indigenous culture. There are numerous examples of correspondence on this subject, showing that in the opinion of some it was clear that indigenous people were no more than primitive savages, often compared to beasts, whereas others fought for the recognition of their rights as human beings. With regard to religion there are many comparisons with the Native Americans (Beggiora 2010: 19) who, although experiencing a troubled history of bloody clashes and marginalisation, were allowed the dignity of a religion composed of totems, shamans and healers, prairie spirits, etc. However, this dignity seems almost always to be denied in the Indian subcontinent.

An overview of colonial history in India reveals the idea of a widespread “undergrowth” of intolerance and opposition towards the Raj, precisely on the part of the indigenous peoples. The major movements of insurrection and

17 In short, Fürer-Haimendorf did not explicitly relate the *buru* with a mythical function, but at the same time he did not deny the possibility of such a relationship. Indeed, from all his study the mythological interpretation seems to be plausible, even if this aspect was not sufficiently scrutinised. Moreover, Stonor did not detect any affinities with the myths and legends of the other tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh, which is unsurprising, given that these cultures were little known or even unknown at that time.

revolt against the British, from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, were born in the heart of the tribal territories (Pati 2010). The Northeast is no exception in this sense: the indigenous peoples, unwilling to submit to external authority even before British rule, under the Ahom dynasty (1228–1826), rendered the border unstable throughout the colonial period. Moreover, the region is still considered a sort of cauldron of separatist organisations and centrifugal movements that leverage local ethnic specificities (Bhagabati 2009: 2–16).

After the shock of the Mutiny in 1857, during which India almost managed to shake off the colonial yoke once and for all, the British arrived in the Northeast, which then still presented itself as wild and partially unexplored. Here they adopted precautionary measures such as the Inner Line (1873), intended to separate the tribal areas from the plantations of the rich Assamese plain. The former were also excluded under the 1935 Act, before all the territory was strategically re-evaluated at the dawn of the Second World War (Singh 1995: 10–19). The colonial impact led to the disintegration of the earlier, more fluid social balance among the tribes of the northeastern border, which was followed by a process of dividing, cataloguing and marginalising the groups. Already in the Second World War the area, close to the Chinese and Burmese borders, fell under the Japanese invasion directive: a comprehensive work of rationalisation and calculation, in addition to control of the local population, would have been of great value (Beggiora 2014c: 157–173).

Stuart Blackburn concludes that Arunachal Pradesh, and in particular the Apatani, were not excluded from the conflicts that dominated the relations between the authorities and the tribes during the colonial period. In particular, he is critical of the conduct of Fürer-Haimendorf himself, more as a British agent than as an anthropologist, and of the pressure generally placed upon the local populations (Blackburn 2003: 335–66). It is interesting to consider that when the British, Fürer-Haimendorf, Stonor, Mills, Major Betts (who was in command as Political Officer) and others pulled up stakes from Apatani territory, a revolt of the tribes against local institutions and military outposts immediately took place (1948). The insurrection was severely suppressed, according to the erstwhile English example, as always with force and retaliation among the villages (Blackburn 2003: 335–66, Baruah 2018: 17–30). But, paradoxically, this serious fact is not mentioned in any of the English writings of the time, not even by those who had the occasion to come back and write about Indian ethnography. As tensions exploded, while a people fought for recognition of their ancestral rights, Izzard instead published his book of exploration.

The presumed superiority of the white man and the arrogance of colonial interests were the basis of a racial prejudice that played an important part in the tribal policies of the time, and which were unfortunately partially inherited by independent India. A detached reading of Izzard's work highlights how

the old mentality still oozes forth in the early post-colonial period (and in a certain way persists even today). So perhaps it can be assumed that Western explorers in search of romantic and exotic clichés were the only “real monsters” to wander around the Himalayas in that period.

As a final note, I recall that in more recent times different researchers have tried to solve the mystery of the *buru* from a biological/zoological perspective, even without the support of any new scientific evidence, but attempting to interpret the past testimonies more coherently. Roy P. Mackal (1925–2013), a biologist from the University of Chicago, hypothesised that it could be an Indian variant of the Komodo dragon (Mackal 1980: 79–98). Bernard Heuvelmans (1916–2001), a Franco-Belgian zoologist who was very involved in cryptozoology, was of much the same opinion (Heuvelmans 1986: 1–26). The creature’s ability to dig in the mud and its most intense activity following the rainy season have given rise in more recent times to the hypothesis of the English scholar Karl Shuker (2007: 237ff) that the *buru* could be a kind of dipnoan, or lungfish (*Neoceratodus forsteri*), of an as yet unknown Himalayan species. Such animals would be able to hibernate in a cocoon of dry mud to survive drought and this would explain the sporadic nature of the appearance. However, the size of these animals would be quite inferior to that of the mythical reptile. These last hypotheses, however, which by virtue of the incredible potential of this territory I can neither deny nor endorse, do not undermine my personal interpretation of this fascinating mystery.

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“A Very Naughty Place!” The Attraction to the Frightening Other Reflected in Narratives about Assam

Irene Majo Garigliano

Abstract

According to many Hindus, travelling to Assam, in North-East India, is dangerous. The Assamese woman might trap the male outsider, using her magic to transform him into a goat and turn him back into a man at night. Unable to leave, the man would become the sex-toy of his mistress. Fear is the emotion many Hindus once felt (and still feel) about remote Assam. Still, many set off on a pilgrimage to Assam's most famous temple – the Kāmākhyā temple in Guwahati. In many narratives, Assam, though frightening, is the source of occult knowledge for those who are prepared to cope with such awe-inspiring power. Through the analysis of several narratives about Assam, the paper advances a reflection on our notion of fear and shows how the latter is often tightly connected to attraction. The narratives are taken from several field visits by the author and her research focusing on the Kāmākhyā temple, as well as common stories from Hindu folklore. Together they explore a frightening picture of Assam. To make sense of these data, the paper evokes the notion of *śakti* and analyses the way Assamese women are depicted in the narratives under consideration.

Keywords: Assam, Kāmākhyā temple, *śakti*, Tantrism, construction of otherness, fear

Introduction

In 2012, while I was conducting fieldwork research at the Kāmākhyā temple in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, my mother travelled from Delhi in order to spend some time with me. After queuing outside Delhi domestic airport, her turn came to gain admission into the departures hall. She gave her ticket to the policeman at the entrance so he could check it:

Policeman (P): Madam, you are going to Assam?

My mother (M): Yes.

P: Why are you going to Assam?

M: Because my daughter is there.

P: Madam, you're going to a very naughty place!

Irene Majo Garigliano, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, France; irenemajogarigliano@gmail.com.

The policeman's reaction exemplifies the general North-Indian understanding of Assam. As this paper will show, Assam is often considered to be beyond accepted morality – probably what the policeman meant by “naughty”¹ – odd and even dangerous. The easternmost corner of India inspires fear. As Boscoboinik highlights, fear is not only an individually felt emotion, but is also shaped by the socio-cultural context in which the individual resides² (Boscoboinik 2009). Things and situations that are feared in one society are not considered risky in another one. The perception of danger and risk can be (and often is) manipulated so that what is feared in a particular moment is considered safe later on.

The choice of risks to be taken into consideration reveals the beliefs of a society concerning values, social institutions, nature and morally acceptable behaviour. Thus, risks are exaggerated or minimised following social, cultural or economic criteria. Certain objects, elements or phenomena, considered as inoffensive at a certain point in time, can be almost demonised at another moment. Though well known at the time, the harmfulness of cigarettes was not as much an issue in the past as it is today. Today attempts are being made to ban cigarettes everywhere, because they are no longer a danger merely for the individual, but for the community as well. After a lengthy moratorium, nuclear energy is again in demand, as concerns about oil increase. Today the risks it involves are again being minimised.³ (Boscoboinik 2009: 123–124, translated from French by author)

Boscoboinik's reflection on fear and risk is inspired by the now classic work of Mary Douglas. According to Douglas, “[risk] is not a thing, it is a way of thinking, and a highly artificial contrivance at that” (Douglas 1992: 46). To this it should be added that risk and danger are often perceived through a religious lens, as the following episode from my fieldwork reveals.

As Indianists know well, the cobra is connected to the god Śiva. One day, while I was conducting fieldwork research at the Kāmākhyā temple in 2011, a priest told me how he had (allegedly) met with a cobra. According to his story, he entered the sanctum of a Śiva temple – situated near the Kāmākhyā temple – at dawn, in order to conduct the morning service of the god. Around the stone *liṅga* – the god's phallic emblem – was a huge cobra. While recalling the

1 “Naughty” generally has a playful connotation. It is impossible to know what exactly the policeman meant by “naughty” (the conversation between them was very brief). He may have had in mind images of licentious women or of wicked magicians. What is relevant is that the policeman was surprised to meet a Western woman heading alone to Assam and that he actually warned her about the nature of her destination.

2 For a survey of social constructionism – the trend that studies the socio-cultural pertinence of emotions – see, among others, Lynch 1990.

3 The original text: “Le choix des risques à prendre en considération reflète les croyances d'une société concernant les valeurs, les institutions sociales, la nature et le comportement moral. Les risques sont ainsi exagérés ou minimisés en fonction de critères sociaux, culturels, voire économiques. Certains objets, éléments ou phénomènes, considérés inoffensifs à un certain moment, peuvent être quasiment diabolisés à un autre moment. La nocivité de la cigarette, bien que connue, n'était pas prise en compte dans le passé comme aujourd'hui, où l'on cherche à la bannir partout car elle est devenue un danger non plus seulement individuel, mais public. L'énergie nucléaire, après un moratoire de plusieurs années, est à nouveau sollicitée et saluée, au moment de la crise du pétrole. Les risques qu'elle comporte sont aujourd'hui à nouveau minimisés”.

episode, the priest expressed mainly awe. As far as I can understand, the presence of the cobra confirmed the presence of the god in the temple sanctum. By this, I do not mean that cobras are not feared at all by Kāmākhyā temple priests. The latter, and the Assamese people in general, do fear cobras. The myth and cult of Manasā – the vengeful goddess of cobras and Śiva’s daughter – are illuminating in this regard (for the annual worship of Manasā at the Kāmākhyā temple see Majo Garigliano 2015: Chapter 1). The point I want to make is that, in the Hindu worldview, the undeniable danger inherent in cobras becomes part of the divine persona. Fear mixes with awe and devotion.

Fear is moulded by religious and cultural models, by the social milieu in which one lives; it is stimulated or inhibited by political calculations and propaganda, etc. With these premises let us now turn our attention to the content of this paper. At the outset, I will concentrate on the Kāmākhyā temple, not only because it is where I conducted the largest part of my fieldwork research,⁴ but also because the temple appears in several of the accounts reported in this paper.⁵ The following pages bring together a wide range of narratives in which Assam appears as mysterious and dangerous. I will employ Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances in order to explore the multiple connections among the data I collected in the field, at the Kāmākhyā temple and in North India (Wittgenstein 2001: 27–31). In addition, I will quote accounts about Assam reported by other scholars. In an intriguing paper, Kar reports a number of narratives in which Assam is described as a mysterious land of seductive women capable of trapping men with their magic (Kar 2008). As will be shown, the otherness of Assam is often in relation to the highly ambiguous nature attributed to feminine sexuality in Hindu thought. The narratives about fear presented in this paper can be better understood by analysing them in light of the double-edged notion of *śakti*, the feminine energy that is both creative and destructive.

The paper’s second part explores further narratives in which Assam appears as the ultimate source of occult knowledge, for those who are prepared to cope with such awe-inspiring energy. Through the analysis of different accounts of Assam, this paper aims to develop our understanding of fear – that what is feared is also attractive: “The fear of the unknown involves curiosity

4 This paper is based on my long dedication to the study of the Kāmākhyā temple and Assamese culture. I visited Assam for the first time in 2006 during my M.A. studies. The first consistent period of fieldwork research lasted two months (November 2008–January 2009). Between 2011 and 2013, as part of my PhD, I carried out several periods of fieldwork research, in total fifteen months. During the same period, I travelled to North India (New Delhi and Rajasthan). I went back to the Kāmākhyā temple in 2018 for one month. While in the field, I always resided near the temple. This privileged position allowed me to form significant ties with both priests and pilgrims. Since the majority of priests do not speak English, I have been studying Assamese as an autodidact since 2008. My knowledge of Hindi helped me communicate with Hindi-speaking pilgrims.

5 The reader may be surprised to see that temple priests are not quoted in this paper. During my fieldwork, I conducted interviews with the priests, but never discussed the prejudices about Assam with them, to avoid hurting their feelings.

and the spirit of discovery”⁶ (Boscoboinik 2016: 123). I will then investigate the elements that possibly contribute to constructing the ambiguous frightening/enticing image of Assam.

Before proceeding to the core of this paper, I want to clarify that I do not support the idea that Assam is strange or unfathomable. Assam is not “a very naughty place” at all. It is now more than a decade since I first visited the enchanting Brahmaputra valley. During my travels in Assam, people of different social and economic backgrounds welcomed me wholeheartedly. The study of Assam and the Kāmākhyā temple has immensely enriched my life.

The Kāmākhyā temple

The Kāmākhyā temple⁷ lies on the Nilachal (*nīlācala*, “the Blue Hill”), within the town of Guwahati, the gateway to North-East India. The mighty river Brahmaputra runs along the northern slope of the verdant hill. The earlier part of the temple dates back to the 16th century, but it was destroyed and rebuilt in the course of history.⁸ The goddess Kāmākhyā is not the only deity inhabiting the hill, whose natural beauty strikes the visitor – notwithstanding rampant pollution. The hill hosts some thirty temples, dedicated to Hindu gods and goddesses, and innumerable small shrines: divine presence on the hill is multifaceted and vibrant. Around the Kāmākhyā temple are the houses of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin functionaries of the temple, as well as guest-houses and restaurants for pilgrims.

The goddess Kāmākhyā is considered by her innumerable devotees to be extremely powerful. Pilgrims from different parts of South Asia flock to her temple to pay homage to her. In the temple sanctum, a subterranean cave, is a spring. From a natural rock, furrowed by a long slit, water flows spontaneously. The spring is understood to be the *yoni* (vagina) of the goddess Satī, consort of the god Śiva. After Satī’s death, her body was dismembered into fif-

6 The original text: “El miedo a lo desconocido implica curiosidad y espíritu de descubrimiento” (translated from Catalanian by author).

7 Literature about the Kāmākhyā temple includes: Kakati 1948; Goswami 1998; Urban 2001 and 2008; Mishra 2004; Arrago-Boruah 2015, Majo Garigliano 2015; and Rosati 2016.

8 The temple history is puzzling, to say the least. In the first half of the 16th century, Koch-Bihar king Visva Singha conquered Lower Assam and built a temple for the goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal. And yet, the Kālikāpurāṇa – composed between the 7th and the 11th century – talks extensively about the goddess Kāmākhyā and affirms that the Nilachal is the place where Satī’s *yoni* fell. Urban advances the hypothesis that the Kālikāpurāṇa was composed under one of the Pāla kings (10th–12th century), in order to bring together “both traditional Brahminical rites drawn from the Vedas and indigenous practices drawn from the hill people of Assam” (Urban 2001: 791–792). His argument is fascinating, but not historically proven. To sum up, the first evidence about the temple history dates back to the 16th century, but the study of the Kālikāpurāṇa suggests that, if not a temple, the cult of goddess Kāmākhyā had already long been in existence at the site. The sources I employed for this rapid sketch of the temple’s history are: Gait 2008, Baruah 2012 and Acharyya (2003, 2007). For a more detailed account of the temple’s history see Majo Garigliano 2015: Chapter 1.

ty-one parts that fell to earth in different regions of South Asia. Fifty-one *pīṭhas* (seats) of the *devī* (goddess, par excellence) stand on the sites where the parts of Satī's body fell.⁹

The passionate worship the spring receives is only understandable in light of the notion of *śakti* – the (divine) feminine energy. It is an awesome, overwhelming, frightening power. Intrinsicly ambivalent, *śakti* is responsible for the creation of life in all its forms, but is also capable of destroying life. The destructive side of *śakti* is often connected to the image of the warrior goddess and to kingly power (see, among others, Skoda 2015). Kāmākhyā is understood to be a form of *śakti* or Mahādevī: she is one with Parvatī, Kālī, Durgā, etc. As a young Brahmin put it: “Kāmākhyā is a nickname”. At the same time, priests and pilgrims understand the goddess Kāmākhyā, the particular form of Mahādevī set on the Nilachal, to be extremely powerful. That the temple enshrines no less than Satī's *yoni*, the organ of sexuality and generation, is the reason for its renown. I have been told that visiting the Kāmākhyā temple is equal to visiting all other *pīṭhas* combined. The priests affirm that if Satī's *yoni* had not fallen on the Nilachal, the *sṛṣṭi* (“emission”, “creation” of the Universe) would not have taken place. “Kāmākhyā is a vortex of power,” said an Assamese Vedic astrologer I met in 2018. He repeatedly stressed the overwhelming, terrific power of the goddess. “Not everyone can handle it,” he concluded.

The number of pilgrims visiting the Kāmākhyā temple is rising day by day, stimulating the emergence of a flourishing pilgrimage industry. The temple priests are becoming more and more skilful in providing pilgrims with various facilities. Hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops, whose number are increasing dramatically, are transforming the landscape of the temple-town (see Majo Garigliano 2018a).

Dangerous females

In 2012 I met a group of Bihari pilgrims at the Kāmākhyā temple. One day, we started chatting and, as usual, the conversation soon turned to religious matters. One of the pilgrims was a Brahmin in his early forties. I will call him Pranay.¹⁰ I asked him when he had first come to the temple (interview in July 2012, Guwahati, my translation from Hindi¹¹):

9 For a comprehensive analysis of the numerous texts containing variants of Satī's myth see Sircar 1948. As Sircar highlights, the myth is composed of different layers. Moreover, although the list of the fifty-one *pīṭhas* is widespread in contemporary India, the number of pieces into which Satī's body was dismembered varies from text to text. For a summary of Sircar's arguments see Majo Garigliano 2015: Chapter 1.

10 I use pseudonyms for all the people who appear in this paper.

11 Some of the dialogues and monologue that appear in this paper happened in Hindi or in Assamese. When this is the case, I explicitly declare that I have translated the text. If not otherwise stated, the conversations happened in English.

Pranay (P): I first came here six years back.

Author (IMG): How did you decide to come?

P: I had known about the Kāmākhyā temple for a long time and had heard scary things. I had heard that a man who comes here risks being transformed into a goat by the women who live here.

Others: ... into a parrot, or into an elephant ...

P: Then during the night they'll change him back into a man. Women here can trap men [using the English verb "to trap"]. They won't let them go. To make it short, I knew that anyone who goes [to Assam] cannot be sure that he will come back home.

The other people in the group kept nodding and saying repeatedly that they used to hear similar things.

IMG: Then how did you decide to come here? Weren't you afraid?

P: I was afraid (*dar lagtā thā*).

IMG: So ...

P: After my son was born [pointing out his seven-year-old child, sitting in the group] I came here for the first time. I said to myself, even if I don't come back, my son is there. I have passed on my name. I can go.

The words of Pranay resonate with the affirmations of a group of female pilgrims from Bombay I met in 2011 at the Kāmākhyā temple: Puja, an energetic middle-aged businesswoman, Pallavi, her niece in her twenties, and the latter's friend of a similar age. After completing the rituals, they were relaxing in the room where their priest had accommodated them. I joined them and we started chatting about different things. Puja told me about "black magic". She pointed out a silent man in his fifties who is always to be seen in the temple. According to her, that man was versed in black magic. At that, Pallavi started talking, in turn. She said that when an Assamese woman wants a man for herself, she places a *supari*, a betel nut, in her vagina during her periods. Then, she gives that *supari* to the man she loves. Eating it, he will fall in love with her.

In both Pranay and Pallavi's accounts, Assamese women are able to subjugate men for their pleasure.¹² Their power involves magic and sexuality. Similarly, Hindu imaginary is replete with figures of (divine, semi-divine, human and demonic) females who are powerful and intimidating. Sexuality is intrinsic

12 The impressively wide variety of forms this idea takes intrigues the anthropologist. Kar (2008) surveys several distinct stories relating to the "erotic excess and magical prowess of the Assamese women" and says that these stories "were commonplace in British India, particularly in British Bengal" (ibid.: 1). He mentions that the colloquial expression "'Kāmākhyā's sheep' continues in the daily conversation to convey the image of an enchanted, docile male who is entirely under the control of a seductive woman" (ibid.). Some among the several sources quoted by Kar, in which Assamese women appear as sensual, threatening and versed in magic are: the twentieth-century Bengali novelists (ibid.), "the seventeenth-century *janam-sākhīs* or biographies of Nānāk, the first guru of Sikhism" (ibid.: 4–5), the so-called "fake tantras", spread in Kolkata in the nineteenth century, along with "the interdependent market of aphrodisiacs and amulets" (ibid.: 16). According to Kar, nineteenth century Assamese and Bengali *savants* attributed Assam's ambiguous fame to lack of communication with North India. They dismissed the recurring frightening narratives about Assam as "mere legends" (ibid.: 18–19). More than a century later, as my fieldwork demonstrates, the same image of Assam remains current.

sically connected with their frightening energy. Erotic desire irremediably pushes these single females to aggressive action, to seize (and annihilate) males.

In *Servants of the Goddess*, Fuller affirms that in Tamil folklore “[g]oddesses [...] are often ritually presented alone, without husbands, and this is especially true of village goddesses, who are normally assumed to be fiercer, more capricious and potentially more vengeful than the wifely goddesses. In ritual, a connection is postulated between a goddess’s regular sexual relations with her husband and her relative pacificity” (Fuller 1984: 9). This is indeed a very widespread notion that permeates Hindu thought (see, among others, Tapper 1979: 14–15 and White 2003). In *Oh Terrifying Mother* – a title that is revealing of the ambiguous nature of *śakti* – Caldwell explains that furious Kālī is placated either by sexual intercourse with Śiva or by the sight of the baby gods, Gaṇeśa and Nandikeśan (Caldwell 1999: 169 – 170). “Milk begins to flow in Kālī’s breasts and her mood is suddenly transformed from one of anger to one of peaceful motherly love as she picks up and suckles the two male babies” (ibid.). In Kerala folklore, “[v]irgins are considered in folk conceptions to be overheated due to lack of access to sexual satisfaction, posing a danger to males” (ibid.: 162). Virgin girls are associated with *yakṣīs*, “unhappy, seductive and bloodthirsty female tree spirits out to entice and destroy virtuous men” (ibid.: 163). According to Tapper, who writes about Telugu-speaking Gavara farmers of Andhra-Pradesh, in the festival in honour of Baṇḍamma, “the goddess is repeatedly associated with uncontained sexuality and danger” (Tapper 1979: 20). Tapper sees in the goddess’s threatening energy a parallel of women’s *āśa*. *Āśa* is translated as “passion, desire, lust, emotion, love, hope, and worldly attachment” (ibid.: 6). Women have more *āśa* than men – and that is why they need to be controlled by men.

More examples could be given, but the point is already clear enough. Goddesses, women and other female beings exist in a continuum. They all have *śakti*, an excessive power that enables them to give life but is also potentially destructive. Sexually satiated or calmed by maternal feelings, the female is pacific. In contrast, the single, sexually agitated female is threatening. Assamese women, as they appear in these narratives, have a lot in common with Mohinī, the nymph who, in Tamil folklore, continuously makes love to young men, thus draining their virility and energy¹³ (Racine 1999). Exhausted, her victims become impotent, weak, apathetic. They give up their studies and work. Similarly, the man who is trapped by an Assamese woman becomes her sex-toy at night, while living as a goat during the day. The transformation

13 According to the story, Mohinī was a woman; she was seduced, abused and abandoned by a king. Desperate, she committed suicide and became a nymph. Frustrated by her premature death, obsessed by the erotic desire she could not satisfy during her life, Mohinī comes back to earth to capture young men in her voluptuous, yet destructive embrace (see Racine 1999).

theme describes a man who is no longer a man in his own right. Both the victims of Mohinī and the prey of Assamese women lose their agency and social role.

Assamese women are a threat to the layman, as much as for the ascetic. In 2012 I met a man in his thirties who belonged to the *nāth sampradāyā* (the Nath sect¹⁴). Originally from Madhya Pradesh, he was on his second visit to the Kāmākhya temple. One evening we were chatting in the temple campus; I mentioned what Pranay, the Bihari Brahmin, had told me that day. My words instantly drove the Nath to give me his version of the tale: “I will tell you how it went.” In a vigorous, uninterrupted flow of words he told me the following story (interview in July 2012, Guwahati, my translation from Hindi):

In Assam there were only women; Rānī Maināki was the ruler there. When the women became pregnant [with a male foetus], they used to pray to Hanumān, who, with his scream, would help them to abort. In this way only female babies were saved. But they had no *mokṣā* [release from the cycle of rebirth] and the place was full of *bhūtas* [ghosts]. One day Rānī Maināki prayed to Hanumān to find her a man who would live with her permanently. After some time Matsyendranāth [the guru of Gorakhnāth, the founder of the Nath *sampradāyā*] happened to arrive in Assam and Hanumān asked him to live with Rānī Maināki. At this Matsyendranāth objected that he was a *sādhu*. Hanumān insisted. In the end Matsyendranāth settled down with the queen, became king and fathered children.

After some time rumours reached Gorakhnāth. People started to blame him, “Your guru is married, he has children!” One day Gorakhnāth thought that was enough: he would go to Assam in order to rescue his guru. When he was just approaching Assam, he protected himself with some mantras [...]. Informed of Gorakhnāth’s arrival, Rānī Maināki sent girls of exquisite beauty to seduce him. But Gorakhnāth resisted them. He turned all the women, including the queen, into statues [at this the Nath pointed at the stone bas-reliefs embedded in the Kāmākhya temple’s outer wall]. In this way they all reached *mokṣā*. Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth left Assam and founded many temples throughout India.

With the same suddenness with which he had started to talk, the Nath stopped. He remained silent for a few seconds and then left.

Bouillier (2008: 90) and Kar (2008: 4–5) report various versions of “the reign of women” narrative. As Kar rightly points out, “it is not the whimper of anxiety but the laughter of mastery that organizes these narratives” (ibid.). The ascetic eventually subjugates the sensual Assamese women, taming their feminine, threatening element. The Nath’s narrative has to do with the complex relation that Hindu thought poses between asceticism and married life, between celibacy and eroticism. The married man disperses his semen to procreate and then has to attend to his family’s needs. The ascetic retains his precious semen, because with the semen he would lose his *tapas* (“heat”, ascetic power accumulated through spiritual practices) as well.¹⁵

14 On the Nath sect see Bouillier 2008.

15 On the ascetic’s austerities see, among others, Tarabout 2005: 146–150. According to van der Veer: “To keep one’s semen is to keep one’s power. Celibacy is therefore a means of acquiring religious, magical pow-

In the following narrative from my fieldwork, the magic aspect of Assamese women's power is played down and more practical issues are brought to the fore. In 2012 I met a Bengali pilgrim who had been living in Assam for eleven years. He and his family had been visiting the temple complex since their arrival in Assam (interview in June 2012, Guwahati):

There are three "Ws" which attract people here: Weather, Wine and Women. The weather is much too good here; people love this place, they love the greenery. This is the magic. Wine is cheap, easy available. If you go Kolkata, it's much more tough to find foreign liquor. Women here are hot, hotter than anywhere else. If a man has some extra money and comes here, he'll find himself in trouble. She [the Assamese woman] will try to keep him with her. With or without magic. People become addicted to staying here, they try to forget their past, they start a new life here. So this is the magic.

As these words show, it is not easy to disentangle magic treats from more material ones. Assamese women are sometimes portrayed as single women willing to keep male strangers with them for their pleasure; in this narrative, they seem to be interested in the material advantages that a relationship with a man from elsewhere can bring as well. Women are not the only menacing presence in Assam, though. The Bengali pilgrim went on:

Beforehand *sādhu-māhātma* [ascetics] used to come here in number for their studies [meditative practices]. People used to think that the *sādhus* here would transform them into statues. People were scared.

Venturing into the unknown

Notwithstanding the frightening stories he had heard, Pranay, the Brahmin from Bihar, decided to travel to Assam to visit the Kāmākhyā temple. His desire to worship the goddess overcame his fears. We need to believe that the other is odd, bizarre or immoral in order to posit the normality and morality of what is familiar. When the odd is relegated to somewhere else, we can comfortably live where we are.¹⁶ And yet, the incomprehensible, the bizarre arouses our curiosity, it attracts us and pushes us to peek through the keyhole of our door.

Assamese women, often depicted as potent magicians, are sometimes portrayed as having occult knowledge. The following narrative, quoted by Kar, was collected by a 19th century Christian missionary, P. O. Bodding who worked with the Santals of Chotanagpur in Eastern India. Under British rule, the Santals were forced to migrate to Assam to work in the tea gardens.

er as is clearly illustrated by many myths relating to the power of a saint's asceticism, which may even threaten the world order. A recurring theme is that of a sage cursing a king with the result that rain does not fall. The only way to end such a drought is to send a prostitute, so that the saint may lose his semen and therefore his curse its power" (van der Veer 1988: 74).

16 As Crapanzano pointed out, "the irreality of the imaginary impresses the real on reality and the real of reality compels the irreality of the imaginary" (Crapanzano 2004: 15).

The [Kāmru] country¹⁷ is very rich and fertile, and there are only women living there, or else the women predominate, and no one is able to go there and stay. Another report is that there are men also, but they are not liked by the women (definite reasons that cannot be recorded are given). Once a Santal had gone there and was at once caught by a woman. He told that he had come to learn their “science”, and was kept for five years by the Kāmru woman who during daytime had him covered by a *dixmi*, a large bamboo basket, and instructed him during the night. At last he got his *sid* [“science”]; the woman turned him into a *kyte* [sic] and he flew into his own country. (Kar 2008: 6, square brackets were added by Kar)

As in earlier narratives, the Assamese woman transforms the man into something else, but this time to help him leave her, not to retain him. The night/day opposition we saw in some of the earlier narratives is present here too: interaction between the Assamese woman and the stranger man happens at night. Unlike earlier narratives, though, this woman does not exploit the man (economically or sexually). On the contrary, she gives him something: her occult knowledge.

Power resides in danger, in what is mysterious, hazardous and yet attractive. Within the limitations of what is safe and known, one does not gain any esoteric knowledge. According to Torella:

A basic classification is between what belongs to “our” world, the *hortus conclusus* in which we can feel relatively safe, and the rest, the immense extraneous world that encircles and potentially menaces our little world on all sides. Broadly speaking, the difficult task that all societies have to confront with is to defend their own little world from the assault of the immense universe, but without negating it: life itself needs the contribution of, or the dialogue with, the obscure world of power just outside the boundaries. (Torella 2015: 6)

Mollex dedicates a very rich M.A. thesis to the *vaidyas*, therapists of the Chakma community of Bangladesh (Mollex 2010). According to her, the *vaidyas*’ therapeutic methodology combines the knowledge and use of medicinal plants and animal and mineral substances with activities that belong to the sphere of ritual (ibid.: 5). As we will shortly see, “Kamrup Kamakhya”¹⁸ appears in the *vaidyas*’ discourses as a legitimating source of knowledge (ibid.: 19, note 29). Mollex describes the *tumro khel*, public contests in which *vaidyas* confront each other. Two *vaidyas* sit in front of each other and cast spells on one another:

17 Kāmru or Kāmarūpa are ancient names of Assam. These names have to do with a local adaptation of the well-known myth in which Śiva burns Kāma, the god of desire, to ashes. Later on, Śiva brings Kāma back to life. But, in the Assamese adaptation of the myth, Kāma, emerging from his ashes, is ugly. Desperate, Kāma and his wife pray to Śiva. The latter eventually restores Kāma’s beauty on the condition that he will build a temple for goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal. Assam, the place where Kāma regained his form (*rūpa*) came to be known as “Kāmarūpa” (see also Majo Garigliano 2015: 31–32). This version of the pan-Indian myth clearly connects Assam with the god of desire. It is interesting to note how many elements pertaining to the sphere of sexuality contribute to create the image of Assam. See the next section for a consideration of the name “Kāmākhyā”.

18 On the term “Kāmarūpa” see note 17.

Tumro Khel are power jousts. There is a place where, according to Priyajon Vaidya, *vaidyas* and other persons such as ascetics, sanyasin and fakirs actually confront one another at their own risk. This place is Kamrup Kamakhya, in the Indian State of Assam. The majority of *vaidyas* know about Kamrup Kamakhya, without necessarily having been there. This locality seems to have a prominent place in the imaginary of many of them.¹⁹ (ibid.: 33, translation from French by IMG)

As in the story of the Assamese woman who instructs the Santal man, here, too, Assam is the abode of people who have some special spiritual or magic expertise.

Why Assam?

Why does Assam have such an ambiguous reputation?²⁰ Why is the image of the sensual, threatening Assamese woman so persistent in Hindu folklore?²¹ Providing a definitive answer to such a question is beyond the scope of the present paper. However, some considerations can be tentatively advanced. The first element that came to mind when I approached these wide issues is the Kāmākhyā temple itself, the most famous temple in all of North-East India. Priests, pilgrims and scriptures largely agree in affirming that the *yoni* of goddess Satī is enshrined in the temple sanctum. And indeed it is on this basis that

19 The original text: “Tumro Khel sont des joutes de pouvoirs. Il est un endroit où selon Priyajon Vaidya, des vaidya ou autres personnes telles que des renoncants, sanyasin et fakir s'affrontements réellement à leurs propres risques, ce serait Kamrup Kamakhya dans l'état indien d'Assam. La plupart des vaidya connaissent Kamrup Kamakhya sans y être forcément allés. Cette localité semble habiter l'imaginaire de beaucoup”.

20 The Assamese I talked to never said that other Hindus held harsh prejudices concerning Assam. Instead, they report similar prejudices regarding a specific place in Assam, named Mayang. Mayang is famed for (black) magic (see Valk 2015). From the time of my first fieldwork, I heard about Mayang from words gleaned here and there from conversations. I soon started to feel that there was scope for investigation. When I said to a Kāmākhyā temple priest, who is a good friend of mine, that I wanted to go to Mayang, he opened his eyes wide and stared at me silently. I asked for some explanation. As I was soon to realise, for him, Mayang is the land of every sort of sorcery and witchcraft; the most absurd practices one can imagine happen there. The wife of another priest intervened in the conversation, alarmed. She said that in Mayang, when women have no more wood to fuel the fire for cooking, they will put a leg into the fire, without getting injured. Kāmākhyā temple priests are not the only ones to fear and blame Mayang. Philippe Ramirez, who works on North-East India, was warned in the same way by his interlocutors (personal communication): “In Assam you can go anywhere; there is no problem. But never go to Mayang!” An Assamese friend of mine from Tezpur (central Assam) once told me that she had heard strange stories about Mayang. She is now in her thirties and recalls that in her childhood her uncle used to say that those who marry people from Mayang will suffer on the day of the marriage. The entire party will not be able to digest the food offered in the feast and will have to endure severe stomach pain for the entire day. It is tempting to assume that Mayang serves as the scapegoat for Assamese people. This technique sounds to me like a subliminal message: “The naughty place you heard about is not the whole of Assam, it is this specific place I'm telling you about.”

21 Like Assam, several other regions in South Asia have an ambiguous reputation in the eyes of many Hindus. For instance, Sax (1998: 295) reports that villagers in the Eastern district of Garhwal (Uttarkhand) warned him not to travel to the Tons basin area: there local women not only used to enslave men “for their pleasure”, but even sacrifice them to the supernatural beings they worshipped. It should be noted incidentally that the figure of sexually unrestrained women, unmarried or with husbands who are somehow absent from the story, who subjugate men, exploit them sexually or kill them, are to be found outside South Asia too.

priests and pilgrims affirm the pre-eminence of the Kāmākhyā temple over the other *śākta pīṭhas*. This belief clearly links the Kāmākhyā temple with feminine sexuality. The name “Kāmākhyā” (*kāma* or *kāmā* + *ākhyā*) can be translated as “she who is called desire”. Before proceeding, it needs to be pointed out that priests and pilgrims tend to portray the goddess Kāmākhyā as a loving divine mother, and not as a dangerous, sexually voracious goddess. The Kālikāpurāṇa openly refers to the goddess’s sexuality:

Because the goddess has come to the great mountain Nilakūta to have sexual enjoyment with me [Śiva], she is called Kāmākhyā, who resides there in secret.²²

As we have seen, female desire, the sexual appeal exercised by women on men and the loss of semen are problematic in the Hindu worldview. Padoux clearly describes the two sides of the woman’s image:

The woman has power. The man can obtain that power from her, but always at the risk of losing it, as he loses his semen. Thus, the woman is thought of in ambiguous terms: source of power, mother, protective, she is also dangerous – undermining and fearsome.²³ (Padoux 2010: 147, translation from French by IMG)

Extolling the role of the mother in the family, a male Assamese friend of mine argued (interview in April 2013, Guwahati, my translation from Assamese):

Who is the father? No one. The father will see a beautiful girl passing by and will run after her. But the mother will always be there for her children. She’ll take care of them. “Did you eat?” she’ll ask, “are you all right?”

These words clarify well the supposed vulnerability of men to female sexual appeal. They also clarify the opposition between the two images of the female: the caring mother and the threatening single woman. In the narratives included in this paper, the threatening side of feminine sexuality is projected onto Assamese women.

The Kāmākhyā temple is widely considered to be a tantric temple. Tantrism and the study of it are too complex to be approached here.²⁴ To put it simply, Tantrism is a trend (or, rather, a set of trends) that developed within Hinduism over the centuries. Recurring practices and ideas – such as secrecy, the pro-

22 This translation is provided by Urban (2008: 1). According to him the relevant passage is contained at the very beginning of Kālikāpurāṇa, chapter 62.

23 The original text: “Elle [la femme] détient la puissance que l’homme peut puiser en elle, mais qu’il risque toujours de perdre en laissant échapper sa semence. D’où une approche ambiguë de la femme: source de puissance, mère, protectrice, elle est aussi dangereuse – affaiblissant ou redoutable.”

24 Tantrism, the transgressive current of Hinduism, seems to escape any unilateral definition. “Because it is born in the Indian framework and evolved with and in it, the universe of tantric vision and life is difficult to distinguish and to describe,” says Padoux in the Introduction to *Comprendre le Tantrisme* (Padoux 2010: 11, the original text: “[P]arce qu’il est né dans le fonds indien et a évolué avec et en lui au cours de siècles, l’univers de la vision et de la vie tantrique est difficile à cerner et à décrire”, translation by the author). According to Brooks: “[t]he acknowledgement of pervasive Tantric influence in Indian religion has made defining Tantrism and classifying different Hinduisms only more difficult” (Brooks 1992: 405). Again, Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances is, in my opinion, the best way to think about “Tantrism”. I will employ this term for the sake of commodity. By doing so, I do not mean that Tantrism is a homogenous phenomenon, but rather the cluster of several distinct but (somehow) related traditions.

grammatic use of impure substances and antonymic behaviour, the merging of the worshipper and the deity – are to be found in religious persuasions that are far from each other in time and space, but no single element is common to all these traditions.²⁵ My focus here will not be on Tantrism itself, but rather on the way Tantrism is perceived and associated with Assam. What is relevant for the present purpose is that Tantrism is often considered to be a set of incomprehensible, strange, indecent practices.²⁶ The fact that the Kāmākhyā temple is associated with Tantrism may add to the ambiguous, somewhat obscure image many people have of it and of Assam.²⁷

Another element to be kept in mind is constituted by the so-called “tribal” populations inhabiting North-East India. Some of them, like the Khasis and the Garos, transmit names and the property through matrilinearity and are matrilocal.²⁸ These customs, distorted by hearsay, can contribute to shaping the image of a dominant femininity.²⁹

In addition to everything that has been said thus far, a (brief) look at the history of Assam provides some hints about its marginality.³⁰ The long-lasting rule of the Ahoms is relevant here.³¹ In the 1220s, the Ahom prince Sukhapha, originally from Yunnan, conquered the upper Brahmaputra valley. With the passage of time, Sukhapha’s heirs expanded their rule over the entire Brahmaputra valley; in the 16th century they defeated the Koch Bihar kings, who had

25 When it comes to complex realities, sharp-edged definitions rarely work. The positions of two eminent scholars are illustrative in this regard. According to White, sex is Tantrism’s landmark: “sexualized ritual practice is the sole truly distinctive feature of South Asian tantric traditions” (White 2003: 13). By contrast, McDaniel shows how sex was not at all a priority for the Bengali tantric practitioners he encountered. “In West Bengal [...] the real tantric preoccupation was death” (McDaniel 2012: 161). The tantrics Mc Daniel met were engaged in the meditation about death and overcoming it. Thus two great scholars, such as White and McDaniel, disagree about the relevance of sexual intercourse in tantric ritual. The sharply different arguments they advance clearly illustrate how difficult (and probably useless) it is to squeeze Tantrism into a clear-cut definition. As I have shown elsewhere, it is not easy to give an unambiguous definition of Tantrism, even if one takes into consideration the Kāmākhyā temple alone. The temple priests have diverging ideas about who is a tantric and who is not. They do not agree among themselves about the value of the three levels of initiation that can be obtained from the temple gurus. See Majo Garigliano 2018c.

26 For prejudices about Tantrism and tantric practitioners, see, among others, Brooks (1992) and McDaniel (2012). Many Hindus simply associate Tantrism with black magic – typically, people with prejudices do not try to differentiate. Knowing about my research, a Marwari friend of mine from Rajasthan in his early twenties genuinely asked me “Tantrism is black magic, isn’t it?”

27 None of the narrators quoted in this paper openly referred to Tantrism. And yet, their words resonate with some of Tantrism’s recurrent elements, such as the insistence on sexuality and the use of impure and powerful substances like menstrual blood and alcohol.

28 On matrilinearity and matrilocality among the Garos, see Momin (1995). On matrilinearity and matrilocality among the Khasis, see Bhattacharyya (1999: 272–275).

29 Apart from this, the populations of North-East India observe other habits which would sound at least extravagant, if not repellent, to other Hindus: for instance, they eat the meat of various animals (pork, dogs, etc.). To those Hindus who are aware of the head-hunting once practiced among the Nagas, this particular custom must really sound like an aberration. On head-hunting see Kumar (1998: 181–189) and Singh (1995: 35–40).

30 See footnote 8 for the sources I consulted regarding the history of Assam and the Kāmākhyā temple.

31 Very little is known about Assam’s ancient history. Three dynasties ruled Assam between the 5th and the 12th centuries: the Varmans (5th–7th century), the Śālastambhas (7th–10th century) and the Pālas (10th–12th century). We know the kings’ names and little more. The image becomes clearer from the 13th century, when Ahom kings start controlling Assam.

ruled in Lower Assam. The Ahom kings resisted the tentative invasions of Muslim kings from present-day Bangladesh, as well as the Moghul from Delhi. All in all, the Ahoms ruled over Assam for six centuries (13th–16th centuries). Thus Assam was politically isolated from the Gangetic plane for centuries altogether.³² This fact can (partly) explain the harsh prejudices existing about Assam.

As the Ahoms' strength weakened, Assam came under British rule (1826). Kar explores the way the image of Assam was built by the colonial intelligentsia, engaged in bringing to light "the great Indian tradition" (Kar 2004: 4). In the 19th and 20th centuries, British intellectuals thought that it was their task to extract a reliable topography of India from Sanskrit texts; a solid, unassailable mapping of India was needed in order to study its "true" history and culture. Within this framework Assam received the attention of British intellectuals and, according to Kar, was soon dismissed as "a Mleccha [barbarian] kingdom" and a "frontier zone inhabited mostly by head-hunting savages and the opium-eaters idlers" (ibid.: 7).

Assam was ejected from the authoritative discourse on Indian civilisation. As is easy to imagine, Indian intellectuals engaged in research on Assamese history soon reacted to this posture. Their efforts to win Assam a place in the "ancient Indian civilisation" is impressive. For instance, in 1921 Agarwala, quoted by Kar, affirmed that:

The Aryan civilisation dawned in Assam, the land of the rising sun of India. It was justly called Prag-*jyotish* [Prägjyotiṣa], i.e. the light of the East. This light travelled towards east and west and illuminated Burma and eastern Peninsula and the whole of northern India. (Kar 2004: 19)

Such hyperbolic glorifications of Assam³³ and the reversal of the British intellectuals' paradigm – such that civilization proceeds from Assam to Northern India and not the other way round – betrays the awareness that Assam was indeed considered marginal, in comparison to Northern India.

Since his first visit, Pranay has repeatedly returned to the Kāmākhyā temple. When I met him in 2012, a group of some seven individuals were with him. All were somehow connected to him: his neighbours, the milkman serving the area where he lives, and so on. All these people decided to undertake the pilgrimage because he had gone to the temple and had told them that it was worth doing. Enquiring from other pilgrims, I detected numerous similar dy-

32 Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, agent of the French compagnie, visited Assam between 1755 and 1757, under Ahom rule. At the beginning of his journal he affirms that he had to wait six months on the border before he was admitted into Assam by an order of the king (Deloche 1984: 23–25). According to Deloche – the editor of Chevalier's journal – strangers were prohibited from entering Assam, the *royaume interdit* ("forbidden kingdom", ibid.: 9–11).

33 The echo of Agarwala's ideas spread quickly. One year later, in 1922, Vasu affirmed, again supporting his argument with creative etymologies, that Assamese traders "over four thousands years back, carried the torch of civilisation to Assyria, Babylon, Greece and other ancient countries" (Vasu, quoted by Kar 2004: 22).

namics. Indeed, it seems to me that word-of-mouth is a significant force pushing people to the Kāmākhyā temple.

During my 2011 fieldwork, I went to Jaipur for one week and stayed with some friends.³⁴ Krishna is now in his forties and belongs to a rich Marwari family, dealing mainly in precious stones and jewels. During my stay, Krishna and his family were going to celebrate the silver anniversary of Krishna's uncle. The day before, the *mehandī* ceremony³⁵ was held. When I arrived in the hall of the hotel that had been reserved for the purpose, some twenty women dressed in sumptuous saris were there. Some of them had already their hands and feet decorated with henna, while others were waiting for their turn. Five skinny female henna artists were at work. After some time my turn came. While one of them was decorating my hands, I suddenly realized that the henna artist next to me was talking about the Kāmākhyā temple to a Marwari woman, whose hands she was working on (interview in April 2011, Guwahati, my translation from Hindi):

My guru has been there. He said the temple is so powerful! So powerful! After the mother [goddess] has her periods, you may get a piece of that cloth which she used [the woman refers to the Ambuvācī-melā, the annual festival celebrating goddess Kāmākhyā's menstruation, see Majo Garigliano 2015: 194–201]. The priests give only a tiny bit of the cloth [making with her right hand the gesture signifying an extremely small quantity], it's so hard to get it! My guru has a tiny bit of that cloth and gave some to me. I preserve it at home.

The henna applier was talking in a very passionate way and the Marwari woman, listening attentively, was evidently impressed by her words. Although no one in Krishna's family had ever visited the Kāmākhyā temple, this episode demonstrates quite well how word-of-mouth spreads the idea that the goddess Kāmākhyā has tremendous power and that a visit to her temple is worth undertaking.

Concluding remarks

The narratives reported in this paper are related to one another, but no single element unites all of them. What runs through these accounts is “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing”, to borrow Wittgenstein's words (2001: 27). In many of the narratives included in this paper,

34 Reader has devoted a very rich monography to the Japanese pilgrimage to Shikoku island (Reader 2005). I agree with him when he says that “the study of a pilgrimage should not be carried out only at the specific sites pilgrims visit” (ibid.: 35). When I went to Jaipur in 2012 my initial intent was not to undertake fieldwork, but while I was there I realised I was collecting significant data.

35 On this occasion *mehandī*, or henna – a plant-based dye – is applied to the bride's and her female relatives' hands with very complex designs. Once dried, the henna paste is removed; the designs remain visible on the skin for a few days. The *mehandī* ceremony is usually performed before a wedding takes place. In the case under consideration, it was performed before the anniversary.

Assam is mysterious and dangerous. In some, Assamese women are dangerous. But in the story about the Santal man who goes to Assam, the woman transmits him her secret science. In some narratives, women are absent, and male figures predominate. According to the Bangladeshi vaidya, it is ascetics who face each other in the Kāmākhyā temple. In some stories even the Kāmākhyā temple itself is not mentioned.

All the materials presented here call for a reflection on our notion of fear. A significant difference exists between the stance of those who see Assam exclusively as “a naughty place” and those who think travelling to Assam is a risky enterprise, but worth the risk. For the latter, there is a good reason to go to Assam, be it the Kāmākhyā temple – as for Pranay, Puja and Pallavi; the occult knowledge of Assamese women – in the narrative about the Santal man; or the arduous contests in which ascetics participate – as in the story of the vaidyas from Bangladesh. Danger and the acquisition of knowledge are tightly interconnected. The narratives resonate with tantric thought in that the acquisition of mystical knowledge occurs only when one challenges one’s limits and fears. The tantric initiate, for example, purposely uses impure substances, thus putting him/herself at risk, to evoke divine beings and to partake of their immense power.

Is the image of Assam going to change? I would like to conclude by hinting at Assam’s emerging tourism industry (see Majo Garigliano 2018b). Sensing the economic potential of Assam, politicians at both the national and local level are collaborating to attract domestic and international investment and to prompt the pilgrimage and tourism industry. The nostalgic image of Assam that is being spread is that of a land of pristine natural beauty, rooted in its age-old traditions. Assam thus becomes – as a brochure of the Assam Tourist Development Corporation promotes – a “paradise unexplored”.

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Water Spirit Possession among the Khasis: Representation of Fear through Narratives

Margaret Lyngdoh

Abstract

This article argues that genre markers employed in oral narratives about possession by water spirits serve to exemplify human / non-human relations in Khasi supernatural ontology. It is not the aim of this work to add to the existing corpus of theories on narrative genre studies, but to try to analyse how genre boundaries within the Khasi language help shape and articulate relationality, interaction and participation between humans and entities of water. The article elucidates the way in which the “supernatural” world is understood and mediated through the mechanism of fear and its absence, as manifested in the narratives. Through case studies collected during primary fieldwork from various interlocutors from different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, attitudes towards entities identified as sourced from the Khasi traditional religion help to create and shape the “new” frames of Christianity, urbanisation and modernity within which these entities operate.

Keywords: Northeast India, Khasi, water spirits, *puri*, narratives, folklore

Introduction

“Where there is water, there is *puri*”
(interview with Meideng Kharkongor, Umphyrnai Village, January 2017)

Possession by water spirits (*puri*) is a well-known occurrence in Khasi society. There is great variation in the presentation of possession across the Khasi communities who inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the state of Meghalaya, in Northeastern India. Variation in the nature of water spirit possessions implies the highly folklorised nature of this phenomenon; in turn this reflects

Margaret Lyngdoh, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia; ninilyngdoh@gmail.com. This article is dedicated to my interlocutors who shared their stories with me. I also acknowledge Lidia Guzy, Stefano Beggiora and Uwe Skoda, who encouraged me to write this article and gave me valuable feedback. I also thank the peer reviewers and Ann Philipp, who worked on such short notice and helped make this article, hopefully, better.

the regional versions, manifestations and articulations of this belief.¹ However, the primary formal feature of possessions of this nature (i.e. by water non-humans) is their connection with water and water bodies. The water spirit in the Khyntiam / Khyrim Khasi language² is called *puri*. *Puri* are usually female entities who ensnare men (*ngat puri* meaning “to be caught or ensnared by a *puri*”), although women also get possessed. In the administrative district of East Khasi Hills, *puri* are mostly considered to be feminine entities. They possess great beauty, have long black hair, and seduce men who like to go fishing. Possession by *puri* manifests as socially supported, “peculiar” behaviour. For instance, a man who has been seduced by *puri* frequents the body of water at odd times, like midnight, talking unintelligibly, until he might finally drown. In Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Northern Khasi Hills, *puri* are narrated differently, their functions pointing towards their ambivalent status in the community.

This article will present variations of *puri* possession³ that have been collected from various regions of the Khasi Hills where the phenomenon of human encounters with water non-humans became a focus topic for my interlocutors. I attempt to look at narratives about possession as genre-based resources⁴ that dialogically reference articulations about the human and non-human belief worlds of the Khasi community. Fear as a responsive mechanism underlines the human / non-human relationship and that with the natural world. My research is based on primary fieldwork data carried out over the course of the last seven years. As a Khasi native, my position represents an emic perspective. I present here four narratives – one description and three case studies – that express *puri* possession and folklore about it. These were told to me by Khasi persons from three different administrative districts of the Khasi hills. The variations among the texts will be interpreted in order to show the social, religious and cultural frameworks and how changes within the society are reflected through the genre peculiarities within the different texts. Narrated experiences of *puri* possession, with the language / verbal expressions used as a primary resource, help to communicate and actualise the results of the narrative performance. Such experiences are formulated in order to succeed in communicating specific goals, such as the enforcement of fear of

1 While “belief” is a problematic category in Anthropology and the Study of Religion, in Folkloristics, it is used to mean articulations, or expressions of belief.

2 Because the British set up their station at Cherrapunjee, the Cherra dialect, which is Khyrim or Khyntiam Khasi, came to be used as the standard Khasi language. As such, Khyntiam words for non-humans in the Khasi belief world became accepted.

3 In this context, I use the term “possession” to mean mental and physical affliction brought upon a person through the agency of the non-human *puri*. The affliction is expressed in multiple ways, including in narrative genres. I look at possession as a “communicative event”.

4 Genres as conceptualised in Folkloristics are cognitive mechanisms that shape speech, in turn creating verbal types. As such, when we talk, we talk in genres: mental categories that are articulated through speech / narrative.

a given body or bodies of water or to demonise and “other” practices and beliefs pertaining to the Khasi traditional religion.⁵

But before I present and discuss the narratives on *puri* possessions, I would like to reflect upon how genre, as a resource or an orienting framework, interacts relationally with other genres. Thus, how is belief expressed experientially? In the present context, how do individuals use language to express and emphasise their perspectives and how do these expressed genres illustrate relationality with the non-human world? This dialogic relationship between human and non-humans enables the communication of multiple meanings conveyed by narratives of the supernatural in the Khasi cultural context. Originating from literary theory, genre in folkloristics has come to denominate classificatory ways of looking at texts. Ulla Savolainen and Frog talk of genres as a “term for approaching categories of cultural expression realised in ‘texts’” (Frog / Savolainen 2016: 47). These “texts” include traditional genres such as legend, myth and memorate⁶ and expand to include micro-genres, the smallest unit, in which cognitive processes organise the form a narrative takes upon articulation. This then represents an organising principle by which genre has now become a function within a system of references where “texts” respond and interact dialogically with other “texts”. In folklore texts, genres are hierarchically organised, with some genres assuming more significance than others. For example, the legend told as true has more influence than the folktale with its higher “entertainment” value. The communicative aspect of genre views it as “an orienting framework for the production and interpretation of discourse” (Bauman 1999: 84). The narratives / beliefs⁷ of water spirit possession which I analyse in this article are first person accounts, genre resources which have great authority to shape social behaviour and influence responses to non-human others.

The water spirits in Khasi religion

The traditional Khasi religion was originally transmitted through an oral tradition. In 1899, as a response to the mass Christian conversions around them, 16 Khasi intellectuals started the “Seng Khasi”, a socio-cultural organisation dedicated to the preservation of Khasi culture and religion. The *Ri Khasi Printing Press* was also founded and Khasi thinkers began to write and print

5 I prefer to use the term “religion” to denote the loosely linked set of Khasi traditional practices related with belief and the non-human world in order to assign agency to this minority system of belief in the context of Khasi Christianity.

6 A folkloristic genre that ordinarily means a personal story told by a single speaker about their life.

7 In folkloristics, “belief” as a critical term encapsulates the idea that it is never possible to measure or categorise “belief”. Belief as an analytical category then is the study of the expressions and manifestations of belief as and where we find them. See also Kaarina Koski (2008) and Reet Hiimäe (2016).

pamphlets and books elucidating the basic tenets of the Khasi religion. Today, the *Niam Khasi* (“Khasi religion”) is also popularly known as *Ka Niam Tip Brieu Tip Blei, Tip Kur Tip Kha* (“To know man to know God, to know one’s clansmen to know one’s kinsmen”). This includes the core value of responsibility that a person has towards other people and toward the Supreme Being. In the traditional religion, tradition and memory are preserved through oral narratives. These include folktales, beliefs, clan origin narratives and place folklore / placelore. The religious aspect was not separate from community administration, and the most important component of the divine within Khasi life was a code of conduct, orally transmitted, in the form of guidelines that are neither fixed nor absolute. However, these rules helped the community to maintain mutual relationships with the entire Khasi cosmology. For example, to know man and to know God implies the fulfilment of responsibilities that humans have towards *Blei* – U Blei, Ka Blei, Ki Blei (lit. “he God”, “she God”, “they God”). The common most name for God is U Blei Trai Kynrad (lit. “He God Precious Lord”). But God, or the Supreme Being, has multiple names that are invoked in various contexts. In matters of jurisdiction and justice, Ka Blei Synshar (Goddess of the Sacred Law) is called upon. Another significant component of the Khasi religious worldview is the clan, around which social order in the community is preserved.

The biggest tragedy in Khasi social life is seen to be the destruction of a clan, which occurs when no clan members are left to carry on the lineage, because then the ancestors cannot participate in the well-being of the clan they belonged to; this in turn means the destruction of ancestors and clan members. In Khasi ontology the entire non-human world also participates towards the continuity or destruction of the clan. For example, the female weretiger, Khruk, in Northern Khasi Hills, has the duty and social responsibility to look after the *longkur*, “the strength / nature of the clan”.⁸ Sublime bliss in the afterlife is achieved if the spirit of the dead is able to rejoin the ancestors and other deceased clan members. In daily life, there was previously considered to be a participative relationship between the living and the dead, the human world with the animate and inanimate natural world. The coming of the Christian mission to the Khasi Hills formally began in 1842 and today there exists an uneasy and contentious relationship among the various factions of Khasi Christians, as well as between practitioners of the Khasi religion and Khasi Christian converts.

While accounts of water spirits may be found in various vernacular and English language pamphlets and books, the earliest printed version I have been able to find about a water spirit, or a supernatural woman who originates from water, is in the ethnographic monograph by colonial officer Major

8 *Longkur* includes the *rngiew* of the clan, see note 9.

Philip Richard Thornhagh Gurdon in *The Khasis*, first published in 1906 (pp. 168–170). Gurdon records the story of Li Dohkha, who is the female progenitor of the rulers of the historical Jaintia Kingdom in the Jaintia Hills, the present day Meghalaya. Her origin is from water, and she is “caught in the net” of the fisherman, Woh Ryndi. After giving birth to many children, Li Dohkha returns to the water. Following this, multiple versions of this story are recorded in subsequent vernacular publications (see e.g. Elias 1937, Gatphoh 1977, Lamare 2016). But printed accounts of belief about or narratives of water entities in everyday life in the communities of the Khasis – such as the Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Nongtraï, Marngar, Maram, etc. – are extremely rare. I have come across one narrative, written by a Khasi woman called Sincerity Phanbuh, that was printed in the form of a pamphlet in 2001, entitled *Haba La Thoh Shun Ki Blei* (“When One Is Marked by the Gods”). In this account, Sincerity Phanbuh recounts her own experience of being given the gift of healing by the water entities. This narrative is a hybrid between Khyntiam and Pnar beliefs about water entities. Lostin Lawrence Kharbani also printed a pamphlet titled *Sangkhini* that describes a human-animal with the head of a bull (alternatively with the head of a cat, in oral narratives collected during fieldwork in Lyngngam and Nongtraï regions of the Khasi Hills) and the body of a snake (Kharbani 2004: 26–54). This entity is intimately associated with water and this living tradition exists among the people of the West Khasi Hills.

The term *puri* to mean a water entity is most common among the Khyntiam Khasis of the East Khasi Hills. In a private conversation the French linguist and Austroasiatic language expert, Anne Daladier pointed out that in Khasi, Pnar and War, *puri* denotes any kind of lower “fairy”. Further, while it is believed that ancestors among the War reincarnate as the clan rivers which delimit clan lands, *puri* are never used in religious rituals because they are not recognised as divinities. The word *puri* itself is not Austroasiatic, unlike the Khasi language (Daladier 2012: 166–194). A *puri* is always a malignant entity and is believed to lead a human being to madness and death. They are said to appear as ethereally beautiful men and women who like to have mortals as their spouses. If a person is properly enchanted (*ngat puri*) by a *puri* then they must die so their *rngiew*⁹ can go to an alternate reality to be with their *puri*

9 The *rngiew* is an ability which is god-like, that the Supreme Being clothes, invests a human being with when he / she comes out of the womb initially divine, and then whatever he / she acquires or achieves in a lifetime is dependent on it. The *rngiew* stays with a person through life and is reflected in the person’s being and stature. If their personality, spirit, essence, strength of character, nature, principles, moral fortitude, etc. are in line with *Ka tip briew ka tip blei and ka tip hok tip sot* (in essence, this means, “living a good life in accordance with the Covenant decreed by the Supreme Being”), then their *rngiew* is strong and protects them from those who desire ill or harm to befall upon them (interview with Sweetymon Rynjah, Shillong, November 2015). To elucidate, when a human child is born, he / she is just made of flesh and breath. But it is the *rngiew* that invests the flesh with personhood. Hence, the *rngiew* has the ability to traverse multiple realities. But non-human entities like guardian deities (in Khasi language, *ryngkew*) also have a *rngiew*; in the Northern Khasi Hills female tigerwomen (*khruk*), have two *rngiew*, one that lives in the animal form of the small tiger and one inside the human body.

wife / husband. The symptoms that indicate that a person has really been enchanted by a *puri* are that such a person will frequent the body of water where their spirit woman / man resides. Sometimes, the person will disappear for days together, only to be found weak and delirious near the water. Sometimes, madness follows, in which state the affected person will call out the name of the body of water where their spirit wife or husband lives. *Puri* are water non-humans and their connection with water locates them in the greater folklore associated with water. Their desire to associate with humans, to have spirit children with them or to impart healing knowledge to them (in the West Khasi Hills), makes them part of the liminal ontologies.

According to empirical data collected from Jaintia Hills among the Pnar, the clan ancestor who reincarnates as a river has great influence and is elevated to the position of a goddess, *ka blai* or *u blai* (“the goddesses, or the god”) and there are many such entities. Each god / goddess has his / her own name, and expresses his / her presence by possessing mediums from particular clans for the special purpose of interaction with the human world. In the village of Chyrmang in Jaintia Hills, the river goddess “K.”¹⁰ mediates between the human and non-human worlds through the human medium Lut Talang, a woman in her 30s (Lyngdoh 2017: 55–78). The world of deities is organised around the familiar Pnar clan structure where the ancestors, deities and humans interact with and influence each other’s existence. This mutual cooperation is most visible in the numerous megaliths that are erected to commemorate the ancestors. Further, sacred places in nature also express the connection of deities. Genealogies of deities and humans are connected through clan narratives, which are in turn manifested through sacred places, for example the Thlumuvi Falls near Amalarem where the water spirit Li Dakha was “fished out” by Woh Ryndi (see above).

Among the Nongtraï community of the Western Khasi Hills, there are two kinds of water entities: *thongthei* and *ñiangriang*. Whereas *thongthei* is the dark or malignant kind of water spirit who possesses and / or kills men and women, *ñiangriang* is mostly ambivalent and benign.¹¹ Encounters with the water entity *thongthei*, in this case, are always narrated to have tragic ends, but an encounter with *ñiangriang* can have multiple consequences. Furthermore, within the folklore of water in this region of the Khasi Hills the water entity is variously narrated to be the daughter or sister of the snake people or *sangkhini* who are human beings possessing the ability to transform into a being with the head of a bull and the body of a snake. It may be that the word *sangkhini* comes from the Bangla word *sankhini*, which means a type of venomous snake. This loan probably comes from the proximity between the present day Bangladesh and the border areas of Lyngngam and Nongtraï areas;

10 It is forbidden to write or “carry” her name outside the village borders (see also Lyngdoh 2017).

11 Fieldwork (2014–2018) Lyngngam and Nongtraï regions of the Khasi Hills.

oral narratives detailing the erstwhile cultural, social and economic exchanges and connections between these two areas – present day Bangladesh and the Meghalaya border – are plentiful.

The human-animal *sangkhini* dwell in water and are the guardian of righteous people. But *sangkhini* with negative qualities also exist in narratives. Certain places close to rivers near the Garo Hills border are said to be inhabited by the guardian deity of all *sangkhini*, who has ambivalent qualities. Always associated with water, the *puri* and the *sangkhini* are connected in the belief world of the community through the popular narrative of the *sangkhini*, which connects a man (Stepiong), the water entity *ñiangriang* and the *sangkhini* (see Kharbani 2004: 17–33, and several interviews in January 2015, Nongmyndo Village, Nongtraï, West Khasi Hills). Stepiong was a human in the Nongtraï inhabited area of West Khasi Hills. He fell in love with Ñiangriang, narrated variously to be the daughter or sister of Sangkhini, the guardian deity of all other *sangkhini*. After his marriage with Ñiangriang, he went to live in the alternate water-reality that *sangkhinis* inhabit. After a lapse of five years, when everyone in Stepiong's village thought he was dead, the secondary death ritual was performed. During the ceremony, he miraculously appeared. And just when everyone was happily celebrating his joyful return, he fell down dead.

Numerous narratives describe how the *sangkhini* are connected with the environment, mediating human interaction with the natural surroundings. For example, my interlocutors in Langdongdai, Nongmyndo and Seiñduli villages in the Western Khasi Hills told me that during the monsoon season, when the rivers and streams are swollen with water, bridges are washed out. People are then stranded on either side of the banks. Then, it is the duty of the *sangkhini* to lay its body down from one bank of the river to the other and it will become a bridge that resembles a wooden log. But there are certain taboos associated with crossing a *sangkhini* bridge: a person may not touch the tip of his / her machete on the body of the *sangkhini*. If this happens, the bridge sinks, drowning all the people on it (interviews in Langdongdai, Nongmyndo and Seiñduli villages, West Khasi Hills District).

In the Northern Khasi Hills, there is a secret-name magic ritual called *jhare*. *Jhare* is a very specific ritual system wherein every inanimate object in nature has a secret name. If a *jha*, a person who is “empowered” by his / her teacher, utters the secret name of the inanimate natural object, he / she gains power over it. Using this medium, the *jha* cleanses the affliction of a patient, by uttering the secret name of the illness, misfortune, etc. In the *jhare* ritual tradition, the deity of water is called Ñiaring. Ñiaring is a feminine deity, the older sister of air. Ñiaring is bound by a mythic covenant that binds her to help mankind. Marcus Lapang is a *Jhare* ritual performer who collected the following narra-

tive, “How Water Tied a Covenant with Man and the Divine Nature of Water”:

In the olden days, the true name of water was *Ñiaring*. *Ñiaring* is the older sister of air. *Ñiaring*, in those days was confined in one place by the Supreme Being. In her place of confinement, the sounds that were heard were of her sorrow, of her crying. Then a Council of the Supreme Being was convened, and in that Council it was decided that *Ñiaring* should be freed to flow into all the earth. So the *riew rambah*, or *pantia*, appointed by the gods began to clear the earth thereby making channels for *Ñiaring* to flow into the world. These *riew rambah* came into existence only to fulfil the task. Neither human, nor spirit, the Supreme Being never made any other use of them and we do not know where they are today. The Khasi lands as we know them today are so hilly and uneven because *Ñiaring* had to be allowed to flow out into the world. After *Ñiaring* was freed, she made a *jutang* or covenant whereby she agreed to help mankind in any way that she could and she would go where she was needed in the Khasi lands. *Ñiaring* made the promise that she would cleanse and purify from illnesses that might be caused by beings whom she contains and nurtures. In return, mankind agreed not to be cruel or violate her. Water came before *Lukhmi*, the spirit of paddy (or rice grain). When *Ñiaring* became free, the sounds of her sorrow turned into music and joy as she flowed over the rocks and mountains, which then became her musical instruments. Every water body is the road, the pathway of the *ryngkew*¹² [guardian deity of a place in nature] and *basa* [the deity of the marketplace]. We see the water flowing by but we never see it return; but it returns, it goes back. *Ñiaring* has 30 kinds of entities,¹³ including fish, which live inside her and she [*Ñiaring*] offered to cleanse any human being who is afflicted by any of the entities who live inside her. The *puri*, or water nymph / spirit is one of the entities belonging to *Ñiaring*. *Ñiaring* also harbours evil spirits, and other non-human entities (*ki ksuid ki khrei*) inside her.¹⁴ This is the reason why *jhare* magical practitioners use *Ñiaring* to heal illnesses caught from water. It is necessary to sacrifice to *Ñiaring* a female white chicken or white she-goat in times of necessity. But this sacrifice should never be performed continuously, but only when the *jhare* practitioner tells you to do so. (interview with Marcus Lapang, Korstep Village, Ri Bhoi District, 2 November 2015)

Water as an animate entity is narrated and is extensively used in magic and ritual. In the secret-name magical tradition in Northern Khasi Hills, *Ñiaring* is the secret name of water. The other components of the hidden name include the following set of words: *Ko ka riñ, ko ka jiñ, ko ka wiñ thiñ, ñiariñ bang, Ñiariñ, ko ka riñ, ko ka jriñ, bei ñiariñ, trai kynrad*. (“Oh Riñ, oh Jiñ, oh Wiñ Thiñ, Ñiariñ Bang, Ñiariñ, oh Riñ, o Jriñ, Mother Ñiariñ, precious goddess!”)

12 Guardian deity of a place in nature. *Ryngkew* are powerful non-humans who inhabit certain designated places in the Khasi natural landscape. But *ryngkew* can also belong to Khasi / Pnar clans and human-animals, like the weretigers and the *sangkhini*.

13 *Ñiaring* is the entity of water. Lesser to her is the *puri*, but this expression of belief can only be found in the Northern Khasi Hills. *Ñiaring* houses 30 kinds of diseases / afflictions / spirits that can plague mankind.

14 These are included in the 30 kinds of entities. According to the etiological narrative of *jhare* magic, there are 30 kinds of afflictions that originate from water (*Ñiaring*) and 19 kinds of afflictions that arise from the other sources. All afflictions can be cured by the practitioner of *jhare* magic (*jha*) except *niang-lyngkut*, or leprosy, because it was born inside the earth, and shortly afterwards Basakongri, its mother, died of treachery, so it could not be named. If a *jha* does not know the name of a disease, he cannot cure it. To cure disease, he must use a medium (like ginger, water, earth, etc.), and utter first its origin narrative and then its secret name.

Uttering these words allows a *jha* – a *jhare* practitioner – to assume power over water, as a medium used for healing. These words recall the covenant, which was made between humans and water in myth and compels Ñiaring to do a *jha*'s bidding.

Water spirit possession as presented in three oral narratives

Having introduced water spirits in Khasi religion, let us now turn to the presentation and analysis of three narratives of water spirit possession. These memorates are representative of the connection of the non-human water entity and the belief worlds of the Khasis. The telling of the narrative mediates between the mundane and alternate realities. Each narrative is derived from a different region of the Khasi hills. I point this out to identify the regional markers and continuities of water spirit belief across the various areas of the Khasi Hills. All my interlocutors are recent Christian converts.¹⁵ It was not always easy to earn the trust of my interlocutors and this may be a result of the differences between the Catholic and Presbyterian Khasis and their different perceptions toward the indigenous Khasi religion. While Catholics assimilate certain components from the Khasi ontology, Presbyterians maintain a strict separation between what they see as connections or continuities with traditional belief. But this strict separation is not always successful, because the indigenous Khasi ontology “supports” Khasi Christianity by enabling vernacular negotiations by practitioners of Khasi Christianity. This means that Christianity among the Khasis has become as successful as it has because it is assimilated into the Khasi traditional culture. For example, traditional Khasi unconscious connections with the sacred landscape are now expressed through the discursive frame of Christianity in the form of house blessings and Catholic sacred groves.

Case Study and Narrative I (East Khasi Hills) – The sons of Meideng Kharkongor

It was on 14 January 2017 that I first met Meideng Kharkongor, 62 years old, female and a homemaker in Umphyrnai, East Khasi Hills District. She is a devout Catholic convert. Meideng had lost a son to *puri* possession some years ago, and her second son almost died because of the possession experience. The

¹⁵ The first serious Christian mission came from the Welsh Calvinistic Missionaries in 1842. Over the last century, Christian conversions became successful. There are presently two main factions of Christians: Presbyterians and Catholics. The approximate percentage of Christians among the Khasis is 83.5 per cent (Census of India, 2011).

village of Umphyrnai has one location that is popular for washing clothes, a particular section of the stream that has two places popularly used by village members. In this location, both her first and second son were possessed, at different times.

MK: It was 15 December 2015. On that particular day, there was a football match in Mawlyngat [a neighbouring village]. My second son and his friend were going to watch this match. On the way, they reached the same place where my other son had been “caught”. My first son was possessed at the water, my younger son got it on the path which is very close to this place. When he reached this place the *ksuid*¹⁶ caught him, *trang!*¹⁷

ML: How did he feel?

MK: He felt as if someone had caught hold of him. As he felt this, he remained standing at the place itself. His friend asked him: “Why are you standing?” He was unable to speak, instead she¹⁸ spoke, she said: “I love you very much, tell me do you love me or not?” My son did not answer. He just stood there. He could not speak. Then, he was released and he went on to watch the football match. We [Meideng and her family] don’t know if he watched it and understood what was going on or not [...] After he came back, on the second day after that, he stayed at home. The second day was Tuesday and he stayed at home and slept all day. When his sister went to wake him up for the meal, his eyes had rolled back and we could only see the whites of his eyes. He was non-responsive and we tried our best to wake him, but he wouldn’t wake! At the time we thought he had a fever, because there had been a lightning storm, that he had a fever because of that. He just wouldn’t wake. ... So we took him to Civil Hospital. ... Later in the hospital in the middle of the night, he woke up. When we spoke to him, he remained silent. He would not reply to our questions ... no physical symptoms or illness were found in the tests carried out by the hospital. We were referred to Woodland Hospital. It was the same there too. No illnesses were diagnosed and tests revealed nothing. By that time he had begun to speak a little and he made numerous attempts to get up and flee ... because that *ksuid* said to him: “Don’t stay here, don’t sleep here, come back now.” He kept entreating us, asking to be released from the hospital. ... It was for about a week that we stayed at the hospital. The elder brother who had attended him at the hospital said that at night, he had heard the thunderous sounds of hammering, but there was no one. He thought it was the nurse ... because the *ksuid* kept telling him to go back. (interview with Meideng Khar Kongor, Umphyrnai Village, Eastern Khasi Hills, 18 January 2017)

The narrative continued with accounts of how the boy kept running away to the place where he had been enchanted (*phud shyrrang*), his loss of consciousness, how he would keep talking about and to the *puri*. He would try any means necessary to get to the *phud shyrrang* and Meideng relates how she had to call out to the neighbours and relatives for help. The boy, 21 years old at the time, used many devious means to trick the people around him in his attempts to run to the water. At one point, ten people had to restrain him. On

16 This is how Meideng narrates the *puri* to be a *ksuid*. In Khasi language, *ksuid* is a generic word to denote the class of non-humans who are malignant.

17 Khasi onomatopoeic word expressing shock, and the feeling of being physically caught by surprise.

18 “She” here refers to the water spirit.

25 December 2015, Christmas Day, the Bishop went to pray for him. Meideng's son physically assaulted the Bishop. The family then commissioned a mass. Meideng related to me that when the demoniac¹⁹ heard his name being called during the service, he became violent and began telling the family that the water spirit was calling to him. Meideng recalled the sense of helplessness and hopelessness she experienced. One time he kept saying to his mother that he wanted to go to the bathroom, because where there is water there is the *puri*. Another time, Meideng narrated that the *ksuid* said to her son: "Wherever you go, they observe you, they don't allow you to come to me. Let's go to the toilet, we will express our love [there]". He went to the toilet, and there was a loud metallic clang. They rushed to him and found him there unconscious. The toilet was broken. They took him to the hospital; he was bleeding and unconscious. He would always ask: "Mother, do you see her? She is standing there and calling me, do you see her?"

The resolution to these problems came when, in Meideng's words, one day the family sat down to pray to Jesus, as the "bringer of light and dispeller of demons" (interview with Meideng Kharkongor, Umphyrnai Village, Eastern Khasi Hills, 14 January 2017). Meideng told me that it was at that moment that the family remembered the Catholic priest adept at exorcisms in Mawlaingut Village, Ri Bhoi District. It took three violent, traumatic visits, characterised by violence on the part of the possessed boy towards Father Alfred Lyngdoh Nongbri, the "exorcist priest", before the boy was completely healed. Today, he leads a normal life.

James Steward was the first son of Meideng, whose death was attributed to *puri* possession. Meideng told me that once when James Steward came back from the *phud shynrang*, the same place where her second son was possessed, he felt some peculiar symptoms, like his left leg was being pulled at, after which the illness began and he died eight months later. Talking about the death of her first son, James, after being afflicted by *puri*, Meideng told me:

MK: After 8 months, in one of the final times that we took him to the hospital, they said it was blood cancer, and after a while he died.

ML: Please forgive me for asking these questions, it must be difficult for you.

MK: It's fine. At the time, we asked only those people who were Christians to pray.

ML: But why not traditional ritual performers?

MK: Because we trusted God and doctors [only]. We turned away from any other form of worship. When we converted, we made a promise ...²⁰

James Steward was 19 when he died in 2002.

19 A person possessed by an evil spirit.

20 When Khasis convert to Christianity, they are taught that what belonged to the traditional religion is demonic and must never be indulged in.

These narratives reveal the most classic elements of *puri* ensnarement. The formal features of the possession narrative communicate cultural identifiers, which are immediately communicated through the use of genre references: *ban ioh ksuid ha um* (lit. “to be possessed at the water”) or the association of *puri* with *ksuid*, a term clearly attributing negative characteristics to its bearer. But *puri* are not seen everywhere as malignant entities. Meideng here substitutes the negatively connoted *ksuid* for the more neutral *puri*, to reveal her Catholic framework, in which entities derived from the Khasi indigenous worldview are effectively demonised. This in turn references fear as the affective emotion ascribed to what is clearly pushed outside the realm of acceptance, in this case, the *puri*. Although the word *sheptiang*, “to fear” in Khasi, was not used anywhere in the narrative, the implicit communication of the emotion is noticeable. The use of the word *ksuid* is never articulated easily in a Khasi conversation without conveying the meta-communication of fear, because *ksuid* are malevolent and always harm humans. Such an attitude is effectively conveyed by this simple shift of referring to *puri* as *ksuid*. The agency of the supernatural power is sharply contrasted with the ascribed higher authority of the Christian deities.

Genre markers that qualify a Christian possession are entangled with more traditional motifs of the possession experience, for example, the compulsion of the demoniac to run to the water. In Western Christian mythology water has no specific status as a non-human entity, and is mostly ambivalent and without agency. But this ambivalence is not translated into the narrated Khasi Christian worldview. Rather, the non-human status of water is recognised as the demonised entity of the *puri*, which is further pushed out of the realm of belonging by being ascribed the status of *ksuid*. Meideng efficiently uses rhetorical tools to identify the traditional Khasi non-human, drawing upon Christian vernacular theology in order to authorise the articulated shift of the *puri* to a demonised other, the *ksuid*. This is because water entities in the Khasi traditional worldview are incorporated into the social life, becoming essential to Khasi understanding of the natural world around them. Water is not an inanimate natural object – water is a deity. In this sense, narrative authority is conveyed by the immediacy of the storytelling situation.

Case Study²¹ II (East Khasi Hills) – Riti and her family

I met Riti while I was searching for narratives of *puri* possession in a village in the East Khasi Hills.²² Riti is a young woman aged 25, mother to a four-year old child, and my primary interlocutor. Riti lost her mother to water spirit possession, and currently two siblings of hers are afflicted with water spirits. Riti was not the only one whose family was affected by water spirit possession in that village – not far from her in the same village lived another woman who had lost her son.

When Riti was 3 months old, her mother went to an enchanted place by the river to wash clothes and was possessed. Following this, her mother got some treatment which proved inadequate because she would always go back to the enchanted place, to the forests and behave as if she were in a trance. This illness lasted for 18 years until her death. It was in 2005 that Riti's sister, who was then working as a domestic help in Shillong, fell ill. Her employer brought her back to the village. Riti's sister became very ill thereafter. She would take off her clothes and sit naked. She ran away from home into the forest naked, so her family relatives and Riti beat her, and did everything they could to control her condition. At that time, Riti brought her home and asked her why she behaved like that. She replied that she was afraid, that there was a man who was threatening her. They took her to the doctor who said that it was mental illness, that she was stressed. For many years after, she took medicines from this doctor. But her illness and medication “went separate ways” (translated literally from the interview transcript, January 2017): the medicines did not help her.

Then her family went to the pastors and church elders to get help. They prayed for her but never looked for help through ritual sacrifice. For ten years Riti's sister has been ill, and as a last resort, Riti, as a strict Presbyterian, finally decided to ask me for help to find a traditional ritual performer. Other people, such as pastors, told them that it was *jingpang ksuid* – “spirit” illness.

Riti makes her living by daily wage work and because she has to look after her sick sisters, with the second sister also sick with possession-related symptoms since the late 2000s, Riti's ability to seek work is seriously limited. I was introduced to Riti by a relative of hers; otherwise Riti probably would never have agreed to talk with me, because in a Christian-dominated community among Khasis, affliction by traditional spirits is stigmatised and is intimately

21 I present this illustration as a case study because although I have interview transcripts, each one is fragmented and the illustration is unclear without its context.

22 All names of the interviewees and places have been anonymised to protect them. The Church and the community might otherwise ostracise them.

connected with the fear of the “vernacular Satan”.²³ Also, the efforts of the church members to pray and intervene on behalf of Riti’s family met with little success. So when I asked Riti if she was willing to talk about her experience with demonic possession, she agreed on one condition; that I help to find a traditional ritual healer who would perform a cleansing ritual for Riti’s family. Consequently, I worked closely with Riti for two months, with a close friend who is also a traditional Khasi ritual performer and since then her family situation has improved dramatically. Riti told me that the illness of her sister has improved. This meant that Riti could find work and support her family better. The youngest brother of Riti also began to fall ill as I was cooperating with her during the months of January and February 2017. His illness went away after the traditional ritual performer’s intervention. However, the ritual performer told me, in a private conversation, that the cause of the family misfortune was a result of the Riti’s parent’s *sang* (“mortal sin”), rather than the possession by the *puri*. The result was the generational misfortune and the mental illness.

In the present context of Christianity, mental illness is stigmatised and pathologised. Mental illness earlier had no special status – it was the work of the spirits. But the Khasi encounter with modernity has brought about a very special shift in the way that mental illness is now perceived, with stigmatisation and othering.

In this example, fear as a cognitive mechanism is expressed through the genre devices implicit in Riti’s language: in this case, her fear is directed not toward the *puri*, but toward the neighbours and the greater Presbyterian community, of which Riti is a part, lest they ostracise her from the community. Riti also fears that this illness of possession would pass down to her child. The complex relationships between neighbours, relatives and the Church community are in turn regulated and socially controlled by fear as a primary device. I, as an outsider, and a researcher of “supernatural” traditions, was more trusted than anyone Riti knew in the village or community members. Significantly, this case study also reveals the tensions that exist between Catholics and Presbyterians in Umphyrnai village. This does not exclude the experiences and interactions with non-humans by Christians. Rather, it enhances the alterity of such beings.

23 All divinities in the Khasi religious pantheon are subsumed under the figure of “Satan”. Therefore the use of the term, “vernacular Satan”.

Case Study and Narrative III (Shillong, East Khasi Hills) – Sincerity Phanbuh

On 13 November 2015, I phoned a Khasi friend who had come across a small pamphlet in the Khasi language, entitled *Haba Thoh Shun Ki Blei* (“When One is Marked by the Gods”) and knowing my interest in Khasi folklore, had informed me of this. It turned out that the author, a woman named Sincerity Phanbuh, was a resident of a neighbouring locality. I sent my friend a list of questions and requested him to meet with Sincerity. She agreed to let me use her story for the purposes of my research. The following excerpt from the interview has been transcribed and translated as a result of the recording that was made during this conversation between my Khasi friend (Q) and Kong²⁴ Sincerity.

SP: My name is Sincerity Phanbuh and I live in Mawlai Nongpdeng. This incident happened in my life. And about this incident I have written in the book I named *Haba Thoh Shun Ki Blei*. This is not something that is imagined or a *puriskam*, a tale told by the elders that I am telling you. But this happening is true. [...] What I can tell you now is only a little of what happened. In this world of ours, I truly tell you there are other entities, deities, who care for us, look after us and hold [to comfort] us. This incident happened to me when I was still young about 19 or 20. As young girls we were very enthusiastic about washing clothes and we were often scolded because we liked to wash clothes more than we liked to study.²⁵ ... I didn't like to go to wash clothes but I was always drawn, pulled to the River Umshing. So one day I went, maybe I got an illness²⁶ from that place. [...] So I went to get medical help. We are Christians ... Presbyterian. The medicines did not help and there were many people who said that I should ask for divinations.²⁷ So I went to a ritual performer, who tried to heal me but it didn't work. At the time we were facing many difficulties, since our father had died and due to financial constraints, I was not able to get the help I needed. At the time we were surviving on our father's pension. My studies were also affected. Time went by and I slowly began to realise that I had something that was different, something that marked me. Then I began to tell this to other people and I began to *kren ramia*.²⁸ People began to say that I was mad.²⁹ After that, I began to “heal” people and people began to get well with my healing abilities. I was a healer until I got employment and I could not keep up the two professions and so I gave it up, but even now, if I have to, sometimes, I heal people. I am able to heal people who are afflicted with *bib*,³⁰ *thlen*,³¹

24 A respectful way of referring to a lady.

25 Among the Khasis, it is common to wash clothes in a nearby stream or river. This is popular with young girls and is considered to be a social activity.

26 Similar to epilepsy.

27 This means that she (Sincerity) was advised to go and seek the help of a ritual performer.

28 *Kren*, means “to speak”, *ramia* is the place where one goes when one is asleep, a place also inhabited by the ancestors and deities. In this context, to *kren ramia* means “to speak in a way that is not intelligible”.

29 In the Khasi language, the word *beij* is used to denote someone who acts outside the expected normal behaviour. It does not necessarily carry the connotation of mental illness.

30 *Bib* is a malevolent entity. It is a poison deity reared by people who harm people with illness in exchange for wealth.

31 *Thlen* is a demonic entity who needs human blood in exchange for wealth and prosperity.

taro,³² [...] I prepare a healing oil also which I give to sick people to apply on the affected areas. After that I began to write books [...]

Q: Before you got the *puri*, you wrote in your book that you were sick. How long did this sickness last?

SP: Two years where I would run and walk restlessly as if I was possessed by the *taro* or *shuar*.³³... Doctors diagnosed me with epilepsy and gave me medicines accordingly. But I told my mother that this diagnosis was not correct because in my own self I felt that this was not the case and the medicines that I drank did not help at all. And at the time I was able to foretell people's illness, problems and misfortunes. Before people came to our home, I was able to foretell that they would come – their names, where they lived – I would tell these details to my mother and they were exactly so.

Q: Do you still have this ability?

SP: No, I don't because I have broken the rules and severed the *jutang*³⁴ that I had made because I could not hold on to it. There are some rules, which I still cling to, but others, I have broken. About this, I cannot tell you. [...] I went with my friend to wash clothes to the Thum Thum stream (in Mawlai, Shillong). Of the two of us I was the only one who was ensnared. It was odd because, when we went to the river, we both fell asleep and it was a strange kind of sleep.³⁵ The other friend of mine is dead now, she is no more. We took a camera along with us, and the pictures that we took at home were fine, but those that we took at the river, they did not come out at all.³⁶ So I understood that there was something strange.

Q: You say that you *kren ramia*, what do you mean?

SP: My family members said they could not understand what I was saying, that I was talking in a foreign tongue and my voice was that of a man's. In this stage, I was like a man, smoking, behaving, talking and the people who came to me for healing also witnessed it. When my family members told me the things I did when I was in this condition, I was afraid. It was like a *hiar blai*.³⁷

Q: How did you know for sure that you didn't have epilepsy and that you had *puri* ensnarement?

SP: You see, in Khasi belief, if any girl steps on a *maw bsum*,³⁸ then the *puri* will marry her. But you see, for me it was like this: I had already met the father of my children and at the time I was no longer a virgin and already pregnant, and this resulted in the *puri* becoming very angry with me. The manifestation of this was my severe illness as my punishment. It was during this illness that I reached another realm [reality / world] ... In this condition my *rngiew*³⁹ was in an alternate reality but my body was at home. There were these beings who looked like people with webbed feet, who did not speak

32 A goddess who possesses people and brings wealth to the owner.

33 Another wealth-bringing deity who is malevolent and possesses people until they are dead.

34 *Jutang* (lit. "covenant").

35 In Khasi ontology sleep is a medium through which a possession is initiated, or a human-animal transformation effected. Sleep is the means whereby one goes into the alternate reality.

36 Meaning that the camera is not able to take the photos because of the supernatural events that occurred during that time.

37 *Hiar blai* in Pnar ontology is the descent of the deity onto the body of a medium for the purpose of mediating between the divine and human worlds.

38 *Maw bsum*, a peculiar stone in a water body, sacred to the *puri* and close to where the *puri* bathe.

39 That part of a human being which renders the person impervious to the evil eye.

a word to me, but they led me through a level country-landscape. Then we went through caves, I followed these beings and then we reached a small hole through which water flowed continuously. We went through it and reached somewhere that looked like a rock but was hollow, like a cave. It was then that they told me that I was brought before the God Kupli.⁴⁰ It was a realm inside water and they told me that they had summoned me to their Council because I had stepped upon the *maw bsum*. There they told me that they could not marry me because I was not a virgin anymore. Perhaps, if I had been a virgin, I would not be alive as I am now ...[a *puri* bride must die in the real world to live in the *puri* reality]. The ones who took me there, I understood that they were deities, although they did not speak a single word to me [...] They addressed the Kupli God as *pa'iem* ["father-chief"]. It was there I was judged [for stepping on the *maw bsum*]. These deities, they spoke among themselves and said that they had [already] brought suffering upon Sincerity Phanbuh [the illness she got from the washing place]. So they turned to me and said, "Ask, ask what you want!" I asked for two things, but at the time I was not granted them. But after some time had passed, three or four years and I had had two children by then. I "dreamt" again that the Kupli God gave what I had asked for, those two things I had previously asked for. These two gifts that were given to me made me to understand that I was given the gift of healing, foretelling, divine possession and prophesy. I began to heal people after that. [...] Earlier, I had asked for something precious which was the gift to heal. [...] In the alternate reality they gave me two stones, which I took. And they told me that if I wanted to get rid of my physical ailments, then I must take and use the two stones. Which I did and my two years of suffering ended. Three or four years later I was given the gift of healing.

Q: You are a Presbyterian. Did the Church members come to ask you about your abilities, or to ask you to stop them?

SP: Yes they came. [She was reluctant to speak upon this topic of how the Church responds to her use of her "abilities", ML]

Perhaps the most hybrid of all the narratives, this memorate recounts a first person experience of what it is like to encounter the non-human world from the indigenous Khasi perspective. Alternate realms become accessible in this narrative and the movement between different worlds is facilitated through Sincerity's possession experience. Realities are permeable and overlap with each other. Sincerity's narrative reveals an entanglement of beliefs across Khasi communities about the various non-humans in Khasi ontology. The narrative immediately establishes the supernatural Khasi ontology with the particular narration techniques used by the teller. In her account, the legend genre is strongly recalled in the positioning of the teller as the source of narrative authenticity. The event is told as true with authority stemming from the teller's experience of the supernatural. The element of fear towards the non-human encounters is remarkably absent in this narrative, which could be because my interlocutor had already written a pamphlet and printed it on this same topic. I refer to Ülo Valk's 2015 article, where he discusses that in Estonian legends about the devil, the fictionalisation through the process of writing decontextu-

40 Kupli is believed to be the greatest River Goddess in Pnar belief. In this narrative, the gender of Kupli is male.

alised them from demonised experience narratives, thus depriving them of their ability to instil fear (Valk 2015). For Sincerity Phanbuh, the writing process could have facilitated a different kind of cognitive processing where she “came to terms” with her condition. The initial fear and confusion she felt was resolved when she shifted her “felt” experience into a written medium. As she recounts elsewhere, she does not practice healing anymore because she has broken several taboos associated with being a healer that the divinities had established for her.

Frames of interpretation: Fear, Christianity, and indigenous narratives

Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, had an urban population of 143,229 in 2011.⁴¹ In the greater framework of Northeast India, Shillong is the centre for education because of the well-known institutions run by missionaries. Therefore, people from other parts of the Northeast travel to Shillong, which results in the population becoming multicultural and more cosmopolitan. The outcome of this conflation of ethnicities results in a sense of uncertainty in the modern, urban environment. Christianity has now almost completely replaced the traditional Khasi religion, but Khasi folk practices have undergone “discursive shifts”.⁴² Belief is now expressed not through traditional frames but from Christianised interpretations and worldviews. Such shifts reveal the tendency of members of the Khasi society to maintain the hierarchies within the in-group.

Returning to my initial question on how generic devices expressed in the language used in the narratives shape relations between human and non-humans, we can conclude that firstly, what comes through is the continuity of realities: from the mundane “human” reality where non-humans also exist, to the liminal ontologies where humans, through the intercession of non-humans, traverse into alternate non-human realities inhabited by *puri* and other entities. Realities do not have a sharp boundary, but become entangled and within these entangled human and spirit ontologies, encounters with the non-human are played out. The second point is that while in the narratives themselves fear and its lack are not overtly expressed, innate, culturally conditioned responses to these phenomena as well as their experience is not something that is desirable. When they occur, when realities are entangled, the help of ritual specialists, pastors or exorcist priests is sought in light of the possible

41 Census of India, 2011.

42 Ülo Valk uses this term to discuss how discursive shifts in legends led from their demonisation to their consequent fictionalisation (Valk 2015).

consequences that such entanglements entail. The narratives of such events then are seen as special; although each experience is unique, the responses always involve fear as the underlying emotion. Verbal expressions that indicate this, as I have found during the two fieldwork cases, are the dramatic lowering of the volume of speech during the interviews. In the third instance it was the refusal of my interlocutor to talk about her relationship with the Presbyterian Church. Silence (on a given topic) becomes a genre-orientated component of speech that may, in context, be interpreted to indicate fear of further stigmatisation by the Church.

These narratives all exist in the context of Christianity, and I see this as the new framework for traditional embedded beliefs to find manifestation. Demonisation and the alterity of the non-humans is a necessary process for Christianity to maintain its authority in the Khasi religious imagination. And fear of the “other” effectively creates boundaries between acceptance and marginalisation. Fear as the central emotion implicit in supernatural encounters and expressed through verbal speech genres connected with its performance aspect – such as the clenching of hands and the pursing of lips during the narration of these experience stories – indicates anxiety as the performance of fear. Fear at the experiential level exists within the cognitive process that is then performed as anxiety, which is revealed during the telling of narratives. This is why I use the genre theory of folklore in order to understand the creative expression of fear, because in the folklore of fear, fear is spoken / performed, as well as being a response mechanism embedded in the minute details of the telling of the story.

In the first narrative, it was only through the intercession of the “exorcist priest” that the boy was healed. In Catholic canon law, exorcism can only be sanctioned by the local Bishop after a thorough medical examination to rule out mental illness. But the illness category of “mental illness” does not exist in the traditional Khasi ontology. Madness only exists as a consequence of the intervention of non-human entities on the human body. Which is one of the reasons why, as in Case Study II, Riti and her family were not fully convinced that the affliction within her family was “mental illness”, as is understood in Western medicine today. Fear as an articulated emotion was expressed in the genre of “whispered speech” when Riti asked me about a traditional ritual healer, because she was so frightened that the neighbours would overhear.

To return to the illness motif, in the urban city centre of Shillong, as a result of the wide influence of Western ideas, including Christianity, “mental illness” as a special category of sicknesses is slowly becoming accepted. But the resolution of illness only occurred, as was narrated by Riti to me, by the intervention of the ritual performance. The same was true for the resolution to Meideng’s second son’s possession. Only traditional ritual performers and in

the new social frame, Christianity, “exorcist priests”⁴³ are able to rid affected people of afflictions such as spirit-induced illness. Thus illness as catalyst is a category in which a multiplicity of genres in narrative are expressed in a dense environment of belief.

Furthermore, Catholic priests who perform exorcisms do not follow a strict pattern of ritual. In the interview with Father Alfred, who cured Meideng’s second son in Mawlaingut in January 2017, he (Father Alfred) told me that he is “possessed by the Holy Spirit” and his hand gets possessed with an unknown power during the ritual. He does not know what words he speaks while talking with the possessed because the words do not come from him. He told me that the power of the Holy Spirit works in him. The new frame, of being “possessed by the Holy Spirit” may be interpreted to be another shift from the older modes of using guardian spirits of place or other Khasi divinities. This reveals the accommodation of Catholicism to alternative experiences by its members. On the other hand, the fear that Riti reveals when asking me to help her get rid of the possession experience of her sisters, leads to a disconnect with the traditional ontology that – rather than eradicating supernatural experiences of Presbyterians – ascribes greater fear and authority to Satan, whose figure is then conflated with all Khasi divinities. As was shown in the narratives described above, the emotion of fear was expressed very differently: using special word markers (like *ksuid* instead of *puri*), voice, body gestures for expressing fear of the water spirits or even of the Christian community – or even the lack of “fear markers” at all. Moreover the relationship between humans and non-humans was not reduced to the emotion of fear alone – the narratives provided many links to other emotions as well: love, grief, loss, distancing from the narratives (in order to minimise the impact of trauma that possession by a water spirit has). In sum, these three narratives took us to the water spirits in the Khasi liminal ontology and helped provide an insight into many different aspects of the folkloristics of religion and emotion, as well as opening up the possibilities of looking at these narratives from different research perspectives.

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43 These priests do not necessarily follow the traditional Catholic norms for exorcism.

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When Fearful Ghosts are Married in Tulunadu

Marine Carrin

Abstract

In Tulunadu those who meet a violent death fighting for a just cause may become demi-gods, or *bhūtas*. Here, death is a kind of apotheosis, where those who fought against injustice become divine figures after death, receiving a cult in a shrine. Quite different is the story of those who simply experienced a violent death before they even managed to get married. They return as ghosts, *pretas*, and their kin suffer from their absence, but still fear the *pretas* and try to appease them by all available means. The paradox is that when *pretas* manifest themselves their unwanted presence is frightening, while at the same time their absence is experienced as grief. This creates a kind of double bind, which villagers may try to resolve by celebrating the marriage of ghosts, enabling their deceased siblings to marry. This marriage induces the families of bride and bridegroom to unite in their grief, while trying to appease the young ghosts who torment them. This ritual, often held secretly, was documented by a photographer from the fisherman caste who had himself experienced similar fear when his brother-in-law, still a bachelor, committed suicide. The paper reflects on the fear he experienced, wondering if the ritual could really appease the kin.

Keywords: Tulunadu, *pretas*, fear, ritual, ghost marriage, death

Introduction

One afternoon in February 2016, I visited Manu and his wife, who live near the seashore in the village of Yermal on the coast of South Kanara. Manu belongs to the fishing (Mogaveera) community, though he never practiced the ancestral occupation of his caste but became a photographer. Passionate about theatre, Manu has published an excellent book in Kannada on Yakshagana, the local theatre, whose heroes are gods and demons.

Marine Carrin, Center for Social Anthropology, University Toulouse Jean Jaurès, Toulouse, France; marinecarrin@hotmail.fr. My warm thanks go to Mr M. Kunder who has kindly allowed me to use his photographs of the ceremony in this article.

When I rang the bell of their house, Manu and his wife Sushila opened the door, greeted me, and introduced me to their *mami*,¹ Sushila's elderly mother. This thin lady seemed very sad, and guessing my thoughts, Manu explained: "Amma is not well, she has lost her son!" Then he invited me to sit down, while Sushila went to the kitchen to prepare tea. The sitting room is comfortable and decorated with books and trophies that Manu has won for his photography exhibitions as well as for his performances of Talemaddale² – he is known in the region for his capacity to sing the epic poems (*pāḍḍana*) all through the night. Manu has a good command of Hindi, which allows me to converse with him, though he always tries to teach me some Tulu, especially when Hindi does not convey quite the same idea. As I ask him whether he has performed recently – he usually rehearses the Talemaddale programme every Tuesday with his friends – he smiles: "I have been busy, I went to the North of the district, I went to pray to Śani, Saturn, the planet which has the most malefic influence over our lives." Having heard of the cult of Śani, which today attracts more and more devotees in different states of India, I wondered why Manu had become a devotee of this terrible god, who is particularly feared in South India.

Who is Śani?

Śani is a star – Saturn – but also a God, explains Manu, like Śankar, who is the sun but also the God Shiva. He explains that Śani is associated with evil and old age, and that he limps but has a terrible eye (*krūr dr̥ṣṭi*) that can strike people with paralysis and other afflictions. Śani is well known in Vedic and Puranic texts. Guenzi (2004–2005) retraces the mythical genealogy of the god. Śani was born from the Sun and the Shadow, and he is the younger brother of Yama, god of death. Known as the most malevolent and inauspicious of the planets, Śani is included in the group of the nine planetary deities (*navagraha*), which also comprises Sūrya, the Sun, Chandra, the moon, Maṅgala (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Bṛhaspati (Jupiter) and Śukra (Venus), as well as Rāhu and Ketu. Guenzi relates the cult of Śani to the Pāla period (8th to 12th century) in Bihar, though there is mention of it in very old texts such as the Atharvaveda. The cult of Śani is now present in many states of India, and his temples are

1 All terms cited are Tulu, but note that some Kannada, Sanskrit or even Hindi terms are used by Tulu speakers. The transcription of the Tulu terms follows U. P. Upadhyaya (1988–1997): *Tulu Lexicon*, 5 Volumes, Udipi: Rashtrakavi Govind Pai Samshodhana Kendra. The transcription of Sanskrit terms follows L. Nitti / L. Renou (1987): *Dictionnaire Sanskrit Français*, Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Jean Maisonneuve. Finally, the transcription of Hindi terms follows N. Balbir / J. K. Balbir (1993), *Hindi français dictionnaire général*, Paris: L'Asiatheque.

2 During the Talemaddale performance, the devotees sing praise songs to different *bhūtas* and Hindu gods. They may dialogue with each other as the deities are supposed to do. The repertoire is based on religious poetry.

visited by local devotees as well as by pilgrims from other regions, come to pacify the anger of the god. The recent development of the cult of Śani in different regions of India foregrounds the importance of astrology. As Guenzi (2013) shows, to consult an astrologer is a current practice through which the clients seek a solution to immediate problems: When and whom to marry? Which profession to choose? Where to build one's house? Astrology as a science is practiced by Brahmins and taught in prestigious universities such as Benares Hindu University, for an audience of urban elites.³ But in rural India, non-Brahmin astrologers also offer astrological counselling: the diviner engages the client in a communicative interaction where problems can be explored and clarified, but he may also use the dialogue to propose to the client ameliorative patterns of thought and behaviour to neutralise the negative influence of certain planets as well as the negative effects of a bad karma resulting from sins committed in past existences (Pugh 1983, Avdeeff 2011).

In South Kanara, Śani has long been worshipped in the temple of the nine planets in Udyavara, where the priest warns the pilgrims about the malevolent gaze of the god. Most astrologers and healers in South Kanara relate Śani to negative *doṣa*, or inauspicious signs. I knew there were several shrines dedicated to Śani between Mangalore and Yermal, where the priest (*pātri*) offers puja but does not provide *darśan*.⁴ But in the North of the district, explains Manu, there are three shrines at Kundapur, Kota and Koteshwara, where Śani gives his blessing through a possessed priest (*pātri*) and through his devotees. In Kundapur, one can experience darśan every Saturday, from 2 to 4 pm. People ask questions (*kanike*) like in the shrines dedicated to the Goddesses.⁵ Perhaps to justify his interest in the cult, my friend added that Śani puja is connected to the folk theatre Yakshagana in some ways, “[...] in the way of singing, since Śani likes the voice effects we do in Talemaddale, where everything depends on the voice, since there is no acting and no costumes.”

In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a poet, Chinmaya Das, in Maharashtra who compiled poems to be sung in praise of Śani. Manu shows me the book (45th edition in 1978) with an image of Śani on the cover, sitting on his vehicle, a crow. Then he returns to the ritual. “In Kundapur, the priest is a Mogaveera and people offer black clothes to the god, since he is connected with evil and death, but we take *prasād* [the remains of the god's food].” I am surprised at this last statement, but my friend continues: “Some devotees address their prayers to the terrible form (*ūgra*) of Śani.” With his lower right hand, the god holds a trident (*triśūl*) like Śiva, while a snake is coiled around his upper right arm. In his upper left arm he holds an arrow. The lower left

3 Guenzi (2013) shows how astrology, a Sanskrit tradition between science and religion, is adapted and reinterpreted in contemporary India to answer the questions raised by the transformations of Indian society.

4 *Darśan* means “vision” but in South Kanara, it refers to the revelation of the deity through possession.

5 For further reading see e.g. Carrin 1999.

arm is held in the peaceful (*śānti*) sign – palm flat outwards, fingers up. But, says Manu: “I am not a *mantravādī* [astrologer and magician]. I even fear the peaceful form of Śani, though some Brahmins prefer to offer the homage of the flame (*ārti*) and ghee to a peaceful image of the god [to pacify him]. In his *ūgra* form, Śani sits on a crow. The bird links the god to death, since the mourners at funerals have to feed some grains of rice to the crows before sharing the funeral meal.” Then, Manu comments on the ritual offered to Śani in Kundapur: “When the priests and devotees sing the Śanideva Mahātmya during a whole night, the tune is like in Talemaddale, and fifteen singers perform the twenty roles. Astrologers and Ayurvedic doctors in the region stress that Śani influences the mental equilibrium of people, and most of their clients are afraid. In Kundapur, the *pātri* gets possessed by Śani and provides *darśan*, then they offer one cucumber to the god, the two halves of which are sprinkled with red powder (*kumkum*), to make it look as if it was blood.”

Fear and sorrow

A few months after his brother-in-law’s death, Manu offered a big *preta* puja in his house – he did the puja to Śani himself with his wife and they did not call any Brahmin. They sacrificed a cucumber to remove *dośa* and *dukh* – inauspiciousness and sadness. Nobody was possessed, but many people came and prayed.

“When Saturn dominates, says the astrologer, the country is full of disasters. Then we fear any event.” Sushila told me that they are still seven siblings in her family, but originally they were eight, and her mother is sad. Here, Manu interrupted her, saying it is not good to talk about *dukh* and *dośa*. This remark reminded us that after such a tragedy, people fear other inauspicious events and they particularly fear the *pretas*, the ghosts who feel lonely in the other world and come back to torment their kin. Those who have suffered a violent death at a premature age are likely to become ghosts since they have been unable to fulfil their lives, to marry and to have children. These roaming souls are frustrated since their premature death seems to defy the natural order of things, time, seasons, and the cycle of life and death. In most Asian societies, the belief in ghosts is well known (Baptandier 2001), but we know little about the articulation of feelings and rituals,⁶ or rather, we do not always clearly understand the extent to which such ritual works in the case of a

6 There is a rich literature on the anthropology of emotions (e.g. Lutz / Abu-Lughod 1990), but not on the relationship between feelings and ritual. Literature on ritual seldom deals with emotions, even if we concede that ritual action works not only at the level of meaning and performance of the ritual but also emotionally for the participants. In this regard, phenomenology insists that any attempt at objectivity is always mediated by the context and personalities within which it is framed. Thus Stoller (2017) shows how a serious sickness allows him to develop another level of understanding of Songhay rituals.

tragic event, or an unpredicted death. When such an event strikes a family, people fear the invisible, but their fear also seems volatile, it comes and goes. Brahmanical thought distinguishes the *pitr*, the deceased who are ritually complete, from the *preta* who died a violent death, an inauspicious event that prevents them from receiving complete funeral rites. This is why the *preta* come back to torment their relatives (e.g. Tarabout 2001).

Sushila tells me that both she and Manu were born under the sign of Śani. “We should not have married,” she says, smiling, “but love was stronger than our doubts: it was a love marriage.” She refuses to be tied by a chain of malediction, stressing that the solidarity of the family is most important in the case of grief. “Love (*prem*) should be stronger than fear (*bhaya*),” she adds. She says that she is glad she can be with her mother in these difficult times, and that also her sister is not far: she lives in Manipal with her husband and they have two children. Her husband is a body-builder and has opened a fitness centre in Manipal that attracts a lot of students.

The suicide

I felt like asking Manu how he interpreted his brother-in-law’s death. But I hesitated to raise the point in the presence of the deceased’s mother. After a while, Sushila took her mother to visit a neighbour. Then Manu remarked: “I have not really answered your question – why I became a devotee of Śani. It was after my brother-in-law’s suicide.” Then he told me: “My brother-in-law was a computer engineer in Bangaluru, he was thirty-two, and seemed to be a successful fellow. I did not know him very well but I know that my mother-in-law, as well as his sisters, were proud of him.” I asked whether his brother-in-law was married. “No, he was a bachelor, though he could have got a good match. But he was often depressed and then, probably, he decided to hang himself on the ventilator of his room. The police called us, saying he did not leave any letter to explain his desperate gesture. [...] A post-mortem was conducted, and he was cremated in Bangaluru.” Then Manu added: “There was no obvious reason, so I thought of Śani, who may inspire negative feelings and push people to commit the most insane acts.”

For my friend, it seemed clear that the suicide of his brother-in-law had been caused by an inauspicious planetary influence, an influence you can neutralise only through fasting and prayers to Śani. It was then that Manu showed me the photographs of the ritual he had held in his house a few months earlier, to appease the planet god. He had invited a *mantravādī* to perform the offering of ghee in the sacred fire. One point was still obscure to me: had the as-

trologer concluded that the suicide had become a *preta*? And who was to be feared, the ghost or Śani himself, the terrible Saturn?

I felt it was not proper to ask my friend whether or not he believed in *pretas* since this belief is very common in Tulunadu. And then, I was convinced that belief was not really the question; rather it was important to know what was to be feared. I asked Manu, cautiously, why he did not consult the priests of the Navagraha shrine in Udyavara, famous in the region for warding off evil influences. I had been to Udyavara myself with Jivan, a Billava lawyer whose neighbour had committed suicide after going bankrupt. Manu did not answer directly, but I was made to understand that he did not want to his fear to become common knowledge, since everybody around the town of Udupi knows him and be aware if he visited Udyavara, which is nearby. Going to a distant Śani shrine, once a month, seemed a better strategy. To convince me, Manu showed me a short film he had made, as he could not take me to this shrine, where women are not allowed. The reason for this ban was not stated, but of course, Śani himself was a victim of the curse of a female, the goddess Pārvatī. She had good reasons, however, to make Śani limp, since his terrible gaze had made her son Ganesh's head fall off (Guenzi 2005: 411).⁷ But Manu did not comment on this episode, and I realised that he deemed it too dangerous to speak of the mythic punishment inflicted to the god, a punishment he could evoke only in chanting during the Talemaddale.

The film showed Manu and a few other devotees singing prayers to Śani all night, while men possessed by *pretas* were jumping and snarling around them. This lasted a few hours, until the main performer, Manu, managed to mute the recalcitrant ghosts. I understood, then, that Manu's voice was able to appease the ghosts. Though the male devotees of Śani drink alcohol and use obscenities in some shrines, this is not done in Kundapur. Probably, this practice is related to the secret cult of the Ūgra Śani, a fierce form of the god not worshipped in the Kundapur temple.

The days that followed persuaded me, however, that Manu, though jovial as usual, had been deeply affected by "the touch of Śani" as he called it. He was still joking with his wife but his fear was palpable. Nevertheless, he was called to film various festivities, and continued working with his usual enthusiasm.

7 There are different stories telling how Ganapati got his elephant head. The version quoted by Guenzi (2005) in the context of the Śani cult was also the one told to me by my informants.

Bhūtas and *pretas* in Tulunadu

A few days later, I met Manu and asked him what he knew about ghosts. He told me that, very often, *pretas* are young men who die unmarried or young women – called *curēl* – who die in childbirth. Such figures are feared all over India, but I wanted to understand what was special about them in Tulunadu, where suicide is not necessarily condemned, and where victims may become heroic figures for having experienced a violent but glorious death, allowing them to become *bhūtas* or demi-gods.

A particular political order⁸ had developed in the region, characterised by Jain kings and Bunt chiefs who were devotees of the royal *bhūtas*. But the latter also represent a moral order, which corresponds to the political, since the justice of the *bhūtas* concerns everybody. Even non-Tulu such as the Konkani speakers may discover that they must offer a cult to *bhūtas* attached to their land (Tambs-Lyche 2011). Otherwise, the deities will torment them and send illness and other evils. Nowadays, the old chiefdoms are still known, and find their expression in the *bhūta* cult.

The *bhūtas* include some three hundred demi-gods in Tulunadu. Some of them have a human origin, others stem from a mythic birth or have an animal form (Carrin 1999). The *bhūtas* of human origin fought, during their lives, against the injustice of the landlords, fighting for a noble cause until they decided to leave the world. Such dramatic events are reflected in a number of epics in Tulu, known as *pāḍḍanas*.⁹ They present the narrative frame of the possession ritual (*kola*), which lasts at least one full night and involves a possession séance where low-caste mediums impersonate the different deities. These poems also describe the labour of the subaltern castes, like the Billavas, who used to cultivate rice and areca nuts in the fields of their landlords.

Bhūtas, then, are the spirits of past heroes or heroines who often died a violent death (Claus 1979, Carrin 2017). They are frightening and destructive figures, associated with the wilderness, whom only the just have no need to fear. These *bhūtas* sit in a court of justice in the other world, but they come back periodically and take possession of two kinds of mediums. The first mediums are dancers who enact the previous life of the *bhūtas* while the epic

8 Under the patronage of small kingdoms, *bhūta* worship developed into an organised system. The *rājan-daivas* or royal *bhūtas*, who are celebrated during the *nēma*, a prestigious ritual, are still associated with the coronation ceremony of the local kings. The Bunts act as patrons of the rituals, and ask the *bhūta*, through a low-caste medium, if he is satisfied with the state of his domain. The answers of the deity should contain divine justice beyond any social considerations. The medium who voices the *bhūta*'s answer may express the concerns of the oppressed castes and demand justice from the dominant Bunt (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2003).

9 From *pardū*, which means “sung”. This refers to a singer who sings the epic during the performance of rituals dedicated to the *bhūtas*.

poem is sung. The second kind of medium, the *darśan pātri*,¹⁰ reveals the “vision” of the deity. Death is often described as a passage from this world of manifestation (*jōga*) to the world of *māyā*, which means the “non-manifest” (Nichter 1979). Suicide implies leaving this world of illusion and injustice. It is a recurrent motive in the *bhūta* epics, where one twin commits suicide to join his brother or sister who has been killed. Thus twins share the same destiny after death and represent a superior justice that is true (*satyā*) (Carrin 1999, 2017).

The idea of suicide has been important in the region since the thirteenth century, when Jain men or women practised fasting until death. Suicide is a voluntary and meritorious act (Dikshit 1967). But today, suicide seems also to be an answer to despair. Some suicides have trivial causes, such as when fishermen choose to die in the sea because they cannot repay loans taken to buy a boat. Other cases are ambiguous, as Manu knows very well, since he often looks at the rock inhabited by Bobbarya, the *bhūta* of the Mogaveera caste, who protects the souls of the suicides as well as those lost at sea, and helps them find the land of the dead. Every year, during the annual ritual (*bhūta kola*) of Bobbarya, a medium is questioned by devotees who have lost a relative at sea and wonder whether or not he committed suicide, since he may then become a dangerous ghost (Carrin 2007).

“We mourn the dead,” repeats Manu, “but they are not supposed to come back.” To stress this point, my friend talks about *pretas*. Unlike the heroic dead who become *bhūtas*, *pretas* are ordinary dead, frustrated since they were deprived of a marital life and have failed to accomplish their destiny. While heroic dead such as the twin brothers Koti and Chennaya¹¹ are worshipped in shrines and protect the members of their caste, *pretas* are feared. Young men and women in particular suffer the attacks of *pretas*, who burden them with headaches, fevers and other illnesses. One often hears a *preta* pelting stones on the roof of a house, causing fear among those who live there. They will then go to a shrine to consult a *mantravādī* exorcist. Girls who refuse to marry the boy chosen by their family are often thought to be possessed by a ghost and taken to one of the many shrines of Babu, a *bhūta* who protects the subaltern communities, to exorcise the ghost (Carrin 2009). During exorcism, *pretas* speak a filthy language, abusing their victims.

10 The term *darśan*, here, refers to the divine vision of the *bhūta* that the medium conveys to the devotees.

11 The Billavas were the traditional healers of the Tulu kings. Koti and Chennaya’s mother knew the medicinal plants and succeeded in curing the chief when the latter’s life was in danger. He promised her that he would donate land to her offspring. The twin brothers succeeded in cultivating lands but were killed by treachery during a war. They became *bhūtas* after their heroic death, which has come to symbolise the struggle of the Billava caste and other subaltern communities (Carrin 2016).

Death ceremony (*saavu*)

Reflecting on the relationship between the dead and the living, death makes us experience a terrible loss, an absence that cannot be compensated, and this feeling makes us realise our own finitude. Grief may be expressed through different cultural idioms, but the return of the dead in the form of *pretas*, it seems, produces fear, since the apparition of the *preta* seems to contradict the very logic of the events that follow death – the death rituals and the mourning. In some cases, death has not even been proven, as in the story of another fisherman, Ganesh, whose sister disappeared in a market, eleven years earlier. She was never found. Ganesh has searched for his sister in every possible way, but his wife claims to be menaced by her sister-in-law's *preta*, who, she says, wants to strangle her. These attacks are so frequent that Ganesh's wife has obliged her husband to leave their home on the seashore, an isolated place which might favour the coming of the ghost. In this case, the funeral could not be performed because the sister's death could not be proven, and this has been a major source of anxiety (Carrin 2009).

In the Mogaveera community they formerly used to bury their dead. Today, they bring rice and put it at the head and feet of the deceased, while they keep two halves of coconut on a seat like a throne (*gaddi*) to symbolise the presence of the deceased. The head of the family fells a mango tree to make a pyre (*kaṭṭa guruni*), and a Madhivala – washerman – will act as priest. A temporary structure to carry the body, known as a *chatta*, is made of bamboo. They wrap the dead body with banana leaves and tie it with ropes. Then the main mourner's son or nephew takes the body to the courtyard, helped by male relatives. They mix coconut and turmeric powder and apply it to the corpse; then relatives pour water over it. Among upper castes, they offer to the dead a kind of temporary house, a structure made of bamboo with several floors, which allude to the different stages crossed by the deceased in the afterworld. In all communities, they generally perform the *sūtaka* purification ritual after 11 days. This ritual may include the personification of death in the shape of an old woman with a black face who acts as a medium and informs the mourners of the progression of the deceased into the other world. As a final death rite, the family members purify themselves and have a meal.



Figure 1: A funeral structure for a prestigious dead (M. Kunder, 2016)



Figure 2: The funeral procession for a prestigious dead (M. Kunder, 2016)



Figure 3: Koti and Chennaya dance for the dead and Death walks on the side (M. Kunder, 2016)

How to deal with *pretas*?

But even if all rituals have been performed, *pretas* may come back and cause trouble. During *amavāsi*, the dark moon, and *ṣṛnīmā*, the full moon, *pretas* may return. In case of repeated attacks by a *preta*, as when a house is haunted, one must call a *mantravādī*. First, the exorcist¹² has to do a ritual to “bind” (*bhāndan*) and capture the *preta*. He ties a thread, on which he chants spells, around the persons suffering from affliction. The latter are tied together under the same spell, demanding their cure, then they are set free. The thread cannot be cut but must be burnt. When the exorcist burns the thread the patients get relief. He may also make a round of the house with a chicken, to catch the *mata* (a maleficent agent), and then he sucks the chicken’s blood. Other techniques consist in transferring the *preta* into a wooden doll (*bombi*) and throwing it away in the jungle (Carrin 2008).¹³

Most people call a *mantravādī* to drive away a *preta*, but some villagers say they do not believe in exorcists, they trust only their own faith. They told me

12 Brahmins expel a *preta* during the rituals for the dead when they send the *preta* to Vaikuṅṭa, the abode of the god Viṣṇu. In Barakuru and some other places, Brahmins sometimes make a human figure and call the *preta* to inhabit the figure they finally destroy.

13 This technique is also used in shrines where they perform exorcisms for several afflicted families at a time, and the *mantravādīs* order the wooden dolls from a carpenter (Carrin 2008).

that *pretas* torment the living because they are both absent and present, producing a logical inconsistency which destabilises humans, who “spend their time defending their world as a world of certitude”, as Manu put it. While most victims of *pretas* tend to consult exorcists or perform particular rituals, others prefer to change their lives and adopt new religious values and practices so as to better confront the *preta*. This is why Manu has become a devotee of Śani, and why Ganesh has decided to join the Hare Krishna movement and engage himself in social work: he has founded a matrimonial agency for the disabled.

When *pretas* are married

In some cases, *pretas* come back and threaten their own siblings, particularly when the latter reach puberty. This is a source of fear. One day, as Manu came to our home, he seemed to be worried and wanted to talk. I asked him what had happened. He told me he had gone to document a special marriage, a marriage of ghosts (*preta maduve*). Extracting some photos from a file he said: “Didi, it was very sad, they tried to make a marriage but there was too much *dukh*.”

The situation reminded me of the work of Pinney (2013), which shows how fully photography has been absorbed into the traditions of marriage, death and religion in India. Such social uses of photographs, like keeping family albums to document important events, have become utterly routine, allowing the photographer to become a witness able to access different spheres of intimacy.

Then Manu explained that the parents of the boy Arun, who was one year and three months old when he died in a pond, had contacted the parents of the girl Deshma, who died when she was six from an incurable disease. The return of the dead boy was frightening his mother, and everybody knew his ghost had been making noise in the night. His attacks had become more frequent now that his younger brother was reaching his twenties, and approaching the age of marriage. But, as everybody knows, elder siblings should be married first. The parents consulted an astrologer (*jyotiś*),¹⁴ who recommended a *preta* marriage for the deceased elder boy.

A Pambada¹⁵ medium was then called to make a drawing of white flour showing the children as bride and groom. From the higher caste among the mediums, he was in charge of “creating” this ritual: in this context of afflic-

14 The *jyotiś* consults the almanac and calculates the astrological chart of his client. If he sees any bad sign (*dośa*), he sends his client to a *mantravādī*.

15 There are three castes of professional mediums: the Pambada and the Paravas are generally possessed by royal *bhūtas* while the Nalke, who are considered inferior, impersonate ordinary deities (Carrin1999).

tion, the ritual should be adapted to the situation of the bereaved family. The parents brought clothes and jasmine flowers for the girl. The boy was symbolised by a shirt and the girl by flowers, and these effigies were meant to invite the *pretas* to descend into the drawing. The marriage was celebrated in the Enade *garōdi*,¹⁶ on the coast near the town of Mulki, an important Billava shrine, dedicated to the twin *bhūtas* Koti and Chennaya, the champions of the Billava caste (Carrin 2016).

To celebrate the *preta* marriage in this *garōdi* meant that the ghosts were placed under the protection of Koti and Chennaya, which, from a Billava point of view, is the safest way to appease them. Manu told me, however, that the atmosphere was tense during the ceremony, since the families hardly knew each other and were united only by their common affliction. The priest took a golden necklace given by the girl's parents, while the parents of the boy had paid the ritual fees (*dakṣiṇā*). To establish the union, the parents of the couple joined their hands and received the ablution of sacred water, meant for bride and groom, from the priest of the *garōdi*. From a ritual point of view, the marriage of the *pretas* combines elements of marriage (when, for example, the parents join hands) and of funeral rites (such as the old woman clad in black and the funeral meal), elements which vary, however, according to the community and the means of the family.

The marriage of the *pretas*, a ritual solution?

The idea to marry the *pretas* reminds us of Bloch and Parry's (1999:7) assertion that death is often associated with a renewal of fertility. Ghosts have to be married in order to allow their living siblings to marry and procreate, since the continuity of the lineage is important not only for the bereaved families, but for the reproduction of the social order. The ritual associates fertility with sexuality since the fertility of the real sibling seems to be saved by the eventual sexuality of the *pretas*. Furthermore, the idea of marriage represents here a "life theme" expressed in mortuary rituals (Hutchington / Metcalf 1979).¹⁷

As we have seen, the marriage of the *pretas* seems to offer a ritual solution for the bereaved families. But Manu felt that the ritual had not really worked to appease the *pretas*, since at one moment, the mother of the dead boy had started shaking. Sadananda, the *pātri*, poured sacred water on her head and murmured some mantras.

16 All Billavas seem to be engaged in reviving the cult of their *bhūtas*, worshipped in shrines known as *garōdis*, which were also gymnasiums where Billavas used to practise martial arts. Today, Billavas celebrate their rites of passage in the *garōdis*, which they consider as their community temples.

17 This reminds us of the parallel that Hertz (1920) noted between death and other rites of passage.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 4: The *mantravādī* adorns the images of the dead children with Jasmine flowers

Figure 5: The *mantravādī* puts the shirt of the bridegroom on the image

Figure 6: Water is poured over the hands of the bride's and bridegroom's parents to celebrate the marriage

Figure 7: The family prays with the *mantravādī*

Source: M. Kunder, 2016

Manu was impressed by the sadness of the children's kin, which he observed while photographing them for the "marriage album". The girl's grandmother could not compose her face, but kept bursting into tears. Manu felt his work as a photographer was in vain, as he could not prevent himself from thinking of his own son, Arjun, now seventeen. Would his brother-in-law's suicide prevent the marriage of his son? Would his *preta* attack his sister's son? He remembered that the sister of the suicide had said that her husband, the body-builder, did not fear the *pretas*. But nobody was convinced by this, since ghosts have their ways and may well compromise a good business, such as the fitness centre.

Manu felt he could keep the *preta* away by praying to Śani every month. He also believed in the strength of devotion (*bhakti*) as the only way to escape malicious planetary influence. Despite this conviction, however, he says, "whatever we do, may turn otherwise." "I was supposed to make a marriage album," he said, "and it became a gallery of dead portraits. [...] But we have no other alternative, we have to struggle against our fear and prayer is the only way."

In contrast to the Billava family, Ganesh still refused to believe that his sister was dead, though his wife protested that she saw the *preta* very often. Ganesh had refused the services of an exorcist since this would mean he had given up any hope of finding his sister again. Whenever his wife told him about his sister's ghost, he seemed relieved, as if this phantom presence was better than complete absence. Ganesh did not fear the ghost since he refused to accept his sister's death and he interpreted his wife's complaint rather as if his sister's spirit was trying to send him a message (Carrin 2009). "When *pretas* send us signals we know they think of us", says Manu, "and we can appease them by our prayers and our engagement."

Manu and Ganesh both preferred to follow their own convictions, rather than to resort to exorcists. They felt strong, while the parents who had wanted to marry their dead children had to rely on exorcists since they could not cope with their grief. I understood that they feared for their living children, since the young have no defence against *pretas*.

The idea of marrying the two *pretas* seems to be spreading, but it is not found among the higher castes. The ritual would seem to imply an effort to pacify the *pretas*. But in the case described, the families may have wanted to do too much, as death and marriage do not easily combine. Manu, the pho-

tographer whose brother-in-law committed suicide, has experienced a similar fear to that of the bereaved families. This parallel destiny allows him to share their emotions even if he chooses to avoid the *mantravādīs* and instead become a devotee of the god Śani.

The idea of an album of photos for the *preta* marriage was meant to render it similar to a real marriage – even if everybody knew that could not be. As Manu put it, “when I started to photograph the kin one by one, I understood I was making a gallery of dead portraits.” And, he added: “How can one photograph the *pretas*, since the symbols which represent them also show the impossibility of their presence?”

Several important contributions have been made to our theoretical understanding of ritual (e.g. Bell 1992, Humphrey / Laidlaw 1993). One of the main problems lies in relating the insights derived from a textual approach (Geertz 2008, Clifford / Marcus 1986) to those stemming from performance theory (Schieffelin 1985). These approaches, I feel, may not really be contradictory; the real challenge lies in defining more precisely the relationship between the structure of the ritual and its innovation and strategic use. The relation cannot be reduced to script and performance nor to text and inscription, since form and content continuously interact in a dialectical manner (Howe 2000). Howe argues that “[...] most rituals are staged to achieve an end and that there is always something at stake in performance” (ibid.: 67). He also shows that rituals are often dangerous because they establish contact with unpredictable forces.

In our example, the *mantravādī* has designed a ritual for the bereaved families himself, though it seems that older people in the region have heard of such rituals. In another context we have suggested that the core of a ritual lies in its syntax (Carrin / Tambs-Lyche 2003). Thus the core of the ritual we are dealing with here mirrors the sequence of the rite of marriage, with the painted images and the parents alternatively standing in for the couple that is to be married. Yet since the actual partners are ghosts, at once present and absent, the belief in the future appeasement of the deceased, a belief that is solicited from the participants – who are also mourners – may be hard for them to realise.

In this marriage of *pretas*, it seems impossible to detach the death, which has preceded and motivated the ritual, from the ritual itself. Since the participants have never seen such a ritual before, they are guided only by the *mantravādī*, who has conceived the ritual, aiming at creating a link between the parents of the bereaved families who, in the ritual, stand in for the *pretas*. In such a case, the dramatic tension resulting from the unacceptable death of the children dominates the ritual. According to the photographer who talked with the mourners, it seemed that the astrologer misjudged the mood of those as-

sembled – the two bereaved families – and failed to adjust his performance in light of the passivity of the audience.

This is why grief and fear encompass the event, and prevent the ritual from working completely. The marriage of the *pretas*, as a ritual of affliction, represents a distorted view of reality, since the participants engage in the ritual to save their living children from unwanted attacks, rather than to appease their own torments. This, probably, also explains why Manu feels more confident in taming his own fear of the god, by learning to sing the different episodes of the god's myth.

In the marriage of the *pretas*, fear experienced as sorrow (*dukh*)¹⁸ is implicitly perceived as a particular notion and is culturally encoded as such. Everybody feels that the ghosts have the power to torment their living siblings, and to prevent their marriage. One may ask why this emphasis on marriage becomes so salient. It seems that fear, here, creates the ritual devices. Since the young ghosts may prevent the marriage of their siblings, it seems logical to marry them, a ritual solution crafted by the *mantravādī*. The kind of fear we encounter here seems to belong with the subaltern communities in South Kanara, where they resort to exorcism when attacked by *preta* – whereas upper castes will call a Brahmin, who will send the ghost to Vaikuṅṭa.

Does fear belongs to specific groups? To take up this question previously raised by Humphrey (2013), let us recall that in medieval Tulunadu, fear (*bhaya*) was a positive emotion related to the place that each member of the society occupied in the hierarchical system. The landlord, generally a Bunt or a Jain, feared only his enemies of equal status and the *bhūta* of his domain,¹⁹ who would manifest his will during the annual ritual (*nēma*) offered to him (Carrin / Tambs-Lyche 2003). In this context, fear was a positive emotion linked to respect. Similarly, in the context of the epic, fear is experienced as an impulse to take action: for example, the heroes see a negative omen in the forest, then pray and decide to fight.

In South Kanara, where society is still traditional, fear is often related to hierarchy. When, for example, a low caste member approaches his previous landlord he may feel fear, though this fear is mitigated today, since low caste people know about their rights. But fishermen still experience fear not just because they brave the sea as they have always done, but also since they need to invest huge capital in boats and gear. Here, fear is manifested in anxiety, since they take financial risks.

In contrast to the fishermen, the members of the Billava community, who still cultivate rice paddies and coconut gardens, seem tied to a more tradition-

18 To express fear, Manu also used the Hindi expression *darte hein*, “they are afraid”.

19 In this case, the royal *bhūta* is considered as the real owner of the domain (*magane*) and he comes back through his medium to inspect how the lord is taking care of his domain. The *bhūta* represents divine justice.

al form of fear, where fear of the ghosts reflects anxiety about kin in a society still embedded in the extended matrilineal family. The recent change towards patrilineal inheritance, imposed by the government, complicates the issue since in many cases, nephews torment their uncles to get their share of inheritance (Rao 2010). But in a context where fearless people are heroic and become *bhūtas* after death, fear must be managed ritually, though, as Manu felt, this particular ritual might have “failed”. In fact, I was told later that the *pretas* had reappeared. The failure of the ritual may indicate, as Schieffelin (1985) notes for New Guinea, a fracture in society. But in present-day South Kanara, it seems clear that various forms of fear, linked to risk and modernity, blur the semantic field of fear. Fear becomes confounded with anxiety, opening the way for the ascendancy of risk consciousness. It is striking that many people who are wondering whether to go to work in the Emirates raise this question in the oracular shrine: “I would like to go there to earn money, but should I take that risk?”

In contrast to this hybrid form of fear, the fear of ghosts brings us back into the intimacy of the family, and the return of the loved ones as ghosts may come as a relief in certain cases. A midwife (*dai*) told me one day that she got her healing gifts from her grandmother, who died violently from a heart attack. The grandmother’s ghost used to return in her dreams and comment on her deliveries: “Here you did well, but next time, be aware of this danger, and so on. [...] In such a case, the *preta* becomes a familiar presence,” she said, “one who guides you.”

These examples suggest that there are different ways to tame one’s fear, ritual being only one of them. Individuals try to cope with ghosts in their own way, since ghosts invite them to be open to the unpredictable, as defined in a particular culture of fear.

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Thaipusam Kavadi – A Festival Helping Hindus in Mauritius Cope with Fear

Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger

Abstract

With Hindus in Mauritius as a case study, this article will show how Thaipusam Kavadi, a festival of piercing and procession of ancient Tamil origin, has become not only a modern expression of religious affiliation in diaspora, but also a way of coping with fear by trying to gain dispensation for possible religious or ethical misconduct in a time and a place where religion has become compartmentalised. To understand this development, the article gives a short introduction to the overall theme of fear, including theoretical considerations as a prism to understand the factors at play. This is followed by an introduction to Hinduism in Mauritius from a general point of view. Then, using a particular case study and participant observations as a point of departure, the article will explore how Thaipusam Kavadi is conducted and what kind of meaning the participants attribute to their participation.

Keywords: fear, piercing rituals, Hinduism, Mauritius, Thaipusam Kavadi

Introduction

Coping with fear, inauspiciousness and misfortune is often part of most lay-oriented Hindu practices and also frequently at the centre of many daily Hindu prayer rituals (*pūjās*) – for instance at the morning and evening *pūjās* at the home altar (*mandir*), where the worship of deities, gurus and forefathers generally also has a protective aspect (Fuller 2004: 224–252, Kumar 2013, Michaels 2017, Rodrigues 2011). This is evident not only in the prayers but also in the offerings; the underlying idea being that if the individual and family are in good standing with the deities, they will be protected against all kinds of inauspiciousness and evil (Falk 2006: 120–122). This is furthermore a key issue in many Hindu folk mythologies, where the emphasis is on the way in which correct conduct and devotion can prevent all kinds of malevolent powers from taking control – for instance demons, restless spirits and evil eyes, as well as angry gods and goddesses who must be given offerings and devotion to make them positively and not negatively inclined (O’Flaherty

Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, Department of the Study of Religion, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark; mf@cas.au.dk.

1980). These entities can all be categorised as external powers whose interventions may have a positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of individuals or families.

A more personal reason for fearing what will happen both in this life and in lives to come is the failure to live up to your *śva dharma* (personal *dharma* related to social position, class, age and gender) or the dharmic rules in general for being a good Hindu. In this respect, fear is connected to the theory of karma and, unlike the fear of supernatural powers mentioned above, has a wider scope because it has an impact both on life tomorrow and on future lives to come (Flood 1996: 58–67). These two perspectives are regarded as being interconnected and are just two different ways of living up to a dharmic-determined orthopraxis (“right practice”) – a keyword within the Hindu tradition that has both ritual and ethical implications (Flood 1996: 12–14). As Lipner notes, this can be seen in the Sanskrit language: the word *pāpa*, often translated as “evil” or “bad” can refer to natural evil or moral evil or to both simultaneously, while its opposition *punya* means both “merit” and being “ritually pure” (Lipner 2010: 244–245). As defined by Axel Michaels, *dharma* is life ritualised according to norms and rules (Michaels 2004: 16). This means that it can be difficult to differentiate between the ritualistic and the ethical aspects of a Hinduistic self-understanding, leading Michaels to suggest the concept of “identificatory habitus” as a key notion for the Hindu tradition – with habitus (“what is done”) being closely intertwined with *dharma* (“what to do”).

In this article, using Hindus in Mauritius as my case study,¹ I will show how identificatory habitus is subject to negotiation and how it is adjusted to suit a modern and in many ways secularised society and lifestyle also when it comes to coping with fear. This does not mean that strong signifiers of “being a good Hindu” have disappeared. Instead, they have become rationalised, compartmentalised and more individualised. Moreover, they have become more concentrated or condensed and are therefore much stronger in their expression on special occasions, even though they are almost absent in daily life. This is in line with Yves Lamberts’s understanding of religion in modernity, where religion does not disappear but is given new forms in light of a secularised society (Lamberts 1999). This is especially due to the fact that religion is a provider of meaning, but at the same time also a provider of a ritual-toolbox with instruments for coping with meaningless and with irrational feelings of fear.

1 The article is based on fieldwork done in Mauritius in the spring of 2010, again in the spring and autumn of 2016 and in the spring of 2017. The timespan between the first and the other visits has made it possible to identify possible changes internally within a certain group of Hindus, between different Hindu groups, and with regard to the formation of Hinduism as such in Mauritius, as well as changes in society at large. The fieldwork consisted of archive and text studies, participant observations and semi-structured interviews with leaders of both the different cultural organisations and board members of different temples, priests and laymen alike.

One of the strongest expressions of belief and affiliation, which involves coping with fear among Mauritian Hindus in particular, is *Thaipusam Kavadi*. This is a ten-day Tamil Hindu festival comprising fasting, piercings and processions that today, alongside *Mahāśivrātri*, is celebrated by many of the Hindus on Mauritius, regardless of their ethnolinguistic affiliation.² The strong commitment, the difficulty of participation and the strong focus on the individual's painful "offering" of his or her body seem to have particular appeal. The body becomes a central communicative tool and a performative expression intended to demonstrate the sincere religious affiliation of the individual in relation to other people and to God.³ But as will be shown in this article, the body is also a channel or tool for coping with fear. As emphasised by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty "the body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146), meaning that we cannot perceive the world without taking the body as lived materiality into account as well. This is furthermore underlined by Thomas Csordas (1994), who understands the phenomenological approach to rituals as an important contribution to other approaches that primarily understand ritual as a cultural inscription. Inspired by Roland Barthes (1986), who makes a distinction between "the work" as a material object and "the text" that is experienced as activity and production, Csordas makes a distinction between "text" and "textuality". He juxtaposes this division onto the "body" as a biological material entity and "embodiment" defined as perceptual experience and engagement in the world (Csordas 1994: 12).

This is an important juxtaposition because, in my view, it underlines how the body not only acts according to something else (the cognitive system, the common shared ritual), but is engaged or takes part in the world in such a way that it becomes a bearer of meaning. As I have shown in another article in relation to *Mahāśivrātri*, the individual dedication of one's body is well suited to a modern performativity (Fibiger 2018). Moreover, especially painful and exhausting rituals seem to promote not only psychological relief, but also a stronger identification with the group as well as an increase in social cohesion within the community (Xygalatas et al. 2013, Fischer / Xygalatas 2014, Geertz / Klocová 2019).

When it comes to the definition of fear, I take as my point of departure the Oxford Living Dictionaries, which define fear as a diffuse feeling or state of

2 The linguistic anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr (2006) uses this concept to describe how Hindus in Mauritius use language to divide themselves and their various affiliations to different places in India. See also Varma (2008).

3 Roy Rappaport (1979: 177f.) calls these two forms either auto-communication (communication to the person himself/herself) or allo-communication (communication to a god or to the group to which individuals feel they belong).

mind caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous and likely to cause pain or be a threat.⁴

The Danish philosopher and existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, in his 1844 book *Om Begrebet Angest* (“On the Notion of Anxiety”), compares fear and anxiety. As summed up by K. Brian Söderquist in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*: “When fear has an object, a fear of something definite, anxiety is disturbed by the indefinite. [...] This means that the thing that is threatening is nowhere and therefore also everywhere” (Söderquist 2007: 88–89). This is an important contribution to the understanding of how a ritual becomes a recognisable strategy for coping with anxiety. While theologies and mythologies might explain the what and why of fear and the reason for fear, rituals help to cope with both fear and anxiety – both as a reparatory mechanism for misconduct (fear) and as a preventative mechanism to avoid potential misfortune (anxiety). Nonetheless, as noted by Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf in the introduction to their book on emotions in rituals, while the feeling of fear is one of the basic emotions and despite the existence of a vast literature on emotions and religion, detailed studies on ritual and emotion remain scarce (Michaels / Wulf 2012: 1–28). This is also the case when it comes to the inter-relatedness between emotions, rituals and text, especially the way in which the body and bodily actions, as embodied ritualisation, play a role in the mind or the cognitive system. This is understood as embodied cognition, where the interaction between bodily actions and human cognition and meaning-making is emphasised (Geertz / Klocová 2019). In relation to fear, the engagement of the body or the making of a bodily sacrifice can have a crucial impact on mental and emotional states of mind, particularly when the ritual is rooted in a collective memory that can include history, places and institutions as well as texts (Assman 2006, Legér 1999).

Because *Thaipusam Kavadi* is rooted in an archaic myth from Tamil Nadu, with a connected ritual describing how sincere devotion can lead to resurrection as well as the relief from fear, this ritual becomes of particular interest for the investigation of the relation between a strongly physical ritual and the mental feeling of relief. As one of my informants described it:

Twice a day I do *pūjā* in the house and I also go to the temple to make offerings to the deities there. This is fine and we believe the deities help us on a daily basis. But when something more comes our way, such as illnesses in our family or other problems, even problems we fear can occur in the future, we feel the need to do something more. Here *Thaipusam Kavadi* comes in. On this occasion once a year, we can show our sincere wish to change our destiny by offering our bodies. My husband did it once when his sister was really sick. Now we all do it – mostly to prevent anything evil from happening. This is a kind of religious insurance [laughing] (Tamil-Mauritian woman, 52 years of age, Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, February 2017).

4 “Fear: An unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat” (Oxford Living Dictionaries 2018).

If this ritual is inscribed in Robert Bellah's grand theory on religion in human evolution⁵, it can be seen as an interesting kind of evolutionary looping, with parts of archaic forms⁶ of religiosity being revitalised and inscribed in a modern way of coping with fear. And as recognised by Robert Bellah, cultural and religious elements are not only "never lost" – the whole of human cultural and religious history is still with us (Bellah / Tipton 2006: 4). In other words, it seems as if some part of an archaic form of Hinduism, in particular the offering of the body and the display of religion, goes hand in hand with a modern and compartmentalised form of religion among Hindus in Mauritius (Fibiger 2018).

Hinduism in Mauritius – a historical and contemporary overview

Hinduism is now the largest religion in Mauritius, with over 670,000 adherents, representing approximately 51.9% of the total 1.3 million population of the country.⁷ This not only makes Mauritius the country with the highest percentage of Hindus in Africa and the third highest percentage of Hindus in the world after Nepal and India, but furthermore makes it the only country in the world in which a Hindu diaspora constitutes the majority. This is important for the role and position of Hinduism in Mauritian society and has a great impact on religiosity as such in the country.

Indians have a long history in Mauritius, and the Mauritian Hindus of today are at least fourth- or fifth-generation Indian immigrants. After the abolition of slavery in 1835,⁸ a severe shortage of cheap labour in British planta-

5 Robert Bellah's evolutionary scheme was introduced in an article entitled "Religious Evolution" in 1964 and further discussed and developed throughout his work – but especially in his book *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), in which he focuses primarily on the development from the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age. What is of particular interest in relation to this article is his typologisation of archaic religions, the Axial Age and modern religion. While his article from 1964 has been criticised by many scholars, his book on human evolution inscribes cultural evolution in a new scheme, which can be very useful for analysis.

6 Robert Bellah changed his first category from primitive religion to tribal religion. This category describes cultures with no complex priestly structures and with an emphasis on local myths and rituals.

7 Approximately 31.4% of Mauritians are regarded as Christians, 15.3% as Muslims and around 1.5% as others, including Chinese Buddhists (see World Population Review 2018). The figures according to the 2011 census carried out by Statistics Mauritius (2018: 68) show slightly different figures: Hindu 48.5%, Roman Catholic 26.3%, Muslim 17.3%, other Christian 6.4%, other 0.6%, none 0.7%, unspecified 0.1%. It is important to note that about 70% of the total population of Mauritius is regarded as having an Indian origin (Eisenlohr 2006), and that many Mauritians today have a secularised relationship with their religion.

8 In 1833 an abolition law was passed, but it was not implemented until 1835. Mauritius has a long colonial history. The island was discovered and occupied by the Portuguese from around 1507 (1510), followed slowly by the Dutch, who settled on the island in 1598 and named it Mauritius after Prince Maurice of Nassau. Among other things, the Dutch introduced sugarcane and the Java deer before leaving in 1710, moving on to settle in South Africa. About five years later, in 1715, the French occupied the island, renaming it "Isle de France". In 1810, the British conquered the island. Most of the French settlers remained on the island and were allowed to keep their customs, religion and laws. Mauritius achieved independence on

tion colonies – especially in the sugarcane fields – led to the systematic shipment of a large number of indentured Indian labourers to the island, both men and women, particularly from the ports of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (known today as Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai). The first ships carrying labourers from India left in 1836, but the traffic grew during the 1840s (Northrup 1995: 62–67, Younger 2009). These indentured labourers came from several regions in India, but especially from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. They spoke Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, Telegu and Tamil, but those who spoke Bhojpuri, comprising both Hindus and Muslims, were the majority at that time.

Today Mauritians with an Indian origin still draw distinctions among themselves depending on the language spoken at home,⁹ which indicates a particular ethnic and cultural affiliation to India. This is despite the fact that many of my informants do not know exactly where in India their family originates. At the same time the Hindu elite, in particular, as well as different Hindu organisations, such as Arya Samaj, jointly promote religious reform as well as the revival of some kind of common shared “Indianness”, which differentiates the Indians in Mauritius from the Creoles (Claveyrolas 2017). Such tensions between unity and difference are core issues with regard to Hinduism in present-day Mauritius.

This preservation of difference is evident in the different names for the temples – a *mandir* or a *shivāla* temple for the Hindi-speaking group, a *maṇḍiram* temple for the Telugu-speaking people and a *kōyil* temple for the Tamil-speaking Hindus – as well as being visible in the temple architecture and in the shape and material used for statues or representations of the deities (*mūrtis*). The temples also have different deities as the centre of their devotion. Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and their respective spouses as well as Hanumān are the most popular deities among Hindus who speak Hindi/Marathi and Telugu, while Murugan (the Tamil name for Śiva’s second son Skanda or Kārtikkēya) is one of the most popular deities among the Tamils, alongside Śiva and his spouse Pārvatī, as well as Kālī and Durga and the elephant-headed deity Gaṇeśa. The other deities have almost equal importance among all the Mauritian Hindus, a status also enjoyed by Murugan, as the popularity of the Thaipusam Kavadi festival indicates.

However, tendencies toward unity have become noticeable within the last couple of years, during which many of the temples as well as previously local, shared festivals have become a shared reservoir for many of the Hindus in

12 March 1968 and adopted a constitution based on the British parliamentary system. Mauritius changed its status to that of a republic on 12 March 1992 (Varma 2008).

9 Today the main distinction is among groups who speak Hindi/Marathi, Tamil and Telegu, all of whom have different cultural associations and religious organisations that try to preserve and continue local religious festivals as well as the local Indian language (Eisenlohr 2006, Eriksen 1992). The Indian language spoken at home as a second language is still important as an identity marker and is taught in schools.

Mauritius. Not only do they visit each other's temples, but they also celebrate or participate in locally anchored festivals or synthesise and combine different local expressions of a given festival, giving it a new Mauritian form to which all the Hindus in Mauritius can relate. So while the different Hindu subgroups have managed to preserve some of their distinctiveness in their temples, as sites of memory (Trouillet 2012, Claveyrolas 2015), there is also an emerging culture of Hindu ecumenism characterised by a sharing of rituals (Rambachan / Shukla 2016). In particular, festivals have become not only the focal point of a shared form of Mauritian Hinduism, but a shared expression of Hinduism in the public space that differentiates them from other ethnic groups on the island.

The procession as a religious and cultural expression seems also particularly suited to a modern compartmentalised, individualised, condensed and concentrated form of Hinduism. In contrast to the temple ritual (*pūjā*), which is primarily orchestrated by the priests (*pūjāris*) and has the devotees as secondary participants, a procession allows individuals to be the centre of participation – for example by wearing particular clothes or behaving in a particular way, such as by going into a trance, carrying altars, playing the drums or a boom box, performing ascetic actions such as piercings or walking barefoot, singing religious songs or mourning. In other words, there has been a shift of authority from the priest and the religious institution to the individual and the public space. This observation is supported by the president of the Kailasnath temple in Bambous: “While participation in temple worship is decreasing, especially among the young people, the participation in the religious processions is increasing and is growing every year” (interviewed in the Kailasnath Mandir in Bambous, March 2017). And his answer to the question of why young people in particular choose to participate in the processions and seldom visit the temples is clear, emphasising that the individual is at the centre but that there are also social benefits:

It is a kind of showing off – especially for the young men. They pierce themselves, or they carry very heavy *kanwards*¹⁰ to show potential wives and their families that, despite the fact that they live secular, not very devoted lives, drinking beer, eating meat and so on, they are Hindus. [...] Many of them participate to get rid of bad karma as well, but I think it is kind of the same. (interview with the president of the Kailasnath temple in Bambous, Mauritius, March 2017)

This has had an impact on worshipping patterns within the last ten years or so, with processions becoming a crucial part of an increasing number of Hin-

¹⁰ The altars they carry are called *kanward* when they are connected to the Mahāśivrātri festival and *kavadī* when they are connected to the Thaipusam festival.

du festivals in Mauritius.¹¹ The procession seems to be the meeting place both for the different generations and for all the different Hindu groups (Fibiger 2018).

The mythological legitimation of Thaipusam Kavadi

The overall ritualistic pattern for Thaipusam Kavadi is found in a myth, the so called Idumban myth. There are of course different versions of the Idumban myth, and many of the participants in the Thaipusam Kavadi ritual in contemporary Mauritius do not know the whole story. They just know about its existence, and perhaps some bits and pieces of the story. The main point is that the myth exists, thereby not only legitimising the ritual but also relating it to a common shared devotional tradition with links extending back to India.

The following is a general summary of the main aspects of the myth. While the original version is found in the Skanda Purāṇa, slightly different versions can be found on the web, in various temple pamphlets and among families. But the main message in all these versions is the same. The piercing is a symbolic death or bodily offering that will purify the person; and the carrying of the *kavadi* (altar) is a strong marker of devotion, in the hope that one's wishes will be granted by the deity.

The main figure in the myth is Idumban, whose name means "arrogant". He is a bandit and a disciple of a guru known as Agathiyar, but also a devotee of Śiva and his family, not least Murugan. To test Idumban's loyalty, Agathiyar tells him to go to the mountains and bring back two summits. He is told to attach the summits to a *kavadi*, a yoke used to carry loads. Idumban, who was faithful and obedient to his guru, departed, accompanied by his wife. He did as he was told. He went to the mountains and firmly tied the two peaks to his *kavadi* before turning back. But on the way home, Murugan wanted to test him even further, so he changed himself into a little boy and hid on one of the peaks to increase its weight. Idumban soon discovered him, and (unable to recognise his God in disguise) started fighting the little boy. In the fight Murugan pierced Idumban with his spear (*vel*) and killed him. However, Idumban's wife recognised Murugan and returned to Agathiyar and told him what had happened. Agathiyar, Idumban's wife and many other followers of Agathiyar prayed to Murugan and asked for Idumban's resurrection. Finally, Murugan heard their prayers and resurrected the dead man. To show their gratefulness and devotion, they all decided to carry the *kavadi* to the temple of Murugan.

11 Some of the most important processions apart from marriage and cremation processions and Mahāśivrātri are held during Gaṇeśa Chaturthi, Navrātri with Dusshera, Themethee and Kavadi. Additionally, there are numerous locally based processions.

There are many symbolic references to this myth in *Thaipusam Kavadi*, which usually takes place on the day of the full moon in the month of Tai/Thai (January or February) corresponding to Māgha in the Hindu calendar. But the meaning invested in these symbols varies from one person to the next. What seems to be of greatest importance is that the symbols are present, thereby supporting and legitimising the rituals to which they are related. But they also signal to the outside and to the individuals involved that they are related to a specific tradition that again is inscribed in specific symbolic coded rituals. For instance, the beginning and end of the ten-day festival are marked in the Tamil temples¹² by the raising and lowering of a flag (*kodi*) decorated with the *vel* that killed Idumban, and a peacock, the vehicle of Murugan. The raising of the *kodi* indicates the beginning of ten days of ascetic living and fasting. This is not a total fast but a time when the devotees avoid eating meat, fish and all foods containing milk products. Furthermore they refrain from sexual intercourse, avoid eating outside their homes and sleep either on the floor or on beds of nails. In this way the devotees are said to purify themselves both physically and mentally, and are encouraged to dispel hate, passion, arrogance and envy – important dharmic regulations. A holy thread is also tied around the wrists of the devotees as a sign or token of their commitment and obedience. During the fast, some devotees visit the temple every day to pray and sing devotional hymns as well as making offerings to Murugan such as coconuts, fruit, milk and saffron water. Most of the devotees will pray either at home or at small get-togethers with their neighbours.

A few days before the big *kavadi* procession, Murugan is taken out of the temple as a tutelary deity to visit and bless the neighbourhood. This is called *urvalam*, or “visiting the neighbourhood”, which is a familiar event in India and part of other festivals as well. It is very popular because it gives devotees the opportunity to make offerings to the deity and have their houses blessed and protected from the intrusion of evil powers. *Urvalam* ends with a shared meal in the local temple. The day before the *kavadi* procession it is time to make the *kavadis*. The framework is mostly made out of bamboo and timber, and these days it is 2–3 metres in height, weighing more than 50 kilos. These are then nicely decorated with artificial coconut trees, peacock feathers, flowers, limes and sparkling cloth – as well as with miniature icons mostly of Murugan, but today also of other deities, reflecting the individuality of religion and giving each *kavadi* a personal touch. As expressed by one of my informants:

Hanumān has always helped me and my family. He is standing in front of our house and he has protected us all for anything evil. For me it is natural that he will be in my

12 Despite the fact that these rituals only take place in Tamil temples or *kōyils*, Hindus with other ethno-linguistic backgrounds attend them. I even met some Hindi-speaking Hindus in a Tamil *kōyil*, who preferred coming to Tamil temples because they enjoyed the pleasant and precise conduct of the *pūjās* there.

mind when doing the *kavadī*, and together with Murugan he will be the one I will give my thanks, but also send my prayer for his blessing for the future to come. (interview with Hindi-Mauritian man, 47 years, Bambous, Mauritius, February 2017)

This man, who belongs to the Hindi-speaking Hindu majority, has performed the Thaipusam Kavadi for the last five years, and says that he will continue to do it every year as long as he is physically able to do so. He told me how participation had changed his life. Not only does he regard himself as a better person, following more of the dharmic precepts, but his new company (the old one went bankrupt) has done well ever since.

The shape and size of the *kavadīs* have been increasing during the last ten years, and the choice of which deity or deities to carry has furthermore become more individual. In particular, this choice of deity reflects the extent to which the ritual follows the myth or is gaining its own expression. This may be one of the reasons why Thaipusam Kavadi now appeals to an increasingly broad audience in Mauritius, including modernised, secularised or compartmentalised Hindus.

Danielle Hervieu-Léger (1999, 2000) takes up the debate about secularisation and religion; but unlike many other scholars she underlines that modernity both undermines religion and creates a “need” for it as the storage place for culturally shared memory or a chain of memory linking a particular group to a presumed common past and projected future. By suggesting that religion should be “a particular modality of the organisation of and function of the act of believing” (ibid. 1999: 87), she focuses not on the substantive elements or functions of religion, but on the action or practice of religion.¹³ This allows different interpretations of how and why a group as well as individuals act. At the same time, because this acting is concentrated on this special occasion, the expression of commitment increases. That may explain why the *kavadīs* are getting bigger and heavier, but also why the participants invest such great efforts in the performance or the act itself. As expressed by one of my informants:

Usually I don't consider myself a strong Hindu devotee. I don't go to the temple much during the year. I eat all kinds of food – meat as well – and I drink alcohol, sometimes too much. But when I do the Thaipusam Kavadi, something happens to me. I feel a kind of ... closeness to God, but also to my family and friends, because we are fasting together. It is a kind of relief to do the Thaipusam Kavadi. I guess that is why I do it year after year. I am kind of addicted, you could say. (interview with Tamil-Mauritian man, 22 years, Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, February, 2017)

This is just what Bastian et al. have observed, namely that the experience of pain and stress alters body chemistry, thus playing an important role in allevi-

13 This is similar to Rappaport (1979, 1999), who wants to find the “obvious aspects” of ritual. He does not reject the functions of rituals, but his overall aim is to determine what is particular to a ritual itself in the sense that it cannot be replaced by something else.

ating guilt (Bastian et al. 2011). And when it comes to Hindu ethics, this can be understood as a cleansing from bad karma, thereby relieving the person's psychological anxiety about what the future will bring.

It is difficult to put an exact number on how many people actually participate in Thaipusam Kavadī. I have been given estimates of 5,000 up to 100,000 people,¹⁴ which can either include or exclude the many people who participate in the procession without being pierced. The fact is that the number of people who get pierced has been increasing over the last 10 years.

Thaipusam Kavadī in February 2017

It is early morning. The sun is slowly rising on the horizon, and I am sitting in a car with some of the members of the Ramasamy¹⁵ family. We are on the way to the riverbank close to Rose Hill in Mauritius, the starting point for some of the Thaipusam Kavadī processions on the island.¹⁶ It is here that the piercing of cheeks and tongues is taking place. We are following a van with beautifully decorated *kavadīs* on its hatch – one for each member of the family who will participate in this year's Thaipusam Kavadī. Today is the culmination of a ten-day period of mental and physical preparation. Most members of the family have been fasting, and they have performed daily *pūjās* directed at the god Murugan. Like many other Tamil Hindus, they understand their relationship to him as the pivot of Thaipusam Kavadī and believe that the outcome of this relationship will have a crucial impact on the year to come, as well as serving as a sign of forgiveness for their failure to fulfil the dharmic precepts. They primarily understand Thaipusam Kavadī as a purifying ritual destroying bad karma, which will furthermore have an impact on Mr Ramasamy's real-estate company.

We are sitting quietly in the car. The mood is a bit tense or ambiguous and loaded with a combination of expectations, anxiety and fear. Most of the family members in the car know what to expect, because they do the Thaipusam Kavadī year after year. Each of them sits with a box on their lap containing Murugan's spears (*vels*): a big one to pierce their cheeks,¹⁷ and a smaller one to pierce their tongues. Mr Ramasamy is also holding his hobnail shoes, which

14 These are estimates I have collected from the religious organisations Tamil Sangam and Hindu Swamysevak Sangh. There are no official figures.

15 This is an invented name to secure anonymity.

16 There are many other starting/piercing points around the island. Most of them are situated close to water or at a neighbouring temple or ashram near a Tamil temple – the destination of the procession – that has either Murugan as its central deity or at least an altar and a *mūrti* representing him.

17 In the last few years the *vel* for piercing the cheeks has in general grown longer and longer – up to more than one metre. In 2016 this tendency led the government to ban *vels* longer than 40 cm, but the ban has had little impact. Many people still use *vels* that are much longer than this.

he will be wearing during the procession, as well as a large number of small hooks with lime fruits that he will use to decorate most of his body. His hobnail shoes and *vels* stand in his home altar all year long to remind him of the importance of being humble. This humility may be difficult to maintain when you have three cars in the garage, a very big house with all the latest equipment, and a bar stocked with whisky and other sorts of liquor to offer guests after a good meal or a business meeting.

This morning at around four o'clock, he and his family did a special *pūjā* with the hobnail shoes and Murugan's *vel* at the centre of the devotion. The symbolism is clear. Mr Ramasamy shows Murugan his intention to offer his body, while asking Murugan for protection so he will not feel any pain when he is pierced. In addition, the *kavadīs* that will be carried on their shoulders during the procession have been consecrated outside the house by *ārtī*, an offering of fire, and blessed by the oldest member of the family, so that they will be bearable.

We are now reaching the riverbank, the place for the piercings and the starting point for a lot of groups whose processions will end at various temples. It is a beautiful scene with the sun rising in the background and with thousands of decorated *kavadīs* and people dressed in fuchsia-coloured garments, a colour related to the festival. Most of the men are stripped to the waist, and some have smeared their forehead, shoulders, back and chest with sacred ashes. There is a lot of activity at the riverbank. Some people are purifying themselves in the river and are getting help to decorate their bodies with small hooks and spears; others are decorating their *kavadī* or doing a short *pūjā* in front of it. Others again are standing around their *pūjāri* (priest), who is consecrating litres of milk that will be distributed to all the participants in the procession later. The milk will be poured into small brass pots that are covered with a piece of cloth before being tied onto the *kavadīs*. These pots of milk are related to the myth and symbolise the two mountain peaks that Idumban carried to his guru as an offering. In the same way, the devotees will carry the pots of milk to the temple as an offering for Murugan. If the milk becomes sour on the way, it is read as a sign that Murugan will not purify the devotee or listen to his or her prayers.

Then it is time for the piercings. Special piercing experts, who can be priests but also high-caste Brahmins, offer their expertise to the waiting people. One by one the participants, who are becoming pilgrims now, are pierced: first through their cheeks and then through their tongue, symbolising the importance of being silent during the procession. The idea is that from this moment on, until they have offered their milk to Murugan, they must concentrate or meditate on the deity.¹⁸ While the piercings are taking place, family members

18 The participants who choose not to have any piercings usually tie a scarf around their mouth as a vow of silence, meditation and devotion while walking in the procession. They will also carry a pot of milk on top of their head.

sing hymns to Murugan, and the piercer utters mantras. It is believed that the individual concerned will then be protected by the deity and will not feel any pain. The scene as I experienced it did not entirely conform to this ideal. I did hear a lot of screaming and crying, especially from the women and children. But coping with the pain is part of the ritual, signalling that the deity is well disposed towards the person concerned and is therefore reducing the pain. Or as mentioned by some of my informants: the pain can also be understood as a constructive pain, either by channelling or overruling a psychological pain or by reducing anxiety.

When I felt the pain, I felt in some way released from all my sorrows. I felt like the *vel* was puncturing my depression and my fear of what will happen to my children. It is difficult to explain, I was just crying and praying, not because of the pain but because of the relief I felt. (interview with a Tamil woman, 42 years, Rose Hill, Mauritius, February 2017, just after the *Thaipusam Kavadi*)

The procession now begins to move forward to the rhythm of religious songs coming from loudspeakers installed on top of a vehicle. This vehicle accompanies the head of the procession, who carries a stick or sceptre as a symbol of authority, and sometimes he carries the statue of Lord Murugan unless this statue is placed on a cart specially made for this purpose. If so, *pūjāris* from the temple towards which the procession is heading will sit on the cart and receive trays with offerings to the consecrated statue (*mūrti*), just as in any other *urvalam* ritual in which the deity visits and blesses the neighbourhood. People from the neighbourhood who are not participating in the procession will offer drinks to the pilgrims or water the road to cool it down.

The procession takes 2–4 hours, depending on the destination. There are a lot of dramatic situations on the way, with some pilgrims (mostly women) dancing in a trance, and others crying or shouting the name of Murugan or any other deity out loud. Quite a few people walk alongside the pilgrims, functioning as helpers. Some of the pilgrims need help in carrying their heavy *kavadīs* or need something to drink; but most of all they need psychological support, which their helpers can provide by singing hymns constantly. When the pilgrims reach the temple, they will first circumambulate the deities in *parikrama*.¹⁹ Then their piercings are removed, before they offer the milk. This will happen with the help of the *pūjāris*, who will pour the milk over the *mūrti* of Murugan.

The pilgrimage procession is now finished, and I find Mr Ramasamy sitting on a chair – tired but happy and (most of all) relieved. He is surrounded by his family, some of whom have done the pilgrimage with him, and others who have helped them along the way. The atmosphere in the temple is very special

¹⁹ *Parikrama* or *pradakṣiṇā* refers to the circumambulation of sacred places. *Parikrama* means “the path surrounding something”, and is also known as *pradakṣiṇā* (“to the right”), because people circumambulate anti-clockwise around the altars and *mūrtis* in the temple.

and can best be described as a combination of being unrestrained but solemn. Children are playing around, some being given *prasāda* (a blessed meal), while others are sitting in front of the *mūrti* of Murugan chanting and praying. Mr Ramasamy greets me and points proudly towards his 10-year-old son, who has now done Thaipusam Kavadī for the second time. Then he shows me an email that he had sent to his employees the previous day. In this email he emphasised that all the needles and hooks with which he was going to pierce his body were intended for the wellbeing of all his employees and the prosperity of the company in the year ahead. There is nothing to fear, neither for himself nor his family and his company, he expresses.

Conclusion

During my fieldwork interviews I was given several explanations of the reasons why pilgrims perform a Thaipusam Kavadī. From my point of view all the explanations are either explicitly or implicitly related to reducing fear in its widest sense. Some interviewees emphasised social and cultural factors, with the ritual being a way of showing that you are part of the Mauritian Hindu community. Thus the person involved will not be excluded from the Hindu community, which also is something to fear. This is especially emphasised among young, single and in many aspects secularised Hindu males, who, by taking part in the ritual, express their sincere wish to be good Hindus despite the fact that they do not show it on a daily basis. The ritual is thus obviously a display of religion (Jacobsen 2008). At the same time it is a way of maintaining and remembering a shared tradition that has its roots in India and that has served for centuries as a protective strategy. This explanation underlines the fact that the ritual involves the negotiation of identificatory habitus, but also that the piercing ritual and the related interpretations of the activated emotions of anxiety and relief are culturally and socially inscribed states (Geertz / Klocová 2019). In other words, the interpretation of but also the participation in Thaipusam Kavadī are examples of the adaptation of the identificatory habitus to a new setting, in relation both to place but also to space, without losing its significance. Others emphasise ethical (dharmic) reasons for participation. It serves not only as a strong reminder that one should be living an ethical and moral life, but moreover as a way that the participant can either make up for not having lived up to his or her *śvadharmā* (personal dharma) or punish him- or herself in order to make a fresh start. This can be understood as a nullification of dharmic misconduct and therefore a relief from fear.

Many people regard the ritual as a vow given to Murugan (or, more recently, also other deities) in return for a wish that has been fulfilled, or as a way of

keeping up a good relationship with the deity, and not least as a way of securing his ongoing protection in all aspects of life. In this way, the ritual relieves fear and anxiety because the deity is thought to be with you at all times. These reasons for the ritual can be categorised as a kind of religious pragmatism.

Most people perceive the piercing of the body as a sacrifice as well as a purifying ritual. The ten days of ascetic living, coupled with the personal, painful offering of the body and the exhausting procession, do not amount merely to a strong, concentrated expression of devotion. They are perceived, in addition, as purifying the individuals in question as well as the whole community, thereby removing bad karma. In this way, the pain becomes a constructive pain that relieves the person and the community not only here and now, but also in the future to come.

Despite the fact that it is the participation in and performance of the ritual itself that is emphasised by my informants as the most important element, the myth, which legitimises the ritual, still plays an important role. First of all, the relationship between Idumban (the devotee) and Murugan (the deity), as well as the offering that Idumban made, and his death at the hand of Murugan is mentioned as relieving fear. First of all, as a former thief, Idumban incarnates a person who is himself ethically and morally “unclean”, but becomes purified by his own sacrifice and by Murugan’s *vel*. This shows how anyone, by showing one’s devotion and sacrificing one’s own body, can be purified and thereby prevent any evil (both moral evil and also physical evil, such as sickness or bad business) in the future. Secondly, in the myth, the acts of Murugan show his ability to take action. He both kills Idumban and later has the power to resurrect him. In other words, he has the power over life and death and in that way, the ritual can also be understood as a way of dealing with death – symbolising everything that is evil or negative. In other words: the participation in the ritual seems to be not so much a coping strategy in the event of death, but more of a preventative strategy against death or – more broadly understood – against all kinds of failure to thrive in the family. Moreover, as mentioned in the theoretical introduction to the theme: when a psychological and indefinite feeling of anxiety or fear can become finite, by relating it either to a specific explanation, namely the myth, or to the misconduct of identificatory habitus, it can be coped with accordingly. And while theologies and mythologies might explain the what and why of a fear and the reason for that fear, rituals can help to cope with fear – both as a reparatory mechanism for misconduct and as a preventative mechanism to avoid potential misfortune. At least until participation in the next Thaipusam Kavadi.

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Book Reviews

HERMANN KREUTZMANN, *Pamirian Crossroads: Kyrgyz and Wakhi of High Asia*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2015. 559 pages, 122 maps, €98.00. ISBN 978-3-447-10449-4

It will be difficult to do justice to this extraordinary book within the word limit of a standard book review. With about 560 pages, 122 maps, 313 illustrations, 15 diagrams and 25 tables, *Pamirian Crossroads* is the first of a total of three volumes – its companion volume *Wakhan Quadrangle: Exploration and Espionage During and After the Great Game* was published in 2017 and another volume on Gilgit-Baltistan’s Hunza Valley is currently under preparation. Together, they are likely to become the capstone of Hermann Kreutzmann’s remarkable career. For more than 35 years, Hermann Kreutzmann – from the beginning in the company of his wife Sabine Felmy – has focused his attention single-mindedly on High Asia and especially on the “Pamirian Knot” at the junction of the Hindukush, Karakorum and Tien Shan, which provides the regional framework for this book. Over this time span, Kreutzmann has visited the region every year and carried out more than 6 years of fieldwork. Frequent visits and long stays in the same locations characterise his field research and have enabled him to observe the area’s “winds of change”, which he so frequently invokes, from a better-informed vantage point than that of any other contemporary researcher. A map on p. 13 shows the dense network of routes that he explored in High Asia between 1977 and 2017. His high standard of empirical research is paralleled by the diligence with which he has carried out work in archives and libraries in London, Delhi, Islamabad, St. Petersburg and Berlin. The confluence of empirical and archival research is one of many features that make *Pamirian Crossroads* such a unique undertaking.

Pamirian Crossroads is set in the border areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Tajikistan – in the Pamirs and Wakhan, high mountain regions that have been utilised by people for a very long time. The book singles out the Kyrgyz and Wakhi ethno-linguistic groups as representatives of mobile pastoralism and sedentary farming, respectively, though this book reveals that these two lifestyles are not neatly separated from each other, and that mobility is a defining feature of life for all people in this region. Hermann Kreutzmann also drives home the point that the diversity of livelihoods in the Pamirs and Wakhan is determined less by the ecological setting, which he describes as fairly homogenous across the region, than by the divergent paths of development which the Kyrgyz and Wakhi have experienced and continue to experience in the four countries whose mountainous margins they inhabit. One of

the leitmotifs of *Pamirian Crossroads* is that “peripheral” does not equal “isolated” and that the lives of people on the periphery of states in the Pamirs and Wakhan are influenced by forces or events that originate far away geographically or that have their origins deep in the historical past. This is one reason that Hermann Kreutzmann accords so much space to the period of the “Great Game” – the contest for supremacy in Central Asia in the 19th and early 20th century between Russia and the British Empire – which resulted in the drawing of the boundaries that created the peripheries described in his book. How life plays out for the Kyrgyz and Wakhi under the varying conditions in four different peripheries is a central theme of the book.

It is, however, impossible to reduce *Pamirian Crossroads* to a single or even a central theme. Its aspirations are far too broad and complex. In a total of nine chapters, Hermann Kreutzmann elucidates the historical perception and exploration of the Pamirs and Wakhan; the making of boundaries and the development within the confines of these boundaries; Kyrgyz and Wakhi livelihoods within the context of the ecology and economy of the Pamirs; mobility and multi-locality in High Asia; and a comparison of changing minority policies. Interspersed with these large thematic blocks are more narrowly focused studies on, for instance, political and religious discrimination in the Pamirs and vehicular traffic in High Asia. The final chapter, “Portraying the Present Age”, describes the current situation in ten Pamir locations. It is followed by an epilogue which, by the standards of the book, is surprisingly short and which ends by giving voice to female shepherds in different locations. This is a rather abrupt ending, and one could have wished for a more conclusive tying together of the many strands that this volume has taken up.

One of the outstanding characteristics of this book is the loving care and meticulousness with which it has been produced. Each chapter is followed by endnotes, and each map or illustration is accompanied by a detailed legend. Some of these legends are stand-alone micro-essays, sometimes of considerable length and supported by references. The book ends with a glossary in 20 languages that also contains toponyms and their previous transliterations and usages.

The book is lavishly endowed with maps, diagrams and illustrations. The maps, especially, are a central feature of this volume. The author himself designed 50 of the 122 maps as an outcome of his empirical research. Of the beautifully reproduced historical maps, the majority are from the Pamir Archive Collection, which was compiled by the Swiss cartographer Markus Hauser and was recently acquired by the University of Central Asia. Another outstanding feature is the use of historical photographs, some dating back to the late 19th century, some published here for the first time.

Hermann Kreutzmann defies established categories of academic writing – in the foreword he refers to his book as a “conspectus”. As such, it can be

read as a consecutive narrative, mined for information like an encyclopaedia, or simply enjoyed as a magnificent picture book. One can read it from cover to cover or explore its content according to one's own specific interests. Such exploratory reading could have been aided by a list of maps and illustrations.

The work stands out for the fact that it has been written by a single author. The rule of the day is that syntheses as comprehensive and complex as this one generally appear as edited volumes containing the contributions of many authors. That Hermann Kreutzmann has taken upon himself the staggering work of writing and compiling this volume on his own commands respect, to say the very least, and is a testament to his unique and dedicated career. Finally, as a vast repository of knowledge on the Pamirs and Wakhan, *Pamirian Crossroads* offers particular value as a reference point from which to gauge the influence of the current and impending geopolitical shifts in this region, such as China's Belt and Road initiative, on the lives of Kyrgyz, Wakhi and other residents of this highly dynamic region.

Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt

KARL JETTMAR, *The Religions of the Hindukush: The Pre-Islamic Heritage of Eastern Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan*. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2018. 591 pages, 3 maps, 24 figures, 14 plates, \$65.00. ISBN 978-974-524-218-0

In 1975 Professor Dr Karl Jettmar (1918–2002), the eminent Austrian-German scholar and doyen of anthropological and historical research on the high mountain peoples of Eastern Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan, published his seminal work on their pre-Islamic cultural heritage. This German-language book became a classic within the international scientific community. The present volume is its first complete English edition; it contains contributions by Georg Buddruss, Schuyler Jones, Max Klimburg and Peter S.C. Parkes as well as an obituary written by Harald Hauptmann. The book was translated by the late Adam Nayyar (d. 2008) as well as other (unfortunately unnamed) colleagues and edited by Hugh van Skyhawk. Thanks to the persistent efforts of Wolfgang-Peter Zingel this English edition has finally seen the light of day.

The voluminous study is divided into six parts: in addition to an introduction and an epilogue the main parts investigate the religions of the pre-Islamic Kafirs in Eastern Afghanistan, the speakers of the Shina language (i.e. the main group of the so-called Dards), the Burusho, the Kalasha and the Kho. The latter ethnic groups inhabit the valleys of the eastern Hindukush, Karakoram and Western Himalaya. In detailing the ancient religious systems of these

mountain peoples, the author describes and analyses their main concepts, their belief in gods (for instance the pantheon of male and female deities among the Kafirs), demons and spirits, their myths, sanctuaries and shrines, rites and feasts, and the role of ritual functionaries as well as other religious aspects, placing his results in a comparative and historical context. In the epilogue, he also discusses the extent to which petroglyphs can be taken as evidence of religious configurations, a topic based on Jettmar's own sensational discoveries of rock engravings in the upper Indus valley, which drew worldwide attention as they highlighted trade relations, the spread of Buddhism and other historical dimensions. In addition to the cultural traits of early Aryan peasants and pastoralists, they even exhibit recognisable traces of pre-Aryan settlers in the Hindukush. Later, Iranian tribes migrated to the mountain valleys, converted to Buddhism and enriched the local archaic religious traditions. In what is now Northern Pakistan, Buddhism was followed by neo-Hinduistic influences.

From at least the 16th century CE onwards Islam gradually became established in its orthodox Sunni as well as Shi'a forms (Twelver-Shi'a and Ismailiyya). Particularly in Sunni-dominated areas, any traces of paganism were radically eradicated over the last decades. Only the Kafirs of the Afghan Hindukush were able to defend their pagan religions until at least the late 19th century. The ethnic groups of the Kati, Parun, Waigali and Ashkun living in these remote valleys were called Kafirs – "heathens" – by their Muslim neighbours; after their subsequent enforced conversion to Islam the region became known as Nuristan, the "Land of the Light".

About thirty years ago, after having carefully studied this comprehensive work of my teacher Karl Jettmar as well as his other writings and after having completed extensive ethnographic field research in Nager and Hunza (Northwest-Karakoram) and in Harban (Indus Kohistan) myself, I was sceptical as to whether our knowledge about the pre-Islamic religions in the Hindukush, Karakoram and Western Himalaya could grow substantially in the future, especially considering the firm grip of Deobandi Islam on the Sunni Muslims living in the side valleys of the river Indus. But a substantial amount of fresh research has since been done between Nuristan in the west and Baltistan in the east. Thus, Jettmar's final sentence in his opus magnum, in which he expresses the hope that "a final chapter for the *Religions of the Hindukush* could be written by future scholars", has been fulfilled. It therefore remains a question why the bibliography of the volume under review has not been updated accordingly. Here it suffices to mention just three very important works on indigenous religious traditions, namely Max Klimburg's *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush. Art and Society of the Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs* (Stuttgart 1999; 2 volumes), Alberto M. Cacomardo's and Augusto S. Cacomardo's *Gates of Peristan. History, Religion and Society in the Hindu Kush* (Rome 2001) as well as

Augusto S. Cacopardo's recent *Pagan Christmas. Winter Feasts of the Kalasha of the Hindu Kush* (London 2016).

The late Karl Jettmar was an outstanding, eminently respected scholar, who “successfully combined ethnographic studies with historical and anthropological views, resulting in a holistic perception of cultural history in a way only few of his contemporaries could parallel” (obituary, p. XIII). His *The Religions of the Hindukush* was indeed a masterpiece of scholarship devoted to this part of Central Asia, but other works published subsequently should have been mentioned, at least within an appendix to the bibliography.

Jürgen Wasim Frembgen

FRAUKE KRAAS / REGINE SPOHNER / AYE AYE MYINT, *Socio-Economic Atlas of Myanmar*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017. 188 pages, 52 photos, 13 tables, 54 illustrations, EUR 39.00. ISBN 978-3-515-11623-7

The *Socio-Economic Atlas of Myanmar* is the first such publication and combines copious amounts of valuable data on the country with skilful and accessible visualisations. The authors have identified six key themes – administration and spatial organisation; environment and natural resources; population, settlements and urbanisation; infrastructure; economic development; social development: household infrastructure, education and health – and provide insights on specific themes such as hydropower and thermal power plant projects or the garment industry in Yangon.

In many cases it is easy to see how the data and its visualisation will aid improved policy making or research on the relevant sector. Researchers and policy makers in the past often struggled to find the right data or any data at all. Thus, the *Socio-Economic Atlas of Myanmar* contributes to filling an important gap. This is especially true for topics that were not covered by the 2014 Myanmar Census Atlas, such as the sections on the environment, natural resources and infrastructure.

Despite these important contributions, it is unfortunately also easy to see how the atlas might fail its readers, at least in part. An atlas is never a mere presentation of data but inevitably also presents a specific point of view, consequently shaping the way that readers perceive the information at hand. The authors, however, reflect little on the perspective they are generating. The atlas includes no data or visualisations regarding questions of ethnicity and belonging. The authors write that “despite the enormous relevance of questions of ethnicity, especially in the process of national reconciliation, it was not possible to include a map of the regional distribution of ethnic or ethno-

linguistic groups [...]” (p. 14). The authors justify this by pointing towards a lack of available data. In so doing, they fail to mention that data on ethnicity and belonging does exist – it was part of the 2014 Census that is one of the key sources for the data provided in the atlas. However, the findings on ethnicity were not released by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, likely because they would have undermined the ethnonationalist narrative that remains prevalent in many parts of the Myanmar Government. The absence of an appropriate framing for the existence and non-existence of such data ultimately serves to perpetuate an understanding that the data is simply “non-existent” or “difficult to obtain”, thereby failing to acknowledge the important debates we should be having regarding data on ethnicity.

A lack of reflection is also evident in other descriptions of controversial topics. The authors write that “interpretations and statistics on the highly charged and controversial so-called Rohingya issue vary greatly” (p. 14) and go on to explain that an adequate representation of the matter was not possible. The latter point is understandable, but the wording is problematic. In referring to the “so-called” Rohingya issue the authors subtly question the legitimacy of the term. However, they fail to provide any justification for such scepticism, thus covertly lending approval to a narrative in which the very term Rohingya is contested.

There is also a key issue surrounding the data. The authors write that “in Myanmar there is a significant body of scarcely tapped knowledge that has attracted very little international attention” (p. 12), notably in the form of reports, research papers, and PhD and MA theses. The authors also note that this data is of varying quality but unfortunately do not provide further explanation. Consequently, the methodological approach to data review and selection remains elusive for the reader except for the section on the Geographical Information System. Being able to learn more about how the data was acquired would be not only interesting but also important for the contextualisation of the findings in the atlas.

This becomes clear when considering the data of the 2014 Census, which is used widely in the atlas without so much as a word on the controversy surrounding it. Indeed, some observers have argued that the census statistics should be treated with scepticism due to a) allegations that not all participants were asked the full number of questions; b) the lack of a post-enumeration survey; c) the lack of proper consultation with civil society in the run-up to the census and d) the highly problematic and politicised handling of ethnic identity, whereby respondents were allowed to identify with only one ethnic group (Mary Callahan on Twitter, 21 February 2018, Census Ethnic Data Saga Continues, <https://twitter.com/marypcallahan/status/966544105022021632>, accessed 20 March 2019).

Discussing such concerns would have strengthened the atlas as a resource for policy makers and researchers who would have been able to gain a clearer understanding of the reliability of the data. Even if the authors had ultimately chosen to defend the controversial census data, their arguments could have provided valuable insights for readers. The absence of a discourse on these themes leaves the atlas vulnerable to criticism. Critics of the 2014 census, for example, might disregard non-related findings in the atlas simply because of the book's association with it. This is extremely unfortunate, especially since publications like this atlas are rare and much needed. Nonetheless, the atlas also has the potential to spark new debates on data gathering in Myanmar and will provide a basis for the further exploration of the themes it contains, thus likely inspiring a new wave of interesting research.

Richard Roewer

RONALD McCrum, *The Men Who Lost Singapore, 1938–1942*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Xv, 265 pages, \$36.00 SGD. ISBN 978-981-4722-39-14

The Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore – famously styled “Britain’s worst disaster” by Churchill – has been analysed and re-assessed on so many occasions that we now have a small library on the subject. So can anything new be said about this military debacle and subsequent human catastrophe? Ronald McCrum’s answer is to the affirmative, as he points to the role of the civil administrators and their difficult relationship with the military commanders and advisers sent in to defend the island. For his study (a remake of his 2014 MPhil thesis from SOAS, London), McCrum has singled out four leading British figures as “the men who lost Singapore”: Governor Shenton Thomas; Commander-in-Chief Robert Brooke-Popham; Admiral Geoffrey Layton of the Royal Navy; and Alfred Duff Cooper, who had been sent to Singapore to mediate between the civilian and the military “camps” but ended up chairing the island’s War Council.

As McCrum shows, it wasn’t the number of cooks as such that spoiled the broth but rather a general lack of coordination and communication – often resulting from the assumption that someone else would make necessary decisions and take action – that led to the collapse of the “impregnable fortress”. McCrum positions the agency of his four protagonists, both by action and default, in a broadly chronological framework spanning from 1937 (when the war in Asia began) to the fall of Singapore in March 1942. Much of his analysis focuses on the individual errors of judgement and misconceptions concerning the events that unfolded before them, while at the same time he acknowl-

edges that circumstances – the situation in which these errors were committed – did change constantly and hence impacted heavily upon individual agency.

This gave McCrum's four protagonists little space to get it right, as Governor Thomas's journey to Kuala Lumpur in December 1941 nicely illustrates. On the one hand, McCrum acknowledges the trip as a "brave and noble gesture" (obviously sending a signal home that the situation was under control), while on the other he blames Thomas for his soothing radio message to Singapore, which according to McCrum illustrates that Thomas was underestimating the severity of the situation (pp. 50–52). But what would his alternatives have been? Not to travel to Kuala Lumpur would have indicated that it was no longer safe to travel to Malaya, whereas revealing the real situation over the wireless would have undermined the image of the "impregnable fortress" (battered by Japanese airstrikes as it was from December 1941) and could have sparked a panic among the inhabitants of the city.

This latter possibility deserves rather more attention than McCrum was willing to pay to it. The widespread perception (or rather misconception) of Singapore as being able to withstand a siege or attack was a set-piece of British military planning on all levels, notably of the London War Cabinet. And with Churchill being more concerned about the defence of Britain and the situation in Europe than with the war in the Far East, Singapore as much as any other part of the Empire became a pawn to be sacrificed for the benefit of a greater good, the defeat of Hitler. Above all, it also has become clear in the meantime that the Japanese commanders in charge of the conquest of Singapore had a comprehensive plan to achieve their aim. It built on their naval and aerial superiority in the region to allow for a rapid advance of the land-based troops through Malaya; and not least they were familiar with Singapore's weaknesses, notably the city's limited food and water supplies, the destruction of which, they knew, would make a swift surrender likely.

Omission of such wider contextualisation or "structures" more generally limits the value of McCrum's assessments to a certain extent, and the value of the book is further lessened by the lack of care taken with regard to factual matters or diligence in general. Admiral Layton comes without a first name in the text or the index (that his name was Geoffrey can be found only in the small print on the flyleaf), and the index misses several page numbers for some entries. Added to this are misleading statements such as the suggestion that the Allied powers resorted to overland aid for the Chinese government after the Japanese invasion of China in May 1937. This refers to the Burma Road, which linked Rangoon through Lashio and northeast Burma to Chiang Kai-shek's new capital Chungking. In May 1937, however, this overland connection was a vision rather than a passable road – one that would not become operational until late 1938.

A final notable omission is that of Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, the GCO who had been put in charge of defending the city (in April 1941), but ended up having to sign the instrument of surrender. His role in the defeat made him a perfect scapegoat in the eyes of the British public, the general staff in London and not least Churchill himself, despite attempts (including his own) to clear his name. If the omission of Percival, and the contemporary and later historiographic controversy surrounding him, wasn't caused by the limitation of space alone (keeping in mind that the book started off as a master's dissertation), McCrum has missed a golden opportunity to make his research relevant to a wider debate. Only when read in this light can McCrum's work be seen as a useful addition to the debate about why Singapore fell; otherwise it lacks a certain degree of comprehension and depth.

Tilman Frasch

CATHERINE SMITH (ed.), *Resilience and the Localisation of Trauma in Aceh, Indonesia*. (ASAA Southeast Asia Publication Series). Singapore: National University of Singapore Press / Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018. Xii, 178 pages, SGD 38.00 / USD 25.55. ISBN 9788776942328 (pb)

Catherine Smith, an anthropologist, achieves something quite rare in the globalised and often entrenched debate on trauma and resilience: in her dense and vivid ethnography she depicts the quest of the local population of Aceh in Indonesia to understand and give some meaning to transgenerational suffering as a consequence of protracted political conflict. Even though the idiom of trauma has entered the medico-moral landscape of Aceh, its decades-long isolation has left the region less affected than other regions by the globalisation of psychiatry and consequent spread of standardised trauma therapies of Western origin. Smith's research focuses on ordinary citizens affected by the separatist conflict (1975 to 2005) between the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) and the security forces of the Indonesian government. Particularly in the North almost 80 per cent of the population was affected and accused of taking one side or the other. Villagers became victims of shootings, torture, threat, extortion and the burning of houses. Many suffered multiple traumas, as the region was also hit by the tsunami in December 2004, which caused more than 160,000 deaths in Aceh alone and destroyed large parts of the infrastructure.

The author draws her findings mostly from an intensive qualitative field study spanning a total of 17 months in 2008 and 2009, mostly in the northern parts of the country. The author arrived for her field research at a time of hope for a peaceful and more economically stable Aceh, almost four years after the tsunami and the

peace agreement. Her extensive data collection is based on the life stories of 53 Acehese women, most of whom she interviewed several times, plus expert interviews. All interviews were done in the Indonesian language, a language all interlocutors were familiar with, an asset that contributed to the deep insights the author was able to obtain from her fieldwork.

Smith explores the multidimensional aspects that shape the way the Acehese population received the concept of trauma and developed their own local responses far from the global trauma industry. She emphasises the reflective and intellectual work that conflict survivors themselves engage in when attempting to recover from political violence. In their quest to bear the unbearable they incorporate “trauma” – defined as “intense internal pressure” (p. 90) and adopted into the Indonesian language since the 1980s – into their already existing moral and normative framework. The latter serves as an anchor for those who seek support and cognitive explanations. The author dedicates a chapter to each of the key orientation points for the population: the memory of past transgenerational suffering (Chapter 2), the traditional spiritual world and the body (Chapter 3) and the support through religious teachings and practices (Chapter 4).

Smith’s starting point is the “ever present” (p. 24) historic narrative of Aceh’s years of suffering, as exchanged in daily life, which has developed into a healing practice. The constant reiteration and reassurance of heroic accounts culminate in what Smith terms an “ethos of strength and bravery” (p. 56), which has become an essential part of the Acehese identity. In her third chapter the author describes those who seek recourse within the spiritual world and its representatives – traditional healers and mediums who are seen as experts in matters of the body and corporeal vulnerability. She highlights the contested nature of spiritual practices and particularly of spiritual possession, as well as attempts by clients and healers alike to adjust these to the traditionally dominant belief system of Islam and the authority of the Qur’an. Smith attended more than 50 exorcisms, where conflict-related topics as well as everyday challenges were treated. Afterwards she examines the role religion plays in the local reception of trauma (Chapter 4). Many of her interlocutors describe in detail how it is mainly due to religious practices that they have developed the capacity to bear the pressure caused by trauma: regular prayers make them calm, tensions are released and feelings of gratitude towards God assist them in dealing with their pain. Further support stems from their belief that one’s date of death is predetermined by God and has to be accepted as destiny (p. 91). Trauma, in turn, is equated for many of Smith’s interlocutors with “the inability to accept destiny” (p. 108). This example illustrates how the traditional imaginary can act in supportive as well as in coercive ways. In the perception of local people, those who fail to recover “do not accept destiny”. The tsunami catastrophe, too, is seen as “an act of God” sent to end the conflict – in the perception of most, the natural disaster as well as the resolution of the conflict are

seen as concurrent, though in reality the peace agreement was only signed eight months after the tsunami.

In her last chapter, the author emphasises that the incorporation of the idiom of trauma into the medical-moral landscape has enabled a greater flexibility within the moral framework which, before the trauma discourse, declared those who failed to recover from their grief within a fixed time frame as “mentally ill”, leading to their social exclusion. One of her interlocutors pointedly expresses the change: “Actually things are better these days. These days we have *trauma*, it’s much lighter than before. In the past if a person was insane [peungo] [their] family would be forced to lock them up or carry them to the psychiatric hospital (p. 75).” Nonetheless, during Smith’s field research it was still a known practice to chain up family members in shackles if they had failed to recover from their grief and had become aggressive or drug addicted. As psychiatric hospitals were seen as “a place outside society” (p. 89), families feared that relatives sent to hospital would never return. The author in her last chapter outlines a new politics of care that is mainly driven by politicians, psychiatrists and journalists propagating medical care as a human right. They have managed to portray reformed mental health care as associated with emancipation and modernisation, yet an inadequate health care system, stigma and mistrust in doctors still prevail.

One of Smith’s major strengths is her ability to raise awareness of why individuals perceived as “mentally ill” and therefore “insane” represent such a danger for local communities. Her empiric findings include local understandings of the body and corporeal vulnerabilities – a research field that has still not been extensively researched. In the conception of many Acehnese, a person’s inner state and energy (*jiwa*, translated by Smith as “spirit/psyche”, p. 82) can easily be influenced by the actions and behaviour in their social surroundings. The role of a healer consists in strengthening and balancing the *jiwa*, an imaginary concept that in Aceh is given utmost importance, as it is also backed by Islamic teachings of an inner and outer body (p. 82). Smith’s profound research, which blends different perspectives, allows us to understand why, within the Acehnese imaginary, a burdened survivor represents a potential danger to the community, as his or her *jiwa* may act negatively on others. In doing so the author, in a probably unprecedented way, provides readers – particularly those with a Western background – a deeper understanding of why a community might fear serious problems when being confronted with traumatised individuals. In light of the presumably large number of people with potentially multiple traumas – according to one survey in the northern region, which suffered the most from the conflict, up to 36 per cent met the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 65 per cent potentially suffered from depression (p. 6) – social exclusion processes come to be understood as a necessary, if not commendable, consequence. In the perspective of parts of the local population, the large number of sufferers represents a threat, as their *jiwa* might impact negatively on others.

Another major strength of the study is to draw our attention to interlinkages between the mental, the cultural, the social and the political, especially when the author talks about “emancipation” from rigid norms and the perceived temporal coincidence of the tsunami and the peace agreement. One could also wonder if more flexibility within the medical-moral landscape, less stigmatisation and a new politics of care might lead to more emancipation and empowerment of local ordinary people – something the political elites might want to contain.

Nonetheless, one misses in Smith’s – at times repetitive – account a more critical stance towards the “ethos of bravery” and its potential link to the political realm. Though she states that the ethos plays a crucial role in the identity-building process of a “collective polity” (p. 25), and herself draws the link to GAM, the exact role of the liberation movement in this process remains unclear. One wonders the extent to which the discourse on bravery is not only reflected in GAM pamphlets but also driven and even prescribed by the political organisation: firstly, as an outcome of the need to continue recruiting fighters and secondly, with the intention of continuing its socio-political domination in the region even in times of peace. One can assume that the discourse on an ethos of bravery has probably been instrumentalised by political actors to create a specific memory policy, as we know from other regions in the world – (see e.g. Katharine Hodgkin: *Contested Pasts. The Politics of Memory*. London: Routledge, 2014; Cath Collins: *The Politics of Memory in Chile. From Pinochet to Bachelet*. Boulder: First Forum Press, 2013; Pierre Nora: *Les Lieux de Memoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984) – particularly as the author mentions that she received many similar responses from different people. From an anthropological perspective it would have been interesting to consider the extent to which political actors such as GAM have benefited from cultural and religious norms – to contain mourning and to accept destiny – or actively shaped and instrumentalised them to promote their political aims.

Moreover, with regard to the social exclusion towards those who do not live up to this model, one cannot but wonder about the impact of GAM in this process of creating insiders and outsiders, a common feature of liberation movements worldwide and part of an in-group effect of particular significance in times of threat and violence. Still, social in- and exclusion processes are also common in rural areas where those who do not conform to the norm risk being stigmatised. Therefore it would have been revealing to obtain more information about the local circumstances leading to social marginalisation processes and to determine whether the label “mental illness” was more quickly applied to those who, in addition to struggling to come to terms with traumatising events, also challenged the norms of the rural populace in other ways.

In Smith’s very detailed and dense account on Aceh, readers might wish for references to similar or differing concepts, attitudes and behaviours elsewhere in Indonesia and the regional and transregional contexts in which local communities have had to come up with their own solutions to suffering and trauma (see e.g.

Jaqueline Aquino Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh*. London: Routledge, 2002; Jesse Hession Grayman et al., Conflict Nightmares and Trauma in Aceh. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 33 (2009), pp. 290-312). A more pronounced theoretical framework and definition of such currently popular key words – prominent even in the title of the book – as “resilience”, “collective resilience” (p. 25) and “transgenerational resilience” (p. 26) would have added further value to the book. The author uses the terms mostly in reference to the continuous narratives of past and present bravery of the Acehnese population. However, one could have critically examined the extent to which these narratives can be regarded as a solid and enduring foundation for resilience. The still strong normative restriction of feelings of bereavement hints towards the (survival) practice of suppressing feelings, evident in statements such as the following: “[...] but if a person cries and says [...] ‘Why did my husband have to die?!’ [...] that is very bad. If a person mourns in that way we become dizzy” (p. 111). This example shows that regardless of the many “survival strategies”, pain and suffering remain a challenge, particularly as they risk undoing the precarious balance a person has managed to build up for herself.

This highly relevant ethnography adds to our still fragmentary knowledge about trauma, its somatic dimensions and the potential cultural and moral implications it holds for survivors. The multidimensional reception of trauma on the side of the affected population shows quite clearly the necessity of a more cross-culturally oriented psychiatry. Smith’s findings also underline the importance of more interdisciplinary research, in which the perspectives of anthropology, sociology, history, political sciences, psychology, medicine and neurosciences are combined to approach the complexity of the reality that one encounters not only on a macro but also on a local micro-level.

Beatrice Schlee

JÜRGEN RÜLAND, *The Indonesian Way: ASEAN, Europeanization, and Foreign Policy Debates in a New Democracy*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 312 pages, \$65.00. ISBN 978-1-5036-0285-4

The Indonesian Way is first and foremost an empirically dense interrogation of the beliefs, worldviews and historical narratives that inform and shape the policy preferences and responses of Indonesian foreign policy makers with regard to regional integration processes in Southeast Asia. But it is also an attempt to refine the theoretical field of comparative regionalism, especially of the dominant constructivist concepts of norm transfer and norm diffusion that have been heavily shaped by Eurocentric ideas and experiences of regional

integration. The interplay of an in-depth analysis of how Indonesians perceive and make sense of regional integration on the one hand, and a critical discussion of the many Western-centrist biases and related blind spots on which contemporary theories of regionalism still rest, on the other hand, makes this book distinct. The author argues that while Indonesian foreign policy actors at various times did adopt what one could refer to as “EU speak”, and that similarities in the terminology used seemed to imply the adoption of “the design, norms, and the ‘spirit’ of the EU, the opposite was the case: they sought inspiration from Europe precisely to retain the core components of their cognitive prior” (p. 230).

The author, Jürgen Rüländ, is Professor for International Relations at the Department of Political Science and head of the Southeast Asia programme at the University of Freiburg. He is renowned for his works on Indonesian foreign policy and regional integration processes in Southeast Asia. Hence, the book under review fits neatly into his research trajectory. Drawing on a close examination of the history of political thought on Indonesian foreign policy, Jürgen Rüländ identifies many traces of age-old political ideas and political culture, “highlighting the polyvalence of seemingly liberal-cosmopolitan concepts of European origin and their local interpretations” (p. 231). Essentially, Rüländ argues that there is no top-down, hierarchical transfer of ideas, norms or practices from Europe to Southeast Asia. Instead, it is through local prisms and seemingly ancient ideas and concepts that external ideas, norms and practices are first translated and localised, and in the process more often than not become transformed, as well.

The study uses interpretive research methods to address the research question on the extent to which the European model of regional integration changed the thinking of Indonesian foreign policy stakeholders regarding their own Southeast Asian regionalism. Is there something akin to an Indonesian way of making sense of, and subsequently practicing, regionalism? Or is there structural convergence in regional integration, in the sense that the EU model as the yardstick of regional integration is essentially emulated by others? The empirical material used to conduct such analysis includes a wide range of primary and secondary sources related to six stakeholder groups (government, NGOs, parliament, academia, media and business). While presenting what is essentially a single case study, the author, in order to explore ideational change and continuity over time, engages in diachronic comparison. Hence, while predominantly dealing with post-Suharto Indonesia, the part of the analysis that seeks to establish Indonesia’s “cognitive prior” on regionalism uses historical sources predating the post-New Order period, as well.

The book’s greatest strength lies in showcasing the importance of local knowledge and value systems when enquiring about non-Western conceptualisations of regionalism and regional integration. Through its detailed analysis

of six different Indonesian stakeholder groups and their respective framing, grafting and pruning of European ideas on regionalism, it reveals the extent to which these ideas have been fused with existing Indonesian concepts of regionalism and foreign policy. Rüländ thus demonstrates compellingly why research on norm diffusion and regionalism is often mistaken in its (often indirect) assumption that local actors act as mere recipients of ideas and norms originating from Europe. The book is insightful in that it shows that the contestation of liberal ideas is not merely a defensive act against certain “Western” ideas, but exposes Indonesia’s diverging normative core.

The book’s strength is also, to a certain extent, one of its weaknesses: it tends to juxtapose, especially in the conclusion, the concepts “Western” and “local”. In doing so it actually reproduces, to some degree, the binary conceptualisations of regionalism it set out to challenge in the first place. Not only is there a plethora of ideas on regionalism in Indonesia, let alone Southeast Asia, but the same can also be said for the EU. Brexit and the rise of EU-sceptic right-wing governments in various EU member states are just two factors that illustrate the rise and prevalence of diverging ideas on regionalism in Europe, as well. While the black box of the Indonesian foreign policy making apparatus is partly unlocked, the reader learns little about how and to what extent the different foreign policy stakeholders in Indonesia actually contribute to the foreign policy debates on ASEAN. Established theories of Indonesia’s foreign policy portray the country as rather top-heavy in terms of its foreign policy making, with the president’s office setting the tone and making the key decisions. It remains unclear after reading the book whether this rather general assumption needs to be questioned or not. Nor is it explained when and why Indonesian stakeholders resort to Western norms and ideas, and when and why to local ones.

To conclude, this book makes a strong contribution to the often Euro-centric debates on norm transfer and regionalism. It does so by challenging core assumptions, such as the depiction of local actors as “passive receivers for norms originating from the West”, via a close analysis of the foreign policy debates on ASEAN and regional integration in Indonesia across two administrations. The book’s core argument – that there is no so-called global script of regionalism, but instead local scripts that coexist side by side, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in a conflicting manner with Western scripts – is compellingly presented by the author. However, it offers less to readers whose main interest lies in gaining a better understanding of Indonesia’s foreign policy-making process, for its main argument is directed against the dominant, “Western-centrist” theories of regionalism.

Felix Heiduk

EVA PEJSOVA (ED.), *Guns, Engines and Turbines. The EU's Hard Power in Asia*. (Chaillot Papers). Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2018. 107 pages. ISBN 978-92-9198-76-8 (free online version)

This fascinating study examines authoritatively the EU's arms trade with Asia, which – given the arms race triggered by China, with 42% of global imports – is the world's largest arms market. The volume also finds that the more the EU produces various Asian strategy papers (all focusing on values, governance and soft power), the more incoherent the arms sales of its member states have become. Whoever produces anything sells everything to almost anyone (except for North Korea and Myanmar) with no strategic cohesion towards friends and foes alike. The EU's "value-based" foreign policy mantra, with its focus on human rights, the rule of law and multilateralism, appears not only unconvincing, but decidedly insincere and duplicitous. This is strong stuff to read, coming as it does not from dissident fringe scholars but from the highly reputed official EU defence think tank.

Europe is seen as an attractive alternative to the US hegemon, which is perceived as increasingly unreliable and unpredictable in its erstwhile security guarantees. EU member states deliver high quality arms and dual use technology with no strategic restraints and few conditionalities attached. Yet due to the lack of effective coordination by Brussels, with decisions on arms exports remaining a national competence, Asian partners have been seeking bilateral contacts, notably with France and the UK. For the EU, total arms exports amounted to 26% of the world's total from 2012–2016, making it the world's second largest supplier after the US. EU market shares among recipient countries in Asia are astounding: 82% in Brunei, 58% in Malaysia, 46% in Indonesia, 42% in Singapore, 41% in Thailand, 39% in New Zealand, 30% in Australia, 29% in South Korea and 26% in the Philippines (p. 8 and p. 19). Others such as Vietnam and Taiwan mostly procure from Russia and the US respectively. All of them want to modernise their militaries in view of the build-up in China, which from 2007 to 2017 increased its military spending by 118%, as well as seeking to diversify their procurement. The greatest expenditure goes towards upgrading naval capacities with submarines, frigates, maritime aviation and anti-ship missiles (p. 17). The most prominent example is Australia's decision to modernise its submarine fleet with French-made vessels.

The South China Sea is arguably Asia's most dangerous flashpoint. Here EU member states are the most prominent supplier to all littoral states. Interestingly, or perhaps shockingly, in spite of the 1989 EU arms embargo following the Tiananmen massacres of students and workers, China continues to be supplied with crucial dual use technology. France sold 60 diesel engines for frigates and sonar systems for submarines, Germany 40 engines for destroyers, submarines and self-propelled artillery (the latter by Deutz AG), and the

UK 80 turbofan engines for combat aircraft and six airborne radars for maritime patrol aircraft (p. 36 and p. 91). China also mass-produces military helicopters designed by Airbus France and the Safran Group (p. 33). Member states who remain in charge of export licences obviously choose a very loose interpretation of the EU's non-committal and non-enforceable "common criteria" for arms exports, which were agreed upon in 2008, as Liselotte Odgaard (p. 24) and Chantal Lavalée (p. 45) point out. In 2015 alone EU member states issued export licences for military equipment to China worth €300 million. With declining military spending in Western Europe, East Asia's growing market and arms race became a decisive factor in the survival of European arms makers, writes Felix Heidruk (p. 18). It is a world region where China has proved unwilling to be restrained in its hegemonic ambitions by international law and norms. Also, unlike Europe, Asia – due to Chinese objections – has no arms control agreements or confidence-building institutions such as the OSCE that could put a brake on the ongoing arms race, of which EU companies appear to be major beneficiaries.

Although the EU in 2005 and in 2010 appeared to move towards lifting its arms embargo against China (which remains effective only against lethal weapons), each time there was no unanimity amongst its member states, given China's hard-line stance and continued human rights violations. Given Xi Jinping's personal nationalistic dictatorship since 2012 the embargo is no longer put into question, as lingering illusions about Chinese democratic reforms and a constructive role in international affairs have been thoroughly dispelled amongst Europeans (p. 30), while China, spending between US\$ 10 to 20 billion on military R&D per year alone (p. 36), has increased its self-sufficiency in military procurement and acquired the remaining missing hardware mostly from Russia.

As Mathieu Duchatel writes, China is catching up in nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines, in energy and cyber weapons and quantum communication – if necessary by engaging in "technology cooperation" with the acquisition of European high-tech firms, such as the Spanish Aritex (p. 37), the German Thielert Aircraft Engines and the British AIM Altitude, all producing high-tech aircraft materials (p. 39), or through joint ventures with German Rolls Royce Power Systems and Dornier Seawings. The stated objective is to build a world-class military on a par with the US and to compete in arms exports beyond the current cheap standard infantry weapons and missiles sold to Pakistan and Africa.

With Korea, European arms sales increased following US refusals to sell high-tech missiles and precision-guided ammunitions (Zoe Stanley-Lockman, p. 54). European companies are more open to technology transfers for items such as tank engines or for the production of German submarines under licence. Japan has until recently relied exclusively on US weaponry for external

supplies. Since 2017, agreements on defence cooperation have been signed with the UK, France, Italy, Germany and Sweden, with little tangible results thus far, although Tokyo – like Seoul – was hurt by Washington’s refusal to sell advanced fighter jets (p. 57).

In contrast, in Indonesia, a country study by Bruno Hellendorff found that military spending is used rather for the upkeep and modernisation of its aging fleet and air force in order to control its waters more effectively. Procurement is subject to turf wars between politicians and the branches of the military, corruption and non-transparent budget decisions (p. 72), with frigates coming from the Netherlands, helicopters and transport planes from Airbus France, Leopard tanks from Germany and Sukhoi fighter jets from Russia. Europe’s appeal for Indonesia, as for the rest of the region, is that unlike the US, its arms exports come with little strategic thinking or political controls attached (p. 78). This small, well-researched volume concludes convincingly that in Asia, a very volatile world region, more coherent European strategic thinking – rather than moralisation – should replace the currently irresponsible patchwork of deal-making among national arms traders.

Albrecht Rothacher

Obituary

Magic Seeds in an Era of Darkness: V.S. Naipaul (1932–2018)

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad “Vidia” Naipaul, one of the most prominent writers of our times, passed away on 11 August 2018 at the age of 85. His complex identity suffused his life: Caribbean by birth, born and raised in Trinidad, he had the Indian immigrant background of his ancestors, Hindus of the Brahmin caste, who had crossed half the world to make a better living as bonded labourers in another part of the British Empire. Naipaul left Trinidad already in 1950 to study in the motherland of the Empire, which had begun to crumble with India and Pakistan’s independence in 1947. He travelled frequently, and to many ends of the world, but his country residence in Wiltshire became the focal point of his life.

His many travels took him repeatedly to South Asia, the Near East, Africa, the Caribbean and North America – but he would return to his Wiltshire residence to meditate and sort out his impressions, write his reports, travelogues, essays and fiction, trying to make sense out of what he had seen and perceived. He wrote his entire life, making him to one of the most respected authors of English prose. He received the most prestigious literary awards, among them the Booker Prize (for his novel *In a Free State*, 1971) and the Nobel Prize in Literature (2001). Queen Elizabeth knighted him in 1989, transforming him into “Sir Vidia”.

The criticism was always strong, and bitter. Like Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897–1999), he was accused of having internalised the perspective of the colonial overlords, a product of the East India Company’s famous commitment to create a class of Indians “English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”, as detailed by Lord Macaulay’s dreadful “Minute on Education” of 1835. Was Naipaul an Englishman by choice or was it perhaps his destiny as a former colonial subject? A certain nostalgia for empire is palpable, already before the formal end of the colonial epoch in Trinidad, as in his first novel *The Mystical Masseur* (1957) and *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) – the two novels that made him an acclaimed author.

His first, long-awaited journey to India in 1962, when the Empire had finally broken apart and even a small outpost like Trinidad and Tobago gained independence, was deeply disappointing. Accompanied by his wife Patricia Ann Hale, he tried to discover his ancestral past and the roots of his own identity, but he could hardly relate his expectations to what he saw. For Naipaul, Indian culture appeared to have lost its dynamic. Naipaul found himself a stranger, a critical observ-

er more than participant. He remained more or less an outsider, pointing with his finger to the scars left by the colonial past all across the social and cultural milieu.

In particular the first of his three novels on India, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), is a relatively merciless account of India and its self-declared timeless social, cultural and ritual traditions. Naipaul's India is an almost hopeless case. Almost everything he perceives arouses his sense of fundamental opposition, even the idea of selfless service in the Gandhian Ashram he visits. Naipaul himself describes his emotions in the country of his ancestors as a kind of desperation – for him, India was a devastated culture. The titles of the following two books, though milder in tone, speak for themselves: *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004), perhaps the greatest Indian poet in English, wrote an extremely bitter essay on Naipaul's imaginary of India, while Salman Rushdie and many others distanced themselves from Naipaul.

Others continued to see him as one of their own at last – a representative of the Indian diaspora who had managed to inscribe himself into Great Britain's cultural memory. Naipaul was always ready to enter a dialogue. He repeatedly came to South Asia, speaking at the famous Jaipur literary festival before thousands of listeners, and more recently – already in his wheelchair – to the Dhaka literary festival in 2016. His second wife Nadira, born in Mombasa (Kenya) to Pakistani parents and having grown up in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka (East Pakistan until 1971), prompted his growing interest in Bengali literature and culture in his final years.

Naipaul used to respond slowly, hesitating, cautious, groping for the right expression, melancholic and with a good sense of humour and irony at the same time. He was a gifted speaker, able to maintain his focus. At the same time he was respected for his listening, particularly during his many travels. He would begin by sorting out his impressions during the journeys, writing reports and essays. After this, fictional writing would follow. He didn't avoid confrontation, but preferred a clear statement to a friendly statement, as long as he perceived it to be true. *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998) are critical accounts of Islam in the 20th century, particularly with regard to Khomeini's Iran. His interactions with the Shia theological orthodoxy in Qom demonstrate Naipaul's courage to enter the tiger's den.

In doing so, he could play on his Indian background, allowing him to be perceived as “one of us” in a way, even though he was non-Muslim. He never tired of raising his critical voice, and didn't belong to those who, in their effort to understand the “other”, tend towards cultural relativism and refrain from moral and political judgements. Naipaul was everything but non-judgemental: he did judge. And his judgements could be tough and even enervating. Critics such as Salman Rushdie and Edward Said saw in Naipaul's judgements on Is-

lam and the Islamic countries the traces of a reactionary resentment hardly hidden behind the rhetoric of enlightened speech.

Even the role of Islam in South Asia did not find mercy in Naipaul's eyes. Some 14.2 per cent of India's population is Muslim, at least 172 million people. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, non-Muslim minorities from small sections of society are systematically marginalised and even threatened. However, Naipaul's critical books on India and on Islam make him no friend of the rising religious-based nationalism in India, which sees Islam only as a disturbing factor in what would otherwise be a holistic cultural environment completely at peace with itself.

Naipaul could not easily take part in nationalist identity politics. He was far too aware of the deep wounds of colonialism that had disturbed the cultural world of its subjects from within, leading to its traumatising and even self-destruction. Nationalist radicalism was for Naipaul a form of cultural self-destruction.

Willie Somerset Chandran, in Naipaul's novels *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), is a kind of alter ego of the author. Born and brought up in Mozambique, the unmoored intellectual and recently divorced Chandran (*Magic Seeds*) follows the suggestion of his sister in Berlin to seek contact with the Maoist guerrillas in Indian tribal regions. Chandran decides to go to India and join their fight, but his romantic ideas of the communist fight for justice are soon frustrated. Nonetheless, it takes him several years before he decides to give up and surrender to the police, at which he receives a lengthy prison sentence. Friends in London publish his earlier collection of poetry and lobby for him on the political level. They manage to get him released and returned to London, where he finds himself in an upper-middle-class environment with its complicated relationships. After his years of hiding under the simplest living conditions and in prison, the new environment is no less alien to him than the endless ideological discussions in the Indian Jungle.

Naipaul's occupation with Africa is no less impressive, particularly his extraordinary Congo novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) and his late collection of essays *The Masque of Africa* (2010). The essays, in particular, are filled with a melancholic view of the past. The Kampala of 1966, where Naipaul had spent some time as a lecturer at the famous Makerere University, is hardly recognisable 42 years later. The population explosion and uncontrolled construction work, the signs of urban decay, the decline of law and structure estrange and isolate the observer – a role that he otherwise loved to cultivate. During his trip to Uganda in 2008 he also visits places that he could not visit or considered unimportant in 1966, like the grave of king Kabaka Mutesa I (1837–1884), where Naipaul is charmed by the pre-colonial architecture of the Ugandan grass houses, but at the same time aware of the cruelty of the feudal system that prevailed in the region immediately before the advent of the colonial colonising powers.

However, even in colonisation he could not see a civilising power. Much more tangible was the process of cultural uprooting that accompanied colonisation. Looking out over the seemingly endless urban landscape, continually spreading further out, and the churches and mosques on the hilltops, he reasons: “Foreign religion, to go by the competing ecclesiastical buildings on the hilltops, was like an applied and contagious illness, curing nothing, giving no final answers, keeping everyone in a state of nerves, fighting wrong battles, narrowing the mind” (chapter 1, *The Masque of Africa*, 2010).

With *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) Naipaul returned once again to the Caribbean – a region that he occasionally described as his real homeland. Even here, Naipaul perceives above all the losses and terror of Western cultural domination. The Royal Swedish Academy explained in awarding the Nobel Prize of 2001 that Naipaul forced his readers “to look at the presence of a repressed history”, which places Naipaul correctly into the context of postcolonial writing. He remained a controversial author, however, who was much read, but also rejected, loved and hated, criticised, but not ignored.

Naipaul was not a great fan of magical realism or trendy ways of producing literature in general. He was more or less a conservative modernist in his narratives: driven by the will to understand and to explain in complex sentences but relatively linear plots. Beyond that, he declared the end of the literary prose long form, the novel, into whose development he had invested a lot of energy.

His language was English and nothing else. The Bhojpuri of his ancestors was a closed door for him. His language was an acquired language, but he transformed it into a tool to negotiate his complex identity between the margins of the Empire and the postcolonial centre. Without doubt, he was one of the great narrators of our time, whether or not one loves his prose. Nobody is forced to agree with his rather harsh statements on India, on Islam, on lost cases of identity. His judgements were straightforward, often without mercy, sometimes stubborn. Writing was a serious matter to him. He did not take it easy, wherever he was. The Wiltshire residence was not made to transform him into a connoisseur of the world. On the contrary: the world made him suffer. Travelling was essential for him, not for some kind of touristic experience or enjoyment, but rather as a painful way to discover the world and its suffering – to discover the world and to discover his own self at the same time.

However, he was not depressive, however dark his diagnosis of our epoch. He loved British understatement and subtle irony. Certainly, his search for a world where he could feel himself at home, in which a secure identity is possible, could appear to be desperate. His realism was suffused with a vision of a world in which identity was possible, and in which different identities could connect into a conclusive whole. Whether and how this is possible remains an

open question – and the life achievement of the great author V. S. Naipaul was to support and maintain this openness to the future.

Heinz Werner Wessler

Authors

DR. STEFANO BEGGIORA, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University, Ca' Capello, San Polo 2035, 30125 Venice, Italy
stefano.beggiora@unive.it

PROF. DR. MARINE CARRIN, Center for Social Anthropology, LISST, University Toulouse Jean Jaurès, Maison de la Recherche 5, allées Antonio-Machado, 31058 Toulouse Cedex 9, France
marinecarrin@hotmail.fr

DR. TILMAN FRASCH, Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, Rosamond Street West, Off Oxford Road, Manchester M15 6LL, UK
t.frasch@mmu.ac.uk

PROF. DR. JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Abteilung Islamischer Orient, Maximilianstraße 42, 80538 München, Germany
JSFrembgen@t-online.de

DR. LIDIA GUZY, School of Asian Studies, Study of Religions Department, University College Cork (UCC) / National University of Ireland, Cork (no post-code), Ireland
l.guzy@ucc.ie

DR. FELIX HEIDUK, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4, 10719 Berlin, Germany
felix.heiduk@swp-berlin.org

DR. MARGARET LYNNGDOH, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 16, 51003 Tartu, Estonia
niniyngdoh@gmail.com

DR. IRENE MAJO GARIGLIANO, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), 3, rue Michel-Ange, Paris 16e, France
irenemajogarigliano@gmail.com

DR. MARIANNE QVORTRUP FIBIGER, Department of the Study of Religion,
School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3, 8000
Aarhus C, Denmark
mf@cas.au.dk

RICHARD ROEWER, Institute of Asian Studies, GIGA German Institute of Glo-
bal and Area Studies, Rothenbaumchaussee 32, 20148 Hamburg, Germany
richard.roewer@giga-hamburg.de

DR. ALBRECHT ROTHACHER, European Action Service (EEAS), 9A Rond Point
Schuman, 1046 Brussels, Belgium
albrecht.rothacher@eeas.europa.eu

DR. BEATRICE SCHLEE, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Windausstraße 16,
79110 Freiburg, Germany
beatrice.schlee@abi.uni-freiburg.de

DR. DIETRICH SCHMIDT-VOGT, Faculty of Environment and Natural Resources,
University of Freiburg, Tennenbacherstraße 4, 79106 Freiburg, Germany
dietrich.schmidt-vogt@waldbau.uni-freiburg.de

DR. UWE SKODA, India and South Asia Studies, School of Culture and Society,
Aarhus University, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 7, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
skoda@cas.au.dk

DR. HARALD TAMBS-LYCHE, Department of Sociology (Emeritus), University
of Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, France
<http://haraldtamblyche.academia.edu/>

PROF. DR. HEINZ WERNER WESSLER, Department for Linguistics and Philology,
Uppsala University, Box 635, 75126 Uppsala, Sweden
heinzwerner.wessler@lingfil.uu.se

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Fear and Fright in South Asian Religion and Society

Special Issue edited by Stefano Beggiora, Lidia Guzy, and Uwe Skoda

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