

MARGARET LYNGDOH

Transformation, Tradition, and
Lived Realities: Vernacular Belief Worlds
of the Khasis of Northeastern India



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In Memoriam:

Dising Maring Tigerman (c.1930–2012) – He called me “daughter”.

Tigerman Dising Marin, Summer 2010, Pahamskhen village, Ri-Bhoi District,
Meghalaya. Photo by Margaret Lyngdoh

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Article I

Lyngdoh, Margaret 2012. The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Shillong: Khasi Belief Narratives and Violence Against Women. *Asian Ethnology* 71 (2), 207–224.

Article II

Lyngdoh, Margaret 2015. On Wealth and Jealousy among the Khasis: Thlen, Demonization and the Other. *Internationales Asienforum* 46 (1–2), 169–186.

Article III

Lyngdoh, Margaret (forthcoming). Tiger Transformation Among the Khasis of Northeastern India: Belief Worlds and Shifting Realities. *Anthropos* 111 (2).

Article IV

Lyngdoh, Margaret (forthcoming). Spirit Propitiation and Corpse Re-animation: Belief Negotiations Among the Khasis of Northeastern India. In: Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (eds.), *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I grew up in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, Northeast India. Due to its multifaceted indigenity, the region is prone to insurgency and identity politics. I was an onlooker to the fight for “racial purity” among the communities, a local conflict that sprung from a mixed population in the urban center. This led to waves of communal violence beginning in October 1979, utilising the slogan “chase the non-tribals away” (lit. *beh dkhar*). In 1987, the Nepali minority in Shillong became the target for mob violence and social unrest (“chase the Nepalis away”; lit. *beh Nepali*). Soon after, in 1991–1992, anger and brutality were directed towards the economic migrants in Meghalaya. I was thus born into an unstable environment of racism and government politics, one that imposed the President’s rule and Armed Forces Special Powers Act to tackle “militancy” in various parts of Northeastern India.

Because my mother is an Assamese Catholic and my father belongs to the Khasi indigenous faith, my religious upbringing incorporated Christian tenets, indigenous Khasi beliefs, and the vernacular practices of Assamese culture. My exposure to this confluence positions me, as a researcher, on the margins of Khasi society: I am part of the community, but I also remain a distant “other”, neither fully foreign nor completely “indigenous” to my own home.

However, it was only in 2007, when I was involved in a project documenting rice myths of Northeast India, that I began to become conscious of multiple expressions of “dark” folklore. I was then working as a research assistant in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at North-Eastern Hill University. I gradually became aware of a vast wealth of Khasi beliefs that exist beyond the forefront of everyday culture, traditions that still subtly manifest in daily practices of the people, shaping the Khasi reality. I was drawn to the tiger-men and tiger-women; practitioners of “name magic” who carry a fearful reputation; Thlen, a demonic deity who is satisfied with nothing less than human blood; and, finally, the spirits of the dead who are propitiated only with human sacrifice. It was my impression that other scholars did not approach these topics due to the narratives of fear that circulated around them. Further, many Khasi intellectuals marginalise such beliefs, relegating them into the past and casting them to the realm of fantasy and “superstition”. Thus I decided to explore these themes, a choice which has informed me about life, folklore, and my own culture, and one that ultimately led me to Estonia.

It was in the winter of 2010 that I had my first glimpse of snow and began as a student at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, which was to become my home for the next six years. Today, after eight years of dedicated fieldwork in various areas of the Khasi Hills and five years of research and writing, I have come to apprehend, to an extent, the various social processes that operate at different levels in the Khasi society, discovering that it is possible to deconstruct the stereotypes through research and interpretation. I understand now that Khasi belief is complex, replete with undercurrents of the “dark” folklore that I was initially inspired to study. I have

further realized that the marginalisation and manipulation of the Khasi communities living in the peripheral areas of the Khasi Hills is a strategy of the dominant religious and political institutions – and that it is in no way accurate to view oral culture and indigenous religion as markers of “primitive” thought patterns or intelligence.

I am very grateful for all of the insights that my doctoral research has granted me. The years that I have spent in Tartu have been a learning experience. Several individuals are responsible for guiding me, and I acknowledge them to be my super-heroes. Firstly, I acknowledge Ülo Valk, my very patient supervisor, mentor, and friend, who believed in me so much that I, too, began to have faith in myself. Next, my parents Sadik Lyngdoh and Gabrielle W. Lyngdoh, who trusted fate and sent me into (at the time) an unknown country. I acknowledge the great help of Laur Järv, my husband, who had the (mis)fortune to marry me: you supported me every single time. I want to thank my sister Aldalin Lyngdoh for all the computers she has bought for me; it is also fortunate that you work in a library, because without you, I do not know how I would have accessed the literature that I have. Claire Scheid, dear friend and colleague with whom I discussed so many research questions: thank you also for helping me with language editing. I thank Damang Syngkon, my friend and translator who has been there with me from the very beginning of it all. Thank you Ergo-Hart Västriik for your close reading of this text and for your insightful comments. I am additionally indebted to all my colleagues in the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore who have helped me, learned to eat spicy Indian food with me, and, most of all, have always been there for me when times got rough – thank you Merili, Pihla, Anastasiya, Maili, Liilia and Indrek Peedu.

I would like to thank the Centre for Folklore Studies, Ohio State University, for allowing me to be a visiting scholar. In particular, I thank Amy Shuman (my teacher and mentor at OSU), Dorothy Noyes (who kindly gave me her office to use), and Cassie Patterson. I acknowledge also the kindness of the Study of Religions Department, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, who also welcomed me as a visiting scholar. I remain indebted to my teacher and mentor Lidia Guzy, to James Kapalo, and to Jenny Butler. I thank also Gregory Alles (McDaniel College, USA) for his ongoing support and my kind friend Jeana Jorgensen (Butler University), who proofread this introduction.

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Tartu, March 2016

INTRODUCTION

During the Sixteenth ISFNR (International Society for Folk and Narrative Research) Congress in Lithuania, 2013, as part of the discussion after a paper I had presented, Leonard Primiano¹ asked me rather candidly, “Well, Margaret, have you thought about how your work is going to contribute to the greater corpus of belief studies?” At the time, I did not know how to respond to this question. I had never thought about this aspect of my research. How would my fieldwork and analysis, based on a minority ethnicity in Northeast India, contribute to the greater corpus of theory on belief studies? Since then, I have often returned to his question when approaching articles and presentations. I humbly attempt here, as well, to answer it.

The aim of this study is to examine how marginalised genres of folklore express themselves in, and are related to, socio-psychological tensions within the Khasi community. Through analyzing traditions of the supernatural, an attempt is made to locate “dark” or negative supernatural beliefs and document their subsequent impact on the social life of the Khasis. The understanding that multiple genres of folklore function as communicative modalities which dictate social behaviour and “normalcy” is crucial to the achievement of the goal that underlies this thesis: the building of a sustainable research project which takes into consideration the actual vernacular life of the Khasi people. Therefore, this PhD thesis postulates the following research questions: How are articulations of Khasi belief manifested in modernity? What is the cultural impact – and origin – of these manifestations? What does “supernatural” folklore reveal about the complicated socio-religious landscape of Khasi sub-communities? Verbal genres of folklore have a significant impact on the construction of community opinion, and it is only through thorough examination of the extent to which such genres have influence, that a possible solution to the present “witch-hunts”, negative stereotyping, and mob violence can be determined. The articles that are included in this work also explore the manner in which belief narratives are linked to vernacular identity construction.

This dissertation is a culmination of fieldwork analysis, focusing on the role of belief and its modes of transformation within the context and society it stems from – in this case, among the Khasi. Because Northeast India is home to more than two hundred distinct ethnic communities² (Wouters and Subba 2013: 130), the political representation of each is central to the construction of identity which is tied directly to finance and welfare: the government of India bestows each ethnic group named in the 6th schedule of the Indian Constitution (“scheduled tribes”) with certain benefits, including reservation in government jobs, scholarships, and stipends (Constitution of India 2011). Each minority ethnic community seeks to be included in this 6th Schedule. Khasi folklore, therefore, is a manifestation of “traditional” indigenous belief, even within a

¹ Chair and Professor, Religious Studies, Cabrini College. Author of the seminal article “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife” (Primiano 1995).

² As is elegantly expressed in the video by Pillai (2014).

dominant Christian context, but also is the product of a community's attempts to preserve its historical identity within the framework of an administration that rewards indigeneity. In the Khasi context, belief is the result of a number of stimuli: concerns over the loss of tradition, confusion within an unstable urban environment, isolation in light of foreign influx and the conflation of cultures.

To Leonard Primiano, I would now reply that I hope that by examining Khasi beliefs, my research contributes specific examples from the marginalized environment of Northeast India that allow us to see belief studies as simultaneous and multiple articulations of a culture's conflicted intentions and memories. These contradictions express themselves in the particular manifestations described and examined in the various articles that comprise this dissertation. This work attempts to contribute to the genre of belief studies by presenting scholarship as it is seen from the perspective of a community caught in the confluence of change, as well as to represent and examine the community's own attempts to draw boundaries around its religion, identity, and belief.

1. KHASI CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I venture to provide a description of the topics that frame this thesis. The disparate subjects of Khasi identity, belief system and brief folkloristic research history will help to contextualise and locate this study in the backdrop of contemporary studies in folkloristics. This segment also lays the groundwork for the theoretical considerations that have been undertaken. I stress those aspects of Khasi social and cultural history which seem to me are most relevant for the purpose of the analysis of Khasi supernatural folklore.

1.1. The Khasis and the Politics of Identity

The Khasi communities — which include the Khyntiam, Jaintia, Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam — comprise a group of indigenous peoples in Northeastern India and they make up the majority of the ethnic population of Meghalaya. They may be further divided into Maram, Pnar, Biate, Nongtraï, Muliang, Marngar *et cetera*. The conventional view about the origin of the Khasi people of Meghalaya is that they are a people of Austric origin who migrated from Southeast Asia, speaking a Mon–Khmer/Mon–Annam linked language. The Khasis had no script of their own until the arrival of the Welsh Calvinistic Missionaries (more popularly known as the Presbyterians today) in 1841–42, as will be discussed below.

With an approximate population of 1.5 million (Statistical Profile 2013: 167), the Khasi people are matrilineal and as such, the society is structured around women unlike the patriarchal social systems found even in the neighbouring states of Northeast India in which men are given the foremost role in the family and the community. The Khasi social system is based on the historical setup of matriliney, according to which a clan traces its origin from the *lawbei*, or the first ancestress. After marriage, husbands live in the wife’s parental house, children take the mother’s surname, and the youngest daughter only “inherits” ancestral property (Cantlie 2008 [1934]: 97).

Inheritance among the Khasis is not as is usually understood to be the passing on of ownership of property. Ownership is key in the concept of inheritance in the usual understanding of the word. In the Khasi society, the youngest daughter is the custodian of the family home because in Khasi law, the *khadduh*, or youngest daughter performs the ceremonies relating to death and deposition of the ashes and bones into the clan ossuary. She does not have the right to sell off, or-dispose of lands or family property without consulting her brother and maternal uncle. This practice is rather unique in the legal system of the Khasis and has been misunderstood by people outside of the Khasi community. Therefore, the youngest daughter is not the “owner” of family property as is commonly misrepresented. But with mass Christian conversions, the abuse of this matrilineal practice has become rampant and many cases have been

reported where this rule has been transgressed and the youngest daughter has appropriated the family property thereby leaving her siblings penniless.³

The matrilineal system is also linked to the clan and kinship system wherein the *Iawbei* is the venerated primeval ancestress; her brother, *Thawlang*, is the maternal uncle who acts as the initiator or ritual performer for all clan rituals. As such, the Khasi landscape is dotted with monoliths which are erected in memory of deceased ancestors — the horizontal stones are the *mawkynthei* (female stones) and these are representative of the *Iawbei*, the first ancestress; the vertical stones are set up to commemorate *Thawlang*, the brother of the first ancestress. In earlier times, the matrilineal system was organised so that among the Pnar community of the Jaintias, men only visited their wives' homes after dark and left at dawn and men did not partake of food during these visits (Chowdhury 1978: 126–155). The sole function was to procreate, and the Khasi term to indicate that a man and woman have decided to live together is *shong kha*, which literally means 'to help to birth'. I infer that the megalithic structures might be representative of fertility and procreation.

A significant feature of the position of women in the Khasi society is their association with the hearth, which is symbolically seen as what binds a Khasi family together. In modern Khasi homes, hearths are not used anymore, but the kitchen is the centre of family life and it is the woman's role to build up a contented family home. There are numerous examples how this idea is practiced and made popular in the present-day Khasi society. To illustrate, there is a Khasi name that is popularly given to girls – *Teilarympei* – which means "one who builds, consolidates the hearth". In the traditional social system of the Khasis, if there are problems within the clan, the clan ancestress is invoked and it is her responsibility to look after the well being and upkeep of the clan. The youngest daughter within the family also has the responsibility to be the custodian of the ancestral property and is the inheritor of the right to carry out rituals and ceremonies related with the clan. Because of this, the number of homeless people and beggars among the Khasis are limited; it is the duty of the youngest daughter of the house to care for any clan member in need. If this responsibility is neglected, it is a matter of great shame for the other clan members. (Singh 1979a: xxxvi; 1979b: 103)

In the years 1826–1829, the British succeeded in crushing the Khasi resistance and establishing a trade corridor from Assam to Sylhet, now in present day Bangladesh. This marks the years of the Khasi rebellion led by Tirot Sing, the Chief of Nongkhlaw. After the treasonous defeat of Tirot Sing in 1829, the British gained access to this road, by a treaty they made with Dewan Sing, the Chief of Sohra. Thus, they first established their headquarters at Sohra, which was called the Cherra Station or Cherrapunjee (Singh 1979c: 43). The first

³ I personally know of a family in the Laban locality in Shillong, where according to the desire of the parents, the siblings lawfully signed over the family home, including the nursing home, to their youngest sister. After the death of their parents, the youngest sister told her siblings to leave the family home and also closed down the nursing home without consulting the other members of her family. There was no court case that was filed.

schools and health facilities were established here as the various missionary activities commenced. This is the reason why the standard language spoken today in Shillong is Khasi in the dialect originating in Sohra. Sohra traditions as well as its dialect began to be perceived as the seat of high Khasi culture. This lends us an understanding of the transformation of the connections between identity and common folklore. Earlier theories attribute folklore and belief to a “shared” common culture. The 18th and 19th century views of folklore in Europe as consequence of a common origin, shared identity, and nationality prevailed widely. The assumptions of folklore stemming from the “rural” and the “illiterate” were at the forefront of early folklore studies (Ó Giolláin 2014). Alan Dundes, however, undermined the pre-existing views, declaring in 1980 that, “The term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is — it could be a common occupation, language, or religion — but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own” (Dundes 1980: 1–3). Practices, beliefs, traditions which a community or folk group partakes in together, and which acts as a marker, constitute folklore which then become identifiable with a particular community.

In order to address the connections between shared folklore and identity among the Khasi sub-communities, I will refer to an early passage printed in the first secular Khasi periodical, *U Khasi Mynta*⁴ (lit. ‘The Khasis Today’) (1896) edited by Hormurai Diengdoh (Sawian 2014), where the solution of a single identity was posited. I quote the following passages from Kynpham Singh’s 1979 publication:

“Khasi” ka thew ba baroh u Khun ka ri Khasi shityllup, u Synteng, U War, U Khasi bad U Bhoi ki long shi para.

“(The common nomenclature ‘Khasi’ for the inhabitants of the Khasi Hills, the Synteng, the War, the Khasi and the Bhoi indicate that they are of the same stock)” – *U Khasi Mynta*, Naitung, 1896.

I have quoted the above passage to stress that Khasis and Jaintias are one and that their religion is also one. (Singh 1979a: xxiv; 1979b: 91)

The connection between identity and religious belief is clearly made here by Kynpham Singh who makes an attempt to homogenise the variations of the sub-tribes, which come under the common political umbrella of “Khasi”. This is also reflected in the tendency and attitude in the year 1896, when the community was threatened by the host of various missionaries and subsequently felt a need for a common, unifying identity and religion. I may also point out the significance of the year of Singh’s books, 1979, was just seven years after the new state of Meghalaya was carved out of the Northeastern State of Assam. Therefore, the necessity for a single, uniform political entity was crucial for the main-

⁴ The first Khasi newspaper began in 1889 called *U Nongkitkhubor* (lit. ‘Newsbearer’) (Language Research Institute 2009).

tenance of a “Khasi identity” during the formative and fledgling years of the State

However, movement towards unity also implies a pre-existing diversity within a community, which is not yet sure of its place alongside the various other ethnic groups in the region. In the religious life of the Khasis, the situation of an uneasy coexistence of the indigenous religion and Christianity with its multiple denominations was also present. Modernity as a legacy of Christianity also presented a challenge, which shaped the group dynamics into transformation. The layered, nuanced, and conflicted circumstances thus demanded a resolution. Addressing the concept of folklore, Charles Briggs in his article “What We Should Have Learned from Américo Paredes” (2012) noted the singular idea that Américo Paredes (1915–1999) was trying to put forward in his 1958 publication: “Folklore, for Paredes, was not made within a sphere of sameness and then transported across a radicalised boundary but was forged in cultural, economic, and physical conflicts associated with inequality, injustice, and violence” (Briggs 2012: 93).

The transformation of the political identity here may be seen in the above quote from *U Khasi Mynta*: the Lyngngam sub-community of the Khasis has not been mentioned because they were initially not perceived to be part of the greater Khasi identity. Philip Richard Thornhagh Gurdon (1914) also endorsed this view in his ethnography on the Khasis simply by adding an appendix called “The Lyngngams” and says about them that:

Although mention has been made incidentally in various parts of this monograph of Lyngngam customs, it has been thought necessary to give the Lyngngams a separate chapter, as these people differ so very greatly from the Khasis in their manner of life, and in their customs.... All Lyngngams claim to be Khasis, they dislike being called Garos. (Gurdon 1914: 99)

Umar Rolf von Ehrenfels, however, writing about the Lyngngam in 1955, contradicts this view and tries to show that though there are similarities with the Garo community, “The Lyngngams are situated between the Khasis and the Garos, not only geographically, but also culturally. Speaking a Khasi dialect and belonging to a Khasi State politically, they are also linked through oral tradition and legendary history with the Khasis.” (1955: 11)

In the present day among the Khasis, I felt that the diversity of identity should be stressed because a lot of the material that informs the articles that make up this thesis, originates from border areas of the Khasi Hills, where identities are shifting alongside religious affiliations and belief. Narratives are adapted to support or to deconstruct, while identities are created and shaped according to need. I may refer here to Philippe Ramirez (2014), whose research in Northeastern India among peoples of the border areas of the various states, reveals that identities are not fixed because ethnicity continues to be fluid; for people of the various sub-communities, identities are located at the margins of the dominant groups (see also Haokip 2014).

I may re-emphasise here that, “Khasi” as an ethnic group is a conglomerate of various communities: Khyntiam, Jaintia, Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam. Each community has its own beliefs and religious expressions — although due to the widespread conversion discussed above most people within the communities are Christianised — and one might argue this to be the linking factor across the Khasi groups. Perhaps, I may also suggest that the word Khasi historically did not necessarily refer at all to this collection of communities.

Here I quote Kynpham Singh, citing Captain Robert Boileau Pemberton in his *Report on the Eastern Frontier* (1835): “The whole of the mountainous country, until within a few miles of the descent into the plain of Assam, is inhabited by the people called by us Cossyas, but who denominate themselves Khyee”. Singh later continues: “How the Khasis got to be called by their present name there is no record because ancient chronicles mis-identified them with the ‘Garrows’” (Singh 1979a: v; 1979c: 33).

During the Hill States Autonomous Movement, before which the whole of Northeast India was called Assam, Williamson Ampang Sangma pioneered the demand for a separate state for the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos. Thus Meghalaya was created in 1972 and the word Khasi became a denominator of an ethnic identity created through the demand for statehood. As central as “Khasi identity” has become politically and culturally for the people of Meghalaya in the modern day, it is still a constructed concept based on historical migration, etic categorisation, and necessary social construction for political means.

1.2. Khasi Indigenous Religion

Before I delve into the religious outlook of the Khasi communities, I would like to consider the concepts of religion and indigenous, and the implications that these terms have in the Khasi backdrop. In Religious Studies, the concept of religion is problematic because it is primarily a Western notion associated with the Judaeo-Christian cosmology (Alles 2005; Asad 1993; Balagangadhara 2005 [1994]). These scholars contend that the concept of religion needs to be re-examined because it assumes as its framework, a Western, individualistic position with a strict separation between “religious life” and “political life”. Critics have accused this term of distorting the meanings of the cultural phenomena on which it is imposed because it is a product of European, Christian historical development, and as such it is not applicable to non-western worldviews. Religion, as it is used by scholars now, is more sensitive to the framework and culture that the alleged “religious” action or belief springs from. In this thesis, I use the term “religion” cautiously because the belief system of the Khasis does not conform to traditional Christian understanding of the word “religion”. Although, when the Khasis felt the real threat to their way of life as a result of the proselytisation by the Christian Western missionaries, they (the Khasis) tried to inform the Khasi intelligentsia of the time, about the salient features of the Khasi worldview by setting up a printing press. The Seng Khasi, which I

will discuss below was organised as an institution to protect the interests of the Khasis who are not Christian converts. This institution was unable to reach the Khasi people in the same way as did the missionaries and to date remains mostly invisible in the lives of those Khasis who still follow the Khasi “religion”.

Religious studies scholar James Cox defines the term indigenous in quite a limited manner by restricting it to location, the place to which a people ‘belong’, and to kinship; including the central role attributed in indigenous societies to ancestor spirits” (2007: 71). This means that he provides three criteria for a community to be designated as being “indigenous”: place, kinship, and ancestor veneration. Further, his definition of the ideologically and theologically loaded term, “religion”, is based rather on the “socio-cultural, non essentialist” pragmatic view. He writes, “Religion refers to identifiable communities that base their beliefs and experiences of postulated non-falsifiable realities on a tradition that is transmitted authoritatively from generation to generation” (Cox 2007: 85). This approach and definition of indigenous religion provides an appropriate framework to the present study. As is outlined in the articles that make up this thesis, special persons among the Khasis experience alternate realities, and the community supports these experiences through the belief worlds, which encompass and permeate the vernacular life ways. In addition, it is through oral means that the transmission of traditions takes place.

For the purposes of furthering this discussion about the beliefs and practices of the Khasis, the term “indigenous religion” is also preferred because contemporarily the *Niam Khasi* (lit. Khasi religion), *Niam tynrai* (lit. original or root religion) and *Niam tip briew tip Blei* (Man-knowing God-knowing religion), as it is variously known in the Khasi language, is relationally linked with Christianity.⁵ The ritual and rhetoric of traditional belief and practices were formalised by the Seng Khasi. Formed in 1899, this organisation sought to preserve the socio-cultural interests of the indigenous religion and the Seiñ Raij (for the Jaintia community in Jowai formed in 1935 and instituted in a similar manner to the Seng Khasi). Accordingly, these institutions formalised the tenets of the Khasi and Jaintia religion 1) *Kamai ia ka hok* (earn righteousness); 2) *tip briew [also, tip kur, tip kha]* (know your duty to your clan, alternatively, know your clansmen and kinsmen); and 3) *tip blei* (know the covenants and rules laid down by God). These three cardinal principles were agreed upon by the Seng Khasi and the Seiñ Raij (Lamare 2005: 113). The use of the term “indigenous religion” gains significance in the context of the increasing awareness of the distinctiveness of ritual and belief practices as being apart from Christianity. Khasi thinkers elucidating upon the rites and rituals inherent in the life ways of community throughout the 20th century (see Mawrie 1981; Sen 2001; Tartiang 2002), tended to essentialise and reduce the Khasi belief system, translating the multiple expressions of Khasi belief into coherent orders; such writings also looked at the Khasi Indigenous religion in terms of Christian theological

⁵ I discuss this point extensively in the fourth article.

thought⁶. Following this, the stress was then put on the salient features of the Khasi worldview: belief in a Supreme Being, rejection of ritual sacrifice and meetings organised every Sunday by the Seng Khasi to discuss Khasi ideology and teaching of Khasi religious principles. A recent development in Seng Khasi politics is the demand for the recognition of members of the Khasi Religion as having a “minority status”.⁷

But the religious beliefs and rituals followed by the different communities who come under the Khasi are varied and multiple. The Khyntiam Khasis are the most studied and documented of the Khasi tribes. A brief look at the features of the religion of the Khyntiam Khasis might give us an idea of some of the general nature of the religious traditions of the sub-communities, collectively called Khasis. Due to the political situation in the area, the Khasi and Jaintia beliefs are often conflated and even homogenised, primarily to aid the construction of “Khasi identity”. But the varieties of the articulation of indigenous ritual and belief held by the different Khasi communities across Jaintia, Bhoi, War, Khyntiam and Lyngngam regions really cannot anthropologically or folkloristically be viewed as a single set but rather a myriad of site-specific manifestations of loosely linked belief systems. I do think it is important to separate the different practices of worship, invocation, and belief as they occur among the Khasi; while sometimes (mis)portrayed as hegemonic, they are not linear paradigms, but rather layered and multivalent articulations that vary greatly by site.

A singular feature of the indigenous religion of the Khasi sub-communities is the emphasis on the word, or *ktein* as it is called in Khasi. Because the Khasi society was oral before the beginning of the use of the Latin script for writing in the early 1840s, among the Khasis one was careful with what one said, what promises were given and how one spoke with one’s fellow men. This code of speaking took on a different dimension when the spoken word was used in ritual or in communicating with the Supreme Being. A peculiar feature of the Khasi language is that most words are either monosyllabic or bisyllabic. It is unusual, but not uncommon when three syllables can be found in a word; and more so, in language used in ritual.

In the Khasi religion, there are two ways in which a person can communicate with the Supreme Being, one is through personal and direct means and the other is through the help of a *Lyngdoh* or ritual performer. But in the lived practices among the different Khasi tribes, there are various mediators between human and divine. For example, in Jaintia Hills, communication with the local deities takes the form of divine possession or *hiar blai* (lit. descent of a deity onto the body of a human being) And this communication does not take the form of prayer as is understood in the Christian framework. Communication with the Supreme Being, in the religion of the Khasis, takes the form of a legal

⁶ Interview with Silbi Passah, Executive member of the Seng Khasi, in December 2011.

⁷ This demand has come about in light of the discrimination of Khasis following the indigenous religion, by the State Government of Meghalaya. For more information see Our Reporter 2016.

argument, carried out with respect and reverence. Any such communication will usually open with a petition to the precious and loving nature of the Supreme Being (*Sngap, sngew a Blei trai kynrad*, lit. listen, empathise dear Lord precious God).

The Khasis, composed of the different communities, believe in the existence of a single Supreme Being most commonly referred to as *U* (denominative of male in Khasi language) *Blei*. But this God is also called *Ka* (denominative of female in Khasi) *Blei*, or *Ki* (denominative of multiple in Khasi) *Blei*. This is exemplified in the following invocation: *U Blei, Ka Blei, ki blei ki lah ban tip ia kane*, lit. '(he) God, (she) God (they Gods) who can know about this' (Tariang 2012: 48). This is a sentence that is employed in ritual language wherein it is expressed that God among the Khasis is above number or gender. The use of gender for God is therefore dependent on the context in which God is invoked. For example, the beginning of any ritual prayer among the Khyntiam Khasi is *Sngap sngew ko Blei Trai Kynrad*,⁸ *Nongbuh Nongthaw, Na ieng ka jingkylli* (lit. 'Listen, empathise, O Lord, precious God, I stand up before you this question') (Lyngdoh 1985: 30). Or in another instance a ritual performance collected from the Bhoi sub-community in Northern Khasi Hills begins with: *O, Trai Kynrad, Nga sait ka suwa ka suti ... O Trai ia Ryngkat ka syiem Lukhmi ryngkat ka bei*⁹ *Lukhmi* (lit. 'O Lord, precious God, I cleanse unclean impurity... O God, with Goddess Lukhmi, alongside Mother Lukhmi'¹⁰). In the former case the deity invoked is male, and in the latter case, it is a female deity. It may be mentioned that this ritual began a ceremony to propitiate Lukhmi, the goddess of paddy, who is female. Another expression of the attribute of the omniscient creator often invoked during various rituals is *Ka Hukum*, which may be translated as 'Goddess of Command'.¹¹

In the worldview of the Khasis the Supreme Being is not the only divinity who is propitiated. To elaborate, in my article on tigermen, the role of the guardian deity of the weretigers is articulated. But in this section of the thesis, I take a look at the shifting notions associated with the concept of *ryngkew*, which refers to another class of divinities, sometimes associated with human-animal transformations among the Khasis. In the belief world of the Khasis, there exists a class of tutelary deities, *Ki Ryngkew Ki Basa*, who, according to Kerrsingh Tariang (2012: 75) are:

The embodiment of a tool to be utilised for the implementation of an objective, like, for instance, protection or the general well being, for which a sanction for

⁸ A beloved way to address God.

⁹ Maternal Ancestress.

¹⁰ Lukhmi is the spirit of paddy and this entity is variously named, for example, Queen Lukhmi, Mother Lukhmi and Goddess Lukhmi. There is no single way in which this deity can be termed. This information was collected during fieldwork in Nonglyngdoh, April 2009.

¹¹ *Ka* in Khasi refers to the female gender. When in ritual, *Ka Hukum* is invoked, this refers to the feminine denominative of the 'command' function of God.

specialised prayer was sought for and obtained might also be in the form of material objects, animate or inanimate, and when such sanctions were sought for and obtained by particular households or clans, the term ‘u Ryngekew u Basa’ or a nomenclatures with a prefix ‘blei’ or its shortened form ‘lei’ had been used for such protectors. The name ‘u Ryngekew u Basa’ or some other local nomenclatures in the dialect of a particular region had also been used to denote such sanctioned specialised areas of demarcation for specialised prayers for the protection and well-being of a village, a *Raid*¹² or a *Hima*.¹³

Another definition of *ryngkew* and *basa*, according to H. Onderson Mawrie (1981: 8), is that, “[e]ach village has its own *Niam* (custom, ritual) which is celebrated every year. Each house or family makes a contribution in the form of subscription to meet the expenditure and the whole function is run by the village priest who is assisted by the Khasi elders. The God localised here is *U Ryngekew U Basa* – the defender of the village. There seems to be no consensus among different authors as to the function or nature of entities known as *ryngkew* and *basa*.

In my interviews with various members of the present Seng Khasi organization (Rynjah, Sweetymon 2012; Syngkon, Damang 2013a) and a careful reading of the book *The Essence of the Niam Tynrai* (Tariang 2012), I may approximate the view that the general, contemporary idea of God and traditional Khasi tenets are modelled on the likeness of the Christian theology. In earlier times, the Khasi religion was clan and family oriented, but now, on Sundays, borrowing from the Christian practice of going to Church on Sundays, people go to the Seng Khasi Hall. In this place, community leaders “teach people the art of argument within the ritual language of prayer in Khasi, there are talks about the Khasi religion; the art of learning Khasi musical instruments and Khasi oral poetry is also taught on Sundays” (Syngkon, Damang 2013b). Sacrifice of the fowl, which is central to communicating with God the creator, is frowned upon and Seng Khasi “theology” looks at it as symbolic of the fall of man, imitating the Christian abhorrence towards blood sacrifice (Passah, Silbi 2011). In the fieldwork that I have carried out, *ryngkew* is perceived within various particular villages as representative of a particular deity who must be propitiated and transgressions against the *ryngkew* often has repercussions leading to illness, misfortune or death of the perpetrator. This belief contradicts the views presented by Tariang (2012: 75) above where he presents a sanitised version of the role played by the *ryngkew* in the ontology of the Khasi communities. The function of a *ryngkew* varies with place and there are multiple articulations of the meanings that a *ryngkew* has for a village.

In addition, each *raid*, or cluster of villages under a single administrative unit, has its individual rituals and ceremonies, which are not practised in other areas. For example, the phenomenon of *hiar blai* — or possession of a person by a deity — is usually only be found among the Pnar; the *shad lukhmi* or the

¹² *Raid* is a cluster of villages under a single administrative unit.

¹³ Administrative units come under a *Hima* or ruler.

dance in honour of the spirit of paddy is an elaborate ceremony performed one every five years in the locale of Marngar in Ri Bhoi; the *behdeinkhlam* or the chasing away of illness is carried out every year in Jowai and other *raid* in Jaintia Hills. The diversity of the practices of the various sub-communities of the Khasis is vast and as yet, undocumented or studied in full.

It is pertinent here to address the publication of James L. Cox, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies*, where he talks about his data from the Māori of New Zealand, the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the Yupit of Alaska and groups within Aboriginal Australia. In his work he looks at how the Biblical idea of God was attributed to the indigenous God as conforming to the ideas of Christian monotheism. Cox argues that the idea of “God” among these four indigenous communities, based on empirical and written material, is not coherent with the evolutionary idea of a single God who later devolved into lower deities and spirits. Although sympathetic missionaries looked at indigenous belief and traditions as being representative of Christian doctrine, they did so for various reasons, like making the indigenous peoples’ transition to Christianity easier. Cox’s findings suggest that, “[e]ach society had its own localised, particular and culturally relevant religious beliefs, oral stories and ritual practices. After extensive contact with Western culture, traditional worldviews mixed with Christian ideas to produce a synthesis which inevitably resulted in the absorption of the Christian idea of God into indigenous beliefs” (2014: 143–144). Similar processes going on in the Khasi society and the superimposition of missionary tenets upon the tradition of the Khasi indigenous community constitutes one of the central issues that are addressed in my articles. In the course of studying revenants, demon-deities, tiger men and spirit propitiation, it soon became apparent that it was impossible to overlook the influence of Christianity on vernacular beliefs. How is Christianity imposed, rationalised and made relevant to the Khasis and how is it contested? My work seeks to examine these complex social and religious problems primarily using folkloristic methods and some anthropological approaches.

This leads to the next topic of examining briefly, the folkloristic research history which will conclude the overview of contexts in which subjects of Khasi supernatural tradition, belief system, ontology and religious conflicts, assimilation and negotiations will be analysed.

1.3. A Brief History of Khasi Folkloristic Research

The Khasi sense of identity and self-awareness was the result of the colonial influence, missionary activity and the arrival of the British (Pariat 2015). The success of mission activity in the Khasi hills may be linked to the benefits associated with conversion. Health care, schooling, better facilities and treatments made conversion to Christianity an incentive. In his seminal anthropological work published on the Khasis, Philip Richard Thornhagh Gurdon remarked:

Khasis of the interior who have adopted Christianity are generally cleaner in their persons than the non-Christians, and their women dress better than the latter and have an air of self-respect about them. The houses in a Christian village are also far superior, especially where there are resident European missionaries. Khasis who have become Christians often take to religion with much earnestness (witness the recent religious revival in these hills, which is estimated by the Welsh missionaries to have added between 4,000 and 5,000 converts to Christianity), and are model Sabbatarians, it being a pleasing sight to see men, women, and children trooping to church on a Sunday dressed in their best, and with quite the Sunday expression on their faces one sees in England. It is a pleasure to hear the sound of the distant church bell on the hill-side on a Sunday evening, soon to be succeeded by the beautiful Welsh hymn tunes which, when wafted across the valleys, carry one's thoughts far away. The Welsh missionaries have done, and continue to do, an immense amount of good amongst these people. It would be an evil day for the Khasis if anything should occur to arrest the progress of the mission work in the Khasi Hills. (Gurdon 1914 [1907]: 6)

The above quote is illustrative of the perception that the British held towards people who continued to follow the traditional religion. The attitudes held by the colonial powers towards the Khasi “natives” is significant in that it enabled the development of the superior perspective that marked the works of converted Khasis versus the publications of non-converted Khasis. This is also why *The Khasis*, by P.R.T. Gurdon continues to remain one of the most important anthropological sources of knowledge concerning the sub-communities of the Khasis at the turn of the 20th century. But Gurdon’s influential work on the Khasis also produced a racial otherness among those members of the community who through the embracing of Christianity adopted the colonial view about Khasi traditional practices and belief. It seems implicit that colonial officers’ treatment of converts and non-converts created a schism among the Khasis which until today was expressed in contested discourses of civilised vs. the primitive.

The Ri Khasi Press, founded in 1896, marked the initial stage in the development of Khasi folklore studies because the early publications that were printed through this printing press were written by Khasi intellectuals who sought to clarify and simplify the core of the Khasi religion. This was in response to the mass Christian conversions that were taking place in Khasi society. In addition to the Seng Khasi publications, other works on belief and ritual resulted as missionaries increasingly arrived in the area and Khasi communities became more self-reflective of their own cultural heritage. Mrs. Rafy states in her “Foreword” to the *Folk-Tales of the Khasis* that her intention in writing down Khasi narratives is primarily to “cheer and give pleasure to many”, and, as such, she has used only such versions, which have seemed to her “unique and graceful” (Rafy 1920: vii). Father Giulio Costa, a Spaniard who came to the Khasi Hills as a missionary, makes mention of customs and folklore of the Khasis in his 1936 publication, *Ka Riti Jong ka Ri Laiphew Syiem* (lit. ‘The Customs of the

Thirty Kings’). These works added to the body of growing written scholarship on the Khasis and their value can be evaluated in context of their contribution to the documentation of Khasi folktales, practices and values.

According to Indian folklorist Sadhana Naithani, the efforts of the missionaries and British officers to collect local stories was “not to uphold native values, but so as to be able to replace them with so-called modern ones” (2010: 116). In her another work, written together with Charles Briggs on the coloniality of folklore, the idea of fostering modernity through the phenomenon of colonialism may be noted again: “modernity was forged in the very context of colonialism, and its emergence required racial Others for its inception and definition, not just its expansion” (Briggs and Naithani 2012: 234). Within the framework of discourses in the Khasi milieu, deriving from the advent of Westernisation and its concomitant phenomena, modernity serves to introduce literacy, Christianity and “civilisation”, replacing older ideas in Khasi cosmology and life ways.

In the 1930s Khasi intellectuals made an effort to compile collections of Khasi folk narratives. Notable among these were Primrose Gathphoh’s *Ki Khanatang bad U Sier Lapalang* (lit. ‘Sacred Stories and the Lapalang Stag’) and H. Elias’s *Ki Khanatang U Barim* (lit. ‘Sacred Stories of the Past’), both published in 1937. H. Elias was affiliated to the educational institution run by the Don Bosco Salesian Brothers and this is why his collection contains Catholic Biblical nuances assimilated into Khasi sacred stories, legends and myths. For example, for the first time, Thlen, the demon-deity endemic to the Khyntiam Khasis, was likened to a fallen angel.

The first amateur Khasi folklorist was Donbok T. Laloo, who extensively researched and documented Khasi folklore since the 1980s.¹⁴ Laloo published his research material some in book form, some in the form of pamphlets (e.g. Laloo 1996; 2000). Laloo’s contribution to the corpus of “dark” Khasi folkloristic material is evidenced by his publications. Laloo’s relationship with the material he collected and delved into was controversial, but knowledge which would otherwise have been lost or kept secret are documented in his works. His books sometimes carried warnings to the reader in the preface, depending on the nature of the book. For example, among the Khasis exists the belief in a malevolent household entity who, in exchange for wealth and good fortune, requires human blood. This creature is called Thlen. Examining the Thlen belief in Khasi literature further, it may be pointed out that the most detailed and well-known description of the Thlen-keeping practice in tradition and narrative are to be found in the novel written by Donbok T. Laloo *Ka Lasubon* (rare yellow flower; here, the name of a girl), published 1987. This novel is written in four parts and is centered on the life of three main characters – Rymphang, Lasubon, and Prem. It is a love story with a tragic ending. What makes the reader take notice of this novel is the elaborate description of Thlen belief and rituals

¹⁴ Unfortunately I have not been able to find online, or in any other written source, a biography of Laloo.

associated with its rearing, which until then had existed only in the oral belief narratives and practices of the Khasis. In the section entitled *Shikyntein*, which is the equivalent of “Foreword” in the Khasi vernacular, Laloo states (my literal translation):

To end this foreword, I want to tell you the truth that all of the creations, episodes and the plot are a product of the imagination. They do not have any similarities with reality or any resemblance with actual happenings, except the truth that has been revealed about Thlen, which I have included after extensive research. (Laloo 1987: ii)

The academic study of folklore began with the North–Eastern Hill University’s (NEHU) commitment towards artistic and cultural aspirations of the Khasis and this was manifested through the establishment of the Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies by Dr. Soumen Sen in 1997, with the amalgamation of the Centre for Creative Arts (set up in 1977) and the Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies (started in 1984; see Department of Cultural and Creative Studies). At present this institution is called the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies and it offers PhD and Master’s programmes in folklore, music and painting. But as of yet, there is no separate bachelor degree programme in folklore in the colleges affiliated to NEHU.

In the contemporary field of Khasi folklore studies, mention may be made of the works of folklorists Desmond L. Kharmawphlang (2001) and Soumen Sen (2004), and literary scholar Esther Syiem (2011). These scholars utilise experiences of a Khasi identity in conflict with the colonial past and they use this conflicted identity to write poetry characterised by folklore allusions, and academic folkloristic works which delve deeply into the Khasi mythological story-world. In addition there are only few publications, which have been the product of the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies of NEHU. Some of the recent books include *Folklorismus: A Study of Khasi Phawar, Media and Films* by G. Badaiasuklang L. Nonglait (2012) and *Khasi proverbs analysing the ethnography of speaking folklore* by Solony Bareh (2011).

The academic field of study, dedicated to the research of Khasi folklore at present, as has been discussed in the preceding passages, is not well developed. This brief overview of the Khasi folkloristic research is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. But through this slim survey, I hope to convey where the present work may be situated: I would like to place my work as an addition to complementing empirical material which will serve to shed light to the sub–genres of Khasi supernatural folklore and its research.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIVED REALITIES

In this section I will consider some theoretical issues, which are pertinent to the parameters of the topics discussed in the articles. The vernacular life of the community will be examined critically in order to see how meanings are made through negotiations between official, alternative and contesting discourses in the life of the individual and through it, in the life ways of the community.

2.1. Fieldwork as the Primary Source of Data

The fieldwork process necessitates focused methodology; a preferred framework of interpretation and the final, finished ethnographic text. It also acknowledges an emotional relatedness between the researcher and the informant and how the researcher's personal history and context influences or shapes knowledge production. In 2007, I began to participate in a project called "Rice Myths of Northeast India", working as a Research Assistant for the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. This project facilitated fieldwork and documentation that focused on mythology and beliefs surrounding Lukhmi, the goddess of paddy. Accordingly then, the origin narrative of rice, the various expressions of Lukhmi-propitiation like the Dance of Lukhmi (Shad Lukhmi), a rare three-day festival of the people of Raid Manger in Ri Bhoi, various expressions of the Pynhir Myndhan pre-sowing ritual performed in Northern Khasi Hills and the place lore associated with Lukhmi (for example, the boat-stones [maw lieng] scattered all over Ri Bhoi which have significance because of the origin myth of Lukhmi) were documented and analysed. Also, conference presentations and an exhibition of the data collected over the course of three years were made, as part of this project. The experience I had with this project inevitably led to the discovery of other manifestations of supernatural folklore among the Khasis. Therefore, following these research lines, I soon became more interested in the multitude of supernatural phenomena among the Khasis. I could see, even over the course of my own life, that such beliefs and rituals change over time – so I realised that as a researcher, I myself could only document a cultural expression at any given moment.

I understood at the time that research ethics also constitutes a key element in the fieldwork process where it becomes the responsibility of the researcher to glean information from the field in an ethical and honest manner. There is thus an ongoing debate about ethically using the data that is collected during fieldwork so as not to bring harm to the communities, or individuals involved. Because research in the humanities and social sciences has become closer to human beings in the modern times, its qualitative nature also makes the researcher more vulnerable to experiencing, "[a]dverse affects...of being criticised, misunderstood, misrepresented, exposed or stigmatised" (Alver and Øyen

2007: 22). Conversely, the individuals or groups being researched may be in danger of being exposed, stigmatised or even driven to a reduced way of life (ibid) which is why, a sensitive, aware, moral approach is necessary in fieldwork. Research ethics and responsibility to the community I work with and am a part of dictates the representation of data in the articles, which make up this thesis in a sensitised and ethical manner.

The fieldwork process also leaves me with an acute awareness of the limitations of fieldwork methodology and the questions of the extent to which a researcher has agency. Because most of my data is derived from primary fieldwork, I am implicitly exposed to the vagaries and whims of my informants. As I was invested in the documentation of folklore materials, which derive from the peripheral regions of the Khasi Hills, this required journeys over long distances on foot and in a four wheeler equipped jeep due to the unreliable and negligible road conditions. Over the duration of fieldwork dedicated to this dissertation, several dangerous fieldwork situations were encountered due the very nature of the topic. I mention the names of people who participated with me in the interview process only if they wanted me to use it, and very often, they did.



Fig. 1. With my fieldwork participants at the site of the sacred place for the Snake People (Sangkhini). Rwiang River, January 2013. Photo by Margaret Lyngdoh.

I also realise that the transformation of the Khasi milieu is taking place in a fast paced manner. Recognising the importance of this, I tried in my own work to preserve numerous ethnographic “snapshots”, recording events, narratives, and rituals over the course of eight years. I documented folklore about the non-human tiger people, snake people, water spirits, ghostly hauntings in rural and urban spaces, indigenous demonic and divine possession, Christian demonic possession, and Christian supernatural manifestations. Representations of these beliefs are preserved in films, photos, and audio recordings. While the main contribution of my dissertation is an original empirical research, I would also stress the importance of archiving and storing this data for posterity as well as future studies. And from this work, I slowly began to comprehend what such beliefs might reveal about the Khasi, my own community.

2.2. On the Use of the Concept and Genre of Supernatural

Embedded in the worldview of the Khasi ontology is the belief in the supernatural. While this concept is initially Western in origin, it was later adapted to accommodate Christian ideologies which is pervasive in the contemporary beliefs of the Khasis. Writing on the concept of the supernatural, Michel Despland states, “[m]ysterious occurrences and beings that habitually or occasionally impinge upon one’s everyday experience are called ‘supernatural.’” It is commonly said that belief in the supernatural characterises all religions and that belief in the supernatural wanes in modern societies (Despland 2005: 8860).

As a European category, developed through the works of the Greek thinkers and the early Christian theologians, the supernatural was conceptualised as being beyond what could be conceived and being above mundane nature. This idea became synonymous with God in Christianity, while this quality could be perceived through grace and as permeating all of creation. According to Christian theology, divine grace and salvation are gifts that are given to humanity through the actions of Christ, as something that human beings cannot reach with their own natural powers alone. For example, Thomas Aquinas spoke of the loss of the attribute of the supernatural in human beings as a result of original sin and the fall of man and the consequent re-acquisition of this gift through the grace of God. Therefore, Christianity looks upon the supernatural as the nature of God, which can be conveyed to man through grace and sacraments (Drown 1913: 144). Pondering upon the relationship of natural and supernatural in man and his redemption constitutes a significant theme in Christian theology (Despland 2005: 8860).

As an extension from the technical theological discussions, the term supernatural came to signify any extraordinary occurrence that could not be accounted for by the usual workings of nature (Despland 2005: 8861). During the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century with which modern science, modern philosophy, the beginning of international law and modern political

theory, combined with the military and colonial ambitions that Europe embarked upon, all contributed to the change in the cognitive perception of what nature represents. Nature began to be perceived as separate, ambivalent, and organised, while natural causes came to explain an increasing range of phenomena from the physical to the psychological. The after-effect of the Enlightenment did away with the notion of superstitions, condescendingly so, as these were proven to be false (Lohmann 2003: 118). Nature could not be invested with value because it was not perceived as having agency. The value of man is thus above nature since man as a thinking and acting being is invested with intention.

In modern theology the concept of supernatural has been passionately deliberated by a Jesuit priest (and later cardinal) Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) (Wood 2013: 175). He challenged the dominant interpretation of Thomas Aquinas since late medieval times, whereby the world is envisioned as two tiers: an autonomous “natural” order at the bottom and an extra “supernatural” order at the top, while man’s desire for enjoyment of God does not arise from his ordinary nature, but only when there is an offer of (supernatural) grace. De Lubac contended such picture as a misconstruction of the understanding of Thomas and Church Fathers. He denied the concept of pure nature as separate from grace, for the longing for supernatural fulfilment is already innate to man as God’s gift that enables man to go beyond the confines of his nature (Wood 2013: 176). The supernatural is already present within the natural order.

For the scholars of the study of religion, the concept of the supernatural is problematic simply because it presupposes an opposition between what is nature and what is super-nature. This is because of the notion of cultural relativism (Brown 2008: 363–383) according to which non-European cultures do not always make a distinction between what is culturally perceived as natural and what remains outside this category. Instead, there exists the possibility that the ontology of such cultures must be looked at on its own terms — emic categories are better applied in such cases.

Rather, religious studies concentrates upon the experience of the numinous and the holy as being at the heart of religion and are guided by the postulations of Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Mircea Eliade’s ideas include his concepts about the experience of the sacred through myth and the creativity that is catalysed through an individual’s contact with “otherness” of sacred forms, which may come from other cultures and times. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) had an influence on Eliade’s perspective. His idea of the “non-rational aspect of experience” (Streetman 1980: 367) which has to be seen in the backdrop of how the religious experience is drawn from the recesses of the human psyche. Emile Durkheim’s (1858–1917) concept of the collective consciousness — rules, morality and belief inclusive of his notion of the sacred — are highly influential in determining the perceptions on the numinous dimension of religious phenomena.

A significant question is asked by Roger Ivar Lohmann (2003: 117) when he discusses the problems of using the concept of supernatural in anthropology:

“What part of the ineffable world that informs cosmologies is captured by the term ‘supernatural’, and what is distorted or left out when we use it?” In the variations that exist in human thought and cultures outside the European context, the contentious issue of the separation of the natural from the supernatural is fraught with conflicting and discursive arguments. However this term continues to be used with risk of misrepresenting the culture that is studied; but on the other hand, this term might still be cross-culturally applicable. The term becomes useful when used with care in a context-specific situation where dualistic positioning of natural and unnatural are embedded in worldview. In a culture, which has no such distinctions, the supernatural has a limited explanatory value. The concept of the supernatural, then, continues to be a contentious one for many scholars of anthropology.

In folkloristics, the use of the term supernatural is inclusive of the vernacular lived reality of the inexplicable. Folklorists like Gillian Bennet (1999), David Hufford (1982), and Ülo Valk (2001; 2015) have studied the relationship variously between belief and the experience of the inexplicable and how these are enacted in the story worlds of the community. Such beliefs also help reveal societal tensions and how these can be resolved through the articulation of supernatural folklore. The connection between belief and the supernatural may be experienced in the domain of the vernacular life of individuals. Therefore, as example in Khasi belief, the drowning of a person during the construction of a bridge or a dam is linked to the belief in the deity of water who requires a sacrifice as an atonement for impingement into her territory, or an accidental death is bound to ensure that the soul of the person becomes restless. The relationship between folklore and the supernatural is an inevitable one because folklore provides tools and insights for the interpretation of belief within a given community.

A noteworthy medium whereby belief may be expressed is through genre. In folkloristics, genre constitutes a representation of hierarchically arranged categories which are not tightly compartmentalised, but which overlap in different contexts. A text may share generic features of content, style, and form with a text belonging to another genre and thus, genres are fluid concepts which enable the audience to deduce relationships between genres (Seitel 1999: 6). Richard Bauman, in his 1999 article writes that each genre can be “distinguished by its thematic or referential capacities, as a routinized vehicle for encoding and expressing particular orders of knowledge and experience” (Bauman 1999: 85). The term genre, in this context may be useful in the understanding of the folkloristic perspective of the concept of supernatural in that it allows for an individual to use the communicative modalities of his/her experience to talk about or verbalise the experience of the supernatural. Genres are expressive resources that are used by people to use words to explain themselves in a way that is routinised and consistent. Genres “shape individual experiences of life according to the collective patterns of traditional narratives” (Bowman and Valk 2014: 8). In the Khasi context, genre’s relationship with the supernatural may be said to stem from beliefs embedded in the community’s memory.

Linked with the supernatural, the legend as a genre of folklore is also expressed among Khasis through storytelling. Conceptualising the role that legend plays in the shaping of identity and worldview in a folk group, Timothy Tangherlini, in his article published in 2007, wrote that the primary consideration that scholars have to pay attention to, is that the legend is performed by the narrator *as true* (italics mine). It is enacted for an audience, which participates in the meaning-making process of the community facilitated by the legend teller's "rhetoric of truth" (Tangherlini 2007: 8–11). Also, legends reflect the values and worldview that are shared and hence become important markers of tension, conflict and oppositional perspectives within the group. The legend incorporates within itself, the component of belief. Linda Dégh suggests in her examination of belief legends that belief may be seen as a "disposition, as an underlying mental attitude or behavioural pattern that manifests in audibly or visibly observable texts as generic ingredients of a belief system, amounting to a (local or subcultural) religion" (Dégh 1996: 37). David Hufford, a proponent of the experience-centered theory of the supernatural, looks at experience as the core of supernatural beliefs. He stresses on the relationship that a supernatural experience has with objective reality (Hufford 1995: 11–21).

In the contemporary context, the beliefs encoded in legend manifest themselves through narration. In such a narrative, there is an accommodation of the idea of supernatural, by referring back to the generic motifs, which existed through beliefs in pre-Christian Khasi society. To discuss the link between Khasi ontology and the concept of the supernatural (which is an etic category), it is necessary to look into the Christian influence on Khasi epistemology. The concept of supernatural was introduced with the advent of Christianity in the 1840s. Prior to this, there was no clear concept of the Khasi "religion" as is understood in the institutionalised forms of the present day. The village community followed rituals and ceremonies to propitiate God and the various guardian deities. The clan and the family carried out personalised ceremonies associated with the Supreme Being, *U Blei*. The supernatural as an event signifying something extraordinary was not present in the worldview of the Khasis prior to conversion.

To exemplify, small-pox as illness is not a misfortune or a cause for unhappiness among the Jaintia. The marks of the disease are considered as a sign of the Goddess. In a house where a person is afflicted with small-pox, people come to visit hoping to catch the illness because this means that the Goddess is favouring the affected person with her mark. In a conversation on the 18 November 2015, Jaintia writer and intellectual, Dr. Shobhan Lamare told me that an onset of the small-pox disease is called *wa ioh thakur* where *thakur* or goddess comes onto a person. I quote P.R.T Gurdon, in his ethnography on the Khasis where he notes this very phenomenon:

In the Jaintia Hills 'the small-pox' is believed to be a goddess, and is revered accordingly. Syntengs regard it as an honour to have had small-pox, calling the marks left by the disease the "kiss of the goddess"; the more violent the attack

and the deeper the marks, the more highly honoured is the person affected. Mr. Jenkins¹⁵ says, “When the goddess has entered a house, and smitten any person or persons with this disease, a trough of clean water is placed outside the door, in order that every one before entering may wash their feet therein, the house being considered sacred.” Mr. Rita¹⁶ mentions cases of women washing their hair in water used by a small-pox patient, in order that they may contract the disease, and women have been known actually to bring their little children into the house of a small-pox patient, in order that they may become infested and thus receive the kiss of the goddess. *It is possible that the Syntengs, who were for some time under Hindu influences; may in their ignorance have adopted this degraded form of worship of the Hindu goddess, “Sitala Devi,” who is adored as a divine mother under different names by Hindus all over India, cf., her name mari-amman, or mother of death, in the South of India, and the name Ai, mother, of the Assamese.* (Italics mine) (Gurdon 1914 [1907]: 107–108)

Whereas the Hindu goddess Sitala Devi (lit. ‘the cold one’, translated from Sanskrit) needs to be propitiated in order to prevent and protect from disease and small pox, in the Jaintia Hills, to have smallpox is to *mih blai* or *wan blai* which literally means ‘the coming of the Goddess’ onto the body of a person is seen as a privilege. This phenomenon, is not perceived as a misfortune but as a blessing and the colonial writers conflate this goddess with the popular Hindu goddess Sitala (see Ferrari 2013; 2015). The concept of the supernatural and the visitation of the Goddess as something extraordinary is not present in this worldview and life ways of the Khasis prior to the mass Christian Conversion. Rather it is a good omen and a blessing for the *thakur* or smallpox deity to visit a household.

Within the Christian context, the supernatural is substituted with the acceptable idea of miracle. As an illustrative phenomenon, occurring in East Khasi Hills may be found in the social media page of the Presbyterian Church (Shillong Khasi Jaintia Revival 2011). A lady named only as Kong Mida S. from Jongsha village, was reportedly taken to heaven bodily by Jesus for a 24 hour visit where he taught her the Bible. Other miraculous incidents include those where she was given a purse of money and told to paint her home in the colour pink by Jesus are recorded in Jongsha village. But the incident which is stressed upon in the Facebook post, involves the devout prayers that were offered by Mida S. and other women from the Parish in order for the rain to stop, for the smooth progress of the 200,000 people who attended the Presbyterian Synod which took place in 20 March 2011. According to the article, the rains stopped only in the venue of the service, while nearby areas were lashed by heavy rains. The devotion and pious behaviour of women like Mida S. and others are the main reasons why the Church service was protected from rain. Their continued prayers brought about the desired state of altered reality where prayer, rather than magic brings about a change (Shillong Khasi Jaintia Revival 2011).

¹⁵ Reverend William Jenkins. Author of *Life and work in Khasia* (see Jenkins 1904).

¹⁶ Mr S.E. Rita was the Deputy Commissioner of United Khasi and Jaintia Hills in 1904.

The significance of this narrative may be seen in the fact that the “miracles” occurred at a time, just before the Synod was to take place. The motifs in the story fit the norm of what is acceptable, set by the parameters of Presbyterian theology. I refer to the article on apparition stories and their transformation in pre-modern Germany and Scandinavia written by Jürgen Beyer, where similar processes were taking place. Before the Reformation, Marian apparitions were recognised by the Church, but after the spilt in the wake of religious revivals, only apparitions which conformed to the Lutheran ideology were given place in the official religious discourse. Saints were thus replaced by angel apparitions (Beyer 2012: 39–47). In the experience of Mida S. the apparitions and experiences pertained only to Jesus, the divinity accepted by the Presbyterians. This example illustrates how the concept of the supernatural has entered into the daily life and vernacular discourse of the Khasis as part of Christian theological teachings. Miracles, faith healing, and blessings because a usual experience with the beginning of Christian conversions among the Khasis. But in the Khasi context, the supernatural is usually associated with something extraordinary, which is not directly connected with Christianity. Within the framework of Khasi Christian belief, the stress is more on “miracles” as a keyword. For example, a person having an inexplicable experience with a Christian divinity, is more likely to term it as a miracle. Such occurrences are common and endorsed by the Church.

2.3. Folklore Theory, Tradition and the Vernacular

In this section I would like to bring in the folkloristic implications of tradition. This concept is seen in the backdrop of beliefs and practices of the Khasi sub-communities and how the idea of tradition is expressed in the Khasi context. The word tradition is often used to mean something, which is passed on from a generation to another. Folkloristics has long wrestled with the implications and problems of the concept of tradition. For example, what is transmitted and what is left out? Is tradition stable? What determines the stability of tradition and what are the conditions, which ensure its continuity? How many years does a practice, or an object have/has to be in use for it to become traditional?

Traditions are maintained and invented at a given point in time because of various reasons — for example, a community’s need for a distinct identity can be one such motivator, or the continuity of a ritual, which may ensure a good harvest may be another. Tradition as is understood, represents a link from the past to the present and into the future (Glassie 1995: 395, see Handler and Linnekin 1984). In western folkloristic scholarship, tradition carries the implication of being something of importance and usually has multiple uses. Tradition also involves the process of handing-over, orally or materially something of value to a community, tribe, clan or family. In another sense, tradition also has the implication of being a survival of a past, which is long gone. Such traditions, then may no longer be in use but are still remembered such as the *Pynhir*

Myndhan ceremony which was used to propitiate the spirit of paddy among the Bhoi in Northern Khasi Hills. Because of the use of hybrid seeds and new methods of agriculture, this ritual has become obsolete, although, by no means, forgotten.

In Dorothy Noyes's (2009) opinion, tradition may be looked at from three different points of view: as transmission of knowledge, as something bound in time, and finally as a handing-over of community property. This view is inclusive of the idea that tradition is temporal, is transmitted by tradition-bearers, and belongs to a community. Henry Glassie takes a more wide-ranging approach to the concept connecting it with history and culture. He contends that tradition is a process created by persons out of experience; tradition is repeated, is volitional and is useful for a period in time: "Things vary with need and circumstance, by genre and culture. The more secure, the less embattled the actor, the freer the action. But when actions are shaped sincerely, tradition will be present". (Glassie 1995: 408). The basis of Glassie's argument is extensive, emphasising upon the link made with the historical and with repetitive actions. Glassie attributes tradition to be a man made property, "but culture and tradition are alike in that, today, we understand them both to be created by human beings going through life" (Glassie 1995: 398). Barry McDonald criticises Glassie's approach:

If tradition is a concept whose meaning is subject to shifts in intellectual fashion ... then this meaning remains largely an academic question. But as soon as the suggestion is made that tradition has real existence, then, it must be asked, who calls what tradition? (McDonald 1997: 51)

McDonald qualifies tradition as something which is owned, personal, and vernacular. In his work with musician Jim Lowe on the rural Northern Tablelands of New South Wales, McDonald observed tradition in an alternative perspective. Tradition here is seen as working in a "continuous present" rather than being bounded in time or authenticated with age. Rather, it is the individual's interpretation of (in this case) his own repertoire that establishes his tradition. McDonald concludes that "tradition was partial in its operation, that it did not 'shadow' all cultural act(s) ... and that its invocation depended on the intention of practitioners" (McDonald 1997: 56). This view incorporates into itself the notion of individual creativity as the source of tradition and proposes that within the vernacular repertoire of knowledge, individuals do not necessarily recognise their actions as being "traditional" in the way that folklorists have theorised upon it.

Talking about this concept within the context of Northeastern India, Indian folklorist Soumen Sen calls tradition a process where elements of culture are utilised through generations. According to Sen, when this process encounters a discontinuity, allowed for by the community itself or "at times due to new formations entering into the flow with alteration of contexts, or through social movements — cultural elements get altered, but carry with them the earlier

features in modified forms” (Sen 2004: 26). Tradition, is utilised to a great extent as a way to distinguish one community from another. The component of politics plays a significant role with distinct identity markers determining indigeneity, which is a quality necessary for an ethnic community’s inclusion into the Sixth Schedule, upon which the government of India bestow’s benefits in the form of employment reservation, monetary endowments, et cetera.

When I asked different Khasi people what is the Khasi word for “tradition”, they replied without hesitation, *ki riti*, *ki dustur*, or alternatively *rukom* meaning ‘customs’, ‘established practices’, or ‘ways of doing things that have been done before’. These three Khasi words are loan words from the Assamese language, which is spoken in the neighbouring State of Assam. The terms *riti*, *dustur*, *rukom* are used on a daily, everyday basis to explain routinised patterns of practice and behaviour. However, tradition has a deeper, more layered, vernacular meaning for the Khasis. *Jutang*, is a word used to mean primarily a covenant that is made between man and God or between inanimate objects and animate beings in nature; it also means ‘argument’. Other words used in place of *jutang* in Khasi language are *jing iasaid* and *soskular*, which literally mean ‘contract’ or ‘agreement’. A *jutang* tied between man and God (or ancestors), and/or man with inanimate objects in nature, requires the “holding on” to the authorised norms of behaviour. In the text of the *Pynhir Myndhan*, the *jutang* is constantly referred to, for ensuring a good harvest. Similarly, this kind of “holding on” to the prescribed laws may be interpreted as being one of the ways to mean Khasi tradition.

One of the most important phrases which exists within the epistemological boundaries of the Khasi belief system is *ka ieng rangbah u briew, ka ap jutang U Blei*. This layered statement means that God requires it that human beings adhere to the laws that were laid down when an agreement between man and God was made. This central covenant or *jutang* is derived through the foundational myths of the Khasis whereby God agreed to listen to the pleas of men through the intercession of a fowl. Tradition, in the Khasi worldview, is adherence to the principles laid down when an agreement was made between human beings and the divine. In order to invoke a *jutang*, certain rules in the discussion between man and God must be obeyed.

In any Khasi divination or ritual, phrases are used which have frequent reiteration because they have the pragmatic function of aiding the performer to remember and articulate the “mental text”.¹⁷ I have translated and transcribed the text of the first twelve minutes of the ritual for bringing down seed paddy or

¹⁷ As put forward by Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko, a mental text is a category that explains the ability of an epic singer to remember lengthy epic narrations. A mental text is a kind of “‘pre-narrative’, a pre-textual frame, that is an organised collection of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer’s mind. This material consists of (1) textual elements and (2) generic rules for reproduction” (Honko 1996: 4). Here, I use it not in the context of epic singing but to refer to the verbal elements of ritual among Khasis.



Fig. 2. Dising Marin performing the *Pynhir Myndhan*. Pahamskhen Village, April 2009. Photo by Margaret Lyngdoh.

Pynhir Myndhan and in this section I have provided the translation and transcription of the first ten lines which begin the ceremony in order to exemplify the unique features that characterise indigenous aesthetics in ritual performance. This ritual was carried out by tigerman, Dising Marin on 6 April 2009 and illustrates the argumentative, formulaic and special ritual language used in communication with the divine. The *Pynhir Myndhan* is a ritual carried out before sowing paddy in northern Khasi Hills, and this particular variation was performed to invite the spirit of paddy who is called Lukhmi. This goddess comes into the *dur bret* or ritual basket, which is filled, during the course of the ceremony, with seed paddy to be planted on the day on which the *Pynhir Myndhan* is completed. What is noteworthy about this ritual is the chanting of invocation, formulae and references to the covenant made between Lukhmi and the Khasi people all of which accompanies the ritual action. The verbal component represents one of the finest examples of Khasi ritual chanting found in the course of my fieldwork. This excerpt incorporates in itself the various constituent parts that comprise the rhetoric of Khasi poetics. It is also illustrative of individual creativity within tradition. The manifestation of *jutang*, use of oral formulae, reference to origin narratives and the form that divination takes in a ritual is well expressed in the following lines.

<i>O ...Trai Kynrad!</i>	O...Lord God! ¹⁸
<i>Nga sait ka suwa ka suti</i>	I cleanse unclean impurity
<i>U lah rit u lah thlieh, u kynthung u kynjar</i>	The rit, the thlieh ¹⁹
<i>Nga kynni nga dang leh er Lukhmi er pukhmi u lah ran deh te cha kanin²⁰</i> <i>kynrad nga par toh bei, u par, nga par nga bshng</i>	I perform this rite; enact this Lukhmi pukhmi ²¹ On me to tell, to show from the beginning to the end Lord God I supplicate please Mother I request
<i>Nga par nga wieh nga tah dei te cha kanin trai</i>	I immerse I anoint from the beginning to the end dear God
<i>Ban lait ka khyndain ka base ba jakir ba jinoh jinoh dei Trai dei Trai</i>	To be free from rejection and hesitation Our coming our going Our going is Lord is Lord
<i>Lah buh noh da mynshua ba pdang ka bakseh</i>	Ordained since the origin, what will be threshed, what multiplies
<i>Lah buh u kni bah u kni bah, u kni san u kni san</i>	Kept since (the time of) our eldest uncle eldest uncle, Our first uncle first uncle
<i>Lah buh ka mei ka jau</i>	Kept by our first mother, ²² the ancestress
<i>Lah buh u bihir u bitoh, u pdang u bakseh, u ba thlieh u ba neit mynshua bynshua</i>	Kept by the possessors, the carriers The first budding, the flowering The first multiplying grains, the first sharing out In the beginning in the genesis.

The mnemonic role that these formulae *te cha kanin* (lit ‘from the beginning’) and *ban lait ka khyndain ka base* (lit. ‘to be free from rejection and hesitation’) play, is possibly the most complex of all formulaic lines used in such a text. This is because these words are exclusively used in ritual or divination and function as the repeated formulae, which enable the ritual performer to memorise the entire content of the ritual text. Also, the continuity of the *jutang* that

¹⁸ The use of capital letters in the translation indicate a “thought” break which I have not thought necessary to include in the original because of the flow of allusions and references are familiar to a person from the Khasi community.

¹⁹ Two types of banana leaves used for the ritual.

²⁰ Phrase used to indicate a break or completion in the thread of prayer. Lit. ‘From the beginning to the end’, having formulaic properties.

²¹ Spirit of paddy.

²² Founding ancestress of the clan.

was “laid down by the ancestors, Goddess Lukhmi, mother earth and the Supreme Being” is recalled during the course of the entire ritual. The participation of ancestors, *syrngi* in the Bhoi dialect, is obligatory because they were the “originators, the possessors” of this ritual ceremony. The link to the present day, is made manifest when the “carriers” are mentioned, who in this context are the Makri clan and the performers of the ritual. These lines reference the origin narrative of the first coming of Lukhmi, the spirit of paddy to the Khasi Hills.

I have used the text of the *Pynhir Myndhan* as an example to show how the concept of *jutang* is expressed in ritual performance. This example is invaluable in that it supports all the arguments, which are made about the concept of tradition within the Khasi ontology. The role of the performer is made clear in the second line where he takes responsibility, “I perform this rite; enact this Lukhmi pukhmi On me to tell, to show from the beginning to the end Lord God I supplicate please Mother I request”. In the Khasi indigenous ontology, the correct performance of any Khasi ritual involving divinities is vital. If there is a transgression that occurs, then the ritual performer either has to make amends, or he/she dies. This is the reason why, during the course of the chanted narrative of this ritual, Dising kept repeating that if he has made a mistake, then the goddess Lukhmi should forgive him, because he is only human.²³

Within the vernacular life ways of the community, the official discourse of Christianity and the unofficial Khasi religion maintain an uneasy relationship. Tradition in this context has transformed from adherence to the laws laid down by the ancestors and mythically advocated by God at the time of creation, to the maintenance of the traditions of the Ten Commandments. In the vernacular domain, the Ten Commandments are not viewed as tradition because the collective consciousness of the Khasi people rejects any *written* law as tradition. I may interpret this to be the result of the oral discourse of the Khasis, which considers the oral, the unwritten to be the reservoir of all experience and knowledge.

In order to fully understand and explore this idea, the notion of the vernacular, as discussed by Leonard Primiano, may be referenced. In his seminal work on the topic of vernacular religion, Primiano defines this approach as: “Religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it. Since religion inherently involves interpretation, it is impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular” (Primiano 1995: 44). This perspective allowed scholars of folklore to look at the individual aspect of the religious life of people. How do people experience religion, and how do they theorise, reflect upon and talk about it? The topics relating to the individual and his relationship with the divine fall under the purview of vernacular religion.

²³ Original text: *U jait bynru ha khrum ka pyrthei / Sah khynnah sah khyllung / Sah beit sah them kata re / Lait noh kata trai / Lah buh te ka jutang mynshua* (lit. ‘The race of men living under the sky / Stay children remain children / Stay unguided stay innocent like this, / Freed from these then God / The Covenant was decreed in the beginning’).

Tradition, as was iterated earlier, for the indigenous Khasis, is irrevocably tied with the Khasi religion. The pact agreed upon in the mythical past requires the performance and carrying out of rites and rituals as were prescribed and laid down by clan ancestors. Individual creativity and a personalised enactment of ritual dedicated to the ancestors or to the Supreme Being cannot be altered, because the terms of the *jutang* that was agreed upon between human and divine must be followed strictly. A transgression will have terrible repercussions, which in several cases have led to the death of the ritual performer. In the context of the Khasi religion then, the creativity in the performance of *jutang* is minimised.

However, the simplified forms of tradition, *riti*, *dustur* and *rukom*, are very much individualised in the domain of the vernacular. The Khasi Christians who make up the majority of the Khasi population have a personalised relationship with the Christian God. I do not mean to imply that in the traditional Khasi religion a person cannot have an intimate relationship with the Supreme Being, but a certain protocol must be followed which cannot be broken. I may clarify, that I look at the people and the folklore I had collected from the point of view of context: How did the community and various individuals who participated in fieldwork with me view the material that they were transmitting? Within the academic environment, it is commonplace for scholars to collect data, archive it, interpret it, and then theorise it. The hierarchy of such a model is criticised by Charles Briggs, who proposes that “[t]hese strategies converge in generating scholarly narratives that cast non-academics as makers of folklore and academics as producers of folkloristic knowledge” (2008: 99). The solution that Briggs proposes is paying attention to “vernacular theorising”, wherein the subjects of folklore research reflect creatively and discursively upon the topics that are of concern to them. Reaching across disciplinary boundaries and participating with the community is crucial in building networks of communicability and resources. This approach became useful when I, as a researcher, was at a loss concerning how to interpret some of the information that I was collecting.²⁴ I am in some ways representative of the Khasi community — and, thus, all my work is inherently “vernacular theorising”, in part — yet I also remain separate and “othered” from Khasi society. Engaging directly with informants and research participants helped me in comprehending, assessing, and analysing the data that they were transmitting.

2.4. Colonialism and the Transformation of the Religious Landscape

I link my fieldwork data, and the community’s response to it, to the concept of transformation, which I view as key to tying together the various experiences of

²⁴ For example, on the death narratives of the Rashir clan.

Khasi sub-communities described in my research articles.²⁵ Firstly, I would like to examine the idea behind the term itself. According to its dictionary definition, transformation means a “a marked change in form, nature, or appearance” (OED). In this research, the idea of transformation functions as a catalyst in interpreting the continuities and disconnections between the progression which occurred from the historical (here, I mean Khasi history which began with the institution of the Khasi script) to the contemporary; this concept implies the transitions that play out within the lived experience of the Khasis. I would like to point out once again that all fieldwork data is carried out in contemporary Khasi society and as such this information is collected from living informants whose narratives illustrate the Khasi transformational framework. I hope to show in the following sections that transformation is an ongoing process, as it is manifested through the folklore that people tell/perform/believe in their day-to-day lives: how Khasis sort through experience and make conscious choices, or have unconscious strategies to derive meaning from institutional religion and find ways to reconcile with the older beliefs in the realm of the vernacular. The disconnectedness and transformations from the oral to the written has given rise to new ways of storytelling replacing the older spaces where these narrative events took place and the change of audiences et cetera is discussed in detail in the article on the topic of the vanishing hitchhiker (see Article I). However, transformation on a more significant level occurs in the realm of religious beliefs of the Khasi communities and is manifested through the conflicts and tensions that exist between the various denominations of Khasi Christianity, the followers of the Seng Khasi and the actual vernacular religion practised by the community.

To begin with, the transformational processes of the Khasis may be tied to the advent of colonialism and the Christian conversions. In about 1824, the British first made their presence felt in the Khasi Hills with a political treaty made with Ram Singh, the Rajah of Jaintia (Singh 1979a: ii; 1979c: 30). With the advent of colonialism, first came the Welsh Calvinist Missionaries. It was in Sohra village, between 1841–1842, that the Khasi language received its script, through the efforts of Welsh missionaries Thomas Jones (1810–1849) and John Roberts (1842–1908). The earliest works to be translated into Khasi were the *Kot Tikir – Christian Catechism* (1841), *Ka Jingduwai – The Lord’s Prayer* (1842), and *Ka Testament Bathymmai – portions of the New Testament* (1843).

In 1897 Jeebon Roy, a Khasi intellectual and one of the founders of the Seng Khasi wrote the first published Khasi book on the topic of the Khasi religion, *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (lit. ‘The Rituals of the Khasi’). This book represents the earliest written expression of Khasi self-awareness, one in which a separate ethnic identity is articulated and embraced. In the Preface, Roy asserted that “[t]he people will completely forget (their religion) with the coming of the Christian Mission. The poor religion of the Khasis without any written

²⁵ Transformation here is from traditional to Christian, which becomes a model for modernity and “civilised”.

record will pass into oblivion and we will one day forget it completely” (cited as quoted in Singh 1979a: xxv; 1979b: 92).

The Ri Khasi Printing Press was established in 1896 to publish books, pamphlets, and newspapers to counter the overwhelming influence of the missionary activities. Jeebon Roy – along with Sib Charan Roy, Rash Mohan Roy, and others — printed small pamphlets which made attempts to put down in writing the religion which until then was unwritten and transmitted solely by oral means. In 1899, sixteen individuals came together to form the Seng Khasi. In 1935, the Jaintias also instituted the Seiñ Rajj for the same reasons.

Yet Seng Khasi represented then only a small section of the community and still today, over 80 per cent of Khasis are Christian converts. Presently, the Khasi religion, Niam Tynrai, is portrayed in a demonic light by the majority of Christians and seen with ambivalence by other converts. The Khasi religion thus only exists as a “memory of primitive belief” within the minds of those who are converts. In the lives of the minority of Khasis who have not converted, the Khasi Religion is still alive, lived through its tenets as made clear by the Seng Khasi. The Seng Khasi, does not seem very influential and from the fieldwork I have carried out, it has minimal influence on people who do not live in Shillong.

In my fieldwork, as yet, I have only come across one village in Jaintia Hills, where the entire population seems to be untouched by influence of Christianity or the Seiñ Rajj. I may add that the reason for this seems to be a fear of the repercussions of conversion, which is linked to the worship and propitiation of a harsh River Goddess who is wrathful.²⁶ The people in this village are very poor and there is absolutely no evidence that electricity, water supply or roads exist. Obviously, this village is disconnected from the advantages that Christianity might have brought along with it. Another aspect of the residents of this village is that they are not allowed to participate or enter in any home in Jowai, the district headquarters of the Jaintia Hills, where any kind of traditional religious rituals are taking place. The reasons for this may be tied to the worship of the River Goddess. The people in this village seemed to me, disinclined to talk further about this, hence I do not have comprehensive knowledge.

With early missionary activity had come a radical transformation, evidenced by the break with the past and the beginning of modernity. This discontinuity brought with it a division between converts: those who considered themselves “civilised” viewed the others as the “primitive ones”. Joel Robbins, in his article, refers to what he calls the “discontinuous transformation” of converted indigenous people, which imposes a “moral code” to which one must adhere strictly afterward: “Converts are routinely enjoined ... to make a complete break with their pasts. ... Once they make the break, they keep themselves separate from the surrounding social world by adhering to an ascetic moral code that prohibits most of its pleasures and figures it as a realm governed by Satan”

²⁶ The name of this River Goddess may not be written or spoken. She is the eldest sister of the Kupli River.

(2004: 127). While this above statement is true for the Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches among the Khasis, the evangelical Presbyterian Church does not promote such a strict adherence to social and moral asceticism.

For example, Khasi Presbyterian Christians are allowed to wear jewellery and attend theatres and concerts. What they are not allowed to do is participate in any way, in indigenous religious rituals or to intermarry with a non-Presbyterian. As Pastor Lyndan Syiem communicated to me in an email on 18 September 2014, the promotion of strict adherence to Church rules did not prevent Church members from having supernatural experiences with malevolent entities derived from the traditional Khasi belief, in the light of which I quote the following passage from his email.

The ministry of preaching which proclaims *Christus Victor* (Christ the Victor). You might want to google Gustaf Aulen. He, or more appropriately the broad strokes of his teaching, has long been very influential among Pentecostals and charismatics; and with the Presbyterians after the 2006 Revival. Before 2006, only a few Presbyterian preachers proclaimed Christ as Victor over demons and evil spirits — although they generally shied away from actually naming the *Thlen*²⁷.... Fewer still practiced it when cases of demon possession and demonic oppression (real or imagined, is not the point here) were brought to them for prayer and exorcism.

The rest of our Pastors and elders either **A.** followed the safe missionary line by rejecting *Thlen* etc. as superstition or **B.** followed and advocated traditional *Thang-thlen*²⁸ remedies.... I estimate about 20% (30% before the Revival), especially rural church leaders, would fall in **B** category. About 30% (40% before the Revival) in **A** category. As far as I've read about the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries among the Khasis, they did not seriously address the issue of *Thlen*, etc. but lumped them together under the category 'superstition' (the general Western, Enlightenment worldview). Which was no help at all to a tribe for whom the *Thlen, Shwar, Taro, Bih, Lasam*²⁹ were real, life and death matters. (Syiem, Lyndan 2014a)

Christianity in the Khasi Hills has two main denominations, Catholic and Presbyterian, with smaller percentages of the population following the Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches. The Christian religion is seen by the Christian converts as apart from and opposed to the traditional religious belief; the precepts of the colonial missionary religion perceived by them as superior to the native indigenous ways of life. Converts routinely employ the labels of "heathens", "pagans", "demon worshippers", and "gentiles" to practitioners of the indigenous faith. These terms are introduced by the Church leaders and have

²⁷ A demon-deity who is gives wealth and fortune to the family, which rears him in exchange for human blood.

²⁸ This is the popular remedy for a person afflicted by the Thlen. It is only practised by persons of the Syiem clan, and more specifically, the sister of the Chief or Syiem of Khyrim (traditional Khasi State) practises this every Saturday in the village of Smit.

²⁹ Malevolent entities who bring harm, disease, demonic possession on the person they afflict.

come into common usage by people of the various Christian denominations in their everyday lives. Another way of denigrating the native religious traditions and beliefs of the community is to “prove” to the community that the Christian God is superior and more powerful through shows of finesse: churches have been built in the poorest and most remote of villages. Catholic processions and Presbyterian synods are regularly convened in order to strengthen the “faith in Jesus Christ as the saviour of all mankind” (Donn, Ridor 2012). A remarkable example of this may be found in the conversion strategy that was used in Langdongdai village in the early 1940s. This narrative has been excerpted and translated from the print souvenir brought out in 2013 on the occasion of the 50 year anniversary of Presbyterian Church in Langdongdai. This episode has been recorded for the Souvenir by Church elder W. Nianglang.

The village of Langdongdai is situated at the foothill of the Dubir Hill. It is the highest point in the area and it is a hill which is very beautiful....It is believed that the Dubir hill was the residence of the Kulong deity who was the arbiter of the entire Langdongdai area. Earlier, people had faith in and respected this deity and they also believed that this deity was more significant and powerful than other deities. They would regularly make ritual offerings and propitiation and they believed that if they went against the diktats of this deity then misfortune and poverty would be the result. Sometimes this deity would visit people themselves especially the ritual performers and the deity would teach them the ways of ritual if the people faced any difficulties.

The Gospel of Christ reached this area just before 1941. Because the collective belief of these people was on the Dubir deity and they were afraid of him so they were reluctant to convert to Christianity. Mr. Elsingh saw the belief of the people in the Dubir deity and so in 1941, he lead a group of people to preach the Gospel, to the summit of the Dubir hill. At the foothill firstly, a prayer was convened and then they climbed to the summit all the while singing, “Come, come to Jesus dear friends”. People were really frightened at that time lest the Dubitr deity would punish them somehow. However to the surprise of everyone nothing happened and from that time onwards, the Dubir deity stopped visiting the people in the village. Since that time, the people of this area began to believe that the Christian God was much more powerful than the Dubir deity. (Ñianglang 2013: 11–12)

Christian zealous community activities related to the religious life are regularly organised as an intervention into the spirituality of the community. A polar opposition is verbalised and even stressed by the practitioners of the two above mentioned factions. Sunday schools, held by the Presbyterian Church, are a singular way to transmit Christian values and precepts in people. These disparate viewpoints are strongly manifested in Shillong City.



Fig. 3. Khasi monoliths like these which originally were used to venerate the ancestors have been “baptised” because they happen to be in the vicinity of the Catholic Church. Pahamskhen, December 2012. Photo by Margaret Lyngdoh.

There is an important difference in the doctrines and respective institutional policies of the Catholics and the Presbyterians. While the Catholic approach is to maintain a mostly neutral stance towards indigenous beliefs, and even assimilate them into Khasi Catholicism, the Presbyterian focus is more rigid: Christianity in this denomination does not allow any influence from indigenous beliefs to filter into practice (Syiem, Lyndan 2014b). That it is necessary for Christianity to be primary in the life of an individual who converts to Presbyterianism, is clearly expressed by Reverend Jyrwa in his book, *Christianity in Khasi Culture*. He states that, “Jesus is equally emphatic that the Word of God should take precedence over human traditions” (2011: 6). The main argument he presents in this book is that Christianity is beneficial to the Khasi society, as it brings about modernity, education, health benefits, and salvation. Christianity is not opposed to Khasi culture but seeks to enrich it without intruding into the heathenish practices of the non-Christians.

The component of transformation, then, is multi-layered, even when one views only the percentage of the population who has been converted. The conversion process symbolises a disconnect, a significant break for the Khasi sub-communities with their past. As has been mentioned before, there has been a large scale conversion of the Khasi communities into Christianity: Catholic,

Full Gospel Fellowship, Unitarian Church, Presbyterian, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of God and others. I could not, as a fieldworker, ignore the context of Christianity, even when I was not directly dealing with it. There seemed to be a link with the indigenous belief system even in areas where stricter forms of Christianity prevailed: supernatural experiences that could be considered “Christian” were reported alongside indigenous spirit ontologies in order to demonise them. These experiences were reported to me in the Christian context, manifesting in narratives about Christian demonic possession and in ritual through supernatural healings, prayers, and worship songs.

In the introduction to the *Anthropology of Christianity*, Fennella Cannell (2006: 22) states that Christianity as a religion is not an arbitrary construct, but a complex one. It differs according to the context to which it adapts itself. There are certain inherent traits that remain in Christianity wherever it moves, which Cannell states as “Incarnation (by which God became human flesh in Christ) and the Resurrection (by which, following Christ’s redemptive death on the Cross, all Christians are promised physical resurrection at the Last Judgement)” (ibid.: 23). Within the dominant anthropological view of Christianity, at the heart of the religion is transcendence. This approach suggests that Christianity is a religion of “radical discontinuity”. Christianity, rather than being a uniform entity, is multiple. Modernity as a transformational category is also a part of the topics that this set of methods addresses. The anthropology of Christianity presents a set of approaches, which help to identify and analyse the processes, which result from discontinuous transformation. This is represented as a transformation from the Khasi indigenous worldview to the new Christianities in which a different way of associating with the spiritual and physical realities are focused on from the traditional one. I may again allude to the complex relationship that Khasi Christianities have with the traditional cultures they encounter: on the one hand Christianity demonises the indigenous beliefs in order to validate Christian values, but by doing this, it also unwittingly maintains and preserves the indigenous ontology.

Referring once more to the ideas of Fannella Cannell in which she emphasizes the conditions under which it becomes impossible to ignore the circumstances brought about by the missionary influence of Christianity, the “colonial agency” and the “compulsory imposition of modernity” becomes part of the interpretation of the folkloric phenomenon that I address in this thesis (ibid.: 35–36). Furthermore, the subtle nuances of change within the Khasi Christian theology itself enables the interpretation of the supernatural folklore in discursive ways, which in turn allows for the multiplicity of meaning.

2.5. Transformation of the Urban Space into New Forms of Modernity

The image of Shillong as the leading urban centre of Northeastern India is not such a recent construct. For decades the city has inspired immigration from

across the region and functioned as the administrative home for the governance of territories such as the North–East Frontier Agency (Arunachal Pradesh). Shillong has reputedly the best educational institutions in Northeastern India. Schools including Loreto Convent (1909), founded by the Loreto Sisters; St. Edmunds College (1916), founded by the Christian Brothers; and the centrally funded North Eastern Hill University (1973) attract huge populations of students from around Northeastern India.

There is a mixed population inhabiting this city. Drawing from my life–long experience as a resident of Shillong, I may say that this results in transformational liminalities, in which identities become multiple. Folklore becomes a central means of expressing the fear of the inhabitants in a town, which seems overrun by people from different ethnicities. Today, Shillong actively cultivates its reputation as an urban, progressive town. The connection is strong with music; the town styles itself as the “Rock Music Capital of India”. An article published in India’s national newspaper, *The Hindustan Times*, dubbed Shillong as “India’s Coolest Town”: “There is something honest about the way every person below the age of 90 loves Elvis or Iron Maiden and variations thereof. (One of India’s finest blues bands, Soulmate, is from Shillong)” (Hazra 2013).

In the early days of colonization, Shillong had been dubbed as “the Scotland of the East” by the British. This was so because of the beautiful terrain, the cloud–kissed slopes, and the verdant hills. Today, this description still characterises the landscape that surrounds the city. But within the town itself, there is overcrowding and traffic jams. Inadequate infrastructural facilities characterise the town with all the features of a modern metropolitan city, yet Shillong lacks the solutions to sustain them. Encroachment into the streams that crisscross Shillong town is an example of this (Our Reporter 2015a). The subsequent loss of narratives describing the water nymphs (*puri*) who inhabited these streams within Shillong City, enchanting and seducing men, is an articulation of this transformation of the city.

Existing folklore then finds new forms of expression which also co–relate with the beliefs of the people who have recently come to Shillong for study or work. To clarify, a remarkable part of the population of Northeastern India, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya are Christian, and as such, generally subscribe to Christian doctrines about death and the afterlife. This links the first article on the vanishing hitchhiker to the confluence of ethnicities and the infrastructural shortcomings of Shillong: the circulation of narratives of the ghostly hitchhiker circulates through taxi drivers by passengers during long traffic jams. These stories in turn, critique the poor road conditions in Shillong, which reflect the limited city infrastructure. In the context of the Khasis, what must be taken into consideration is the complexity of the matrilineal social set up and its opposing discourse made manifest in the “real” position of women in contrast with the “ideal” position of women in a matrilineal society, the instability of political institutions and the frequent vernacular opposition to governmental policies, and the the politics of the conversion process. Folklore which is subversive, then, circulates on a dramatic scale and brings into focus the nuanced perspectives of the Khasi ethnicity.

Here I make a digression to exemplify this characteristic of folklore that opposes the imposition of a moral code by Khasi Christianity, inclusive of all denominations, which has a rigid stance on the issue of pre-marital sex, adultery and “licentious” behaviour. A person, by the name of David Lyngdoh, and infamously dubbed *Bah Jyllud* or Mr Massage, is a repeat sex offender in Shillong. His trademark is that he stealthily enters a house in Shillong City, and then gets into bed with the lady of the house while she is sleeping. Then he “massages” her and the lady allows it because she thinks that it is her husband. David Lyngdoh was arrested twice, in 2012 and 2014 (Our Reporter 2015b). But as the story spread, narratives about the sexual licentiousness of *Bah Jyllud* were reported from all around the city. Women from all walks of life were “attacked”. Therefore even when David Lyngdoh was safely locked up in prison, women continued to talk about him, discuss his activities, and report cases of being molested by him. These narratives expressed the vernacular sentiment against the strict moral codes that Christians have to “endure,” or risk ex-communication. Folklore here, undermines set paradigms and divides opinion. It contests the authorial discourse and creates a dialogic narrative, which questions rules. Folklore, then, is created and forged in differential identities and borders and it allows for the expression of opposition, conflict and subversion (Bauman 1971: 38–39).

2.6. Transformation and the Non-Human Entities

In the traditional Khasi belief and ritual system the concept of sacred and cursed space is related with ritual or death. A sacred place, in the Khasi epistemology, is created through the intercession of a ritual performer and has a guardian deity or *ryngkew* living there. A sacred place also incorporates taboos in it. On the other hand, a cursed place for a Khasi is a place inhabited by a *tyrut*, or curse, which is born when any accident or tragic occurrence has taken place. This means that misfortune or accidents of a similar nature will keep recurring at such a place. There is a third kind of place, which is perceived as being mostly ambivalent until given meaning through the medium of narratives and, consequently, belief. These places include water bodies — waterfalls, streams, rivers and pools — which are located in the wilderness or near villages. People do not venture near water bodies late at night because the *puri um* or water spirit and other other-than-human entities inhabit such places.

Theorising upon the idea of the non-human and their social existence, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in his article “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” (1998) on Amerindian ontologies, points out that animals see themselves as people where the outer skin becomes the “clothing” which hides a human form. This internal form may be perceived only by a specific species or specially endowed human beings who are able to traverse across worlds, for example, shamans (Viveros de Castro 1998: 470–71). In the view of Viveros de Castro who propounds the theory of perspectivism, the dualist

cosmology, which distinguishes western cultures cannot be applied to non-western cosmologies. Amerindian perspectivism in its universality, according to Viveiros de Castro means that there was an original state of un-differentiation between humans and animals, described in mythology. It may be inferred then that there exists a spiritual union within all beings. Appearances may differ, but the inner being is undivided — nature is thus as social as are human beings. A jaguar may have the same spirit as does a human being, but its bodily appearance is different. The “notion of clothing as one of the privileged expressions of metamorphosis” is another noteworthy peculiarity of transformation:

[A]nimals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask. At first sight then, we would have a distinction between an anthropomorphic essence of a spiritual type, common to animate beings, and a variable bodily appearance, characteristic of each individual species but which rather than being a fixed attribute is instead a changeable and removable clothing. This notion of ‘clothing’ is one of the privileged expressions of metamorphosis – spirits, the dead and shamans who assume animal form, beasts that turn into other beasts, humans that are inadvertently turned into animals – an omnipresent process in the ‘highly transformational world’. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470)

In the Khasi context, a parallel reality is inhabited by the non-human entities and this may be comprehended only through movement into the dream/vision state, the *ramia*. Reality is not dualistically ordered or perceivable only to humans or to the dead. Reality is multiple, and variegated, dependent upon the beings who inhabit it and the purpose for which they inhabit it. The living environment is social and interactive with humans; moreover there exists a reciprocal, intentioned relationship. Human beings can apprehend alternate realities through the dreamworld (*ramia*), the world of the tiger-men, the water realm of the spirit deities and the reality of the ancestors. For this to happen, for a human to access the alternate reality, a transformation is required. This is inclusive not only of the human-animal, but of the natural animal. I use the word human-animal, because in Khasi ontology, specially gifted individuals have the ability to transform into animals and deities.

Even, the “ability” to be a human being requires that the Supreme Being endows or clothes a person with a *rngiew*. In the words of Khasi writer and culture aficionado Sweetymon Rynjah (telephonic interview in November, 2015), it is the *rngiew*³⁰ of a person, which makes a being into a human. To transform into

³⁰ The *rngiew* is an ability which is god-like, that the Supreme Being clothes, invests a human being with when he or she comes out of the womb initially divine, and then whatever he or she acquires or achieves in a lifetimes is dependant on him or her. The *rngiew* stays

a human–animal, the *rngiew* must leave the human body, usually in sleep, make a physical manifestation in the form of a tiger, gecko, bull–snake et cetera, and traverse the various realms or realities. To become a deity, the human being must first go through a period of illness usually lasting two years and then, the ability of transformation is gifted to him or her. In cases of divine transformation, the human being falls into a supernaturally induced soporific state and then transforms, through possession, into a god. The physical features remain the same but the voice, mannerisms and cognitive abilities are altered. Transformation of consciousness is therefore a key concept that informs the contemporary belief of the Khasis.



Fig. 4. Tah Markri is a Khruk, or tigerwoman. Mawphrew Village, January 2009. Photo by Margaret Lyngdoh.

with a person through life and is reflected in the person’s being and stature. If their *jinglong mynsiem* (lit. ‘personality, spirit, essence, strength of character, nature, principles, moral fortitude et cetera’) are in line with *ka tip briew ka tip blei and ka tip hok tip sot*, (lit. ‘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. (Rynjah, Sweetymon 2015)

An analogy may be drawn through the example of the Khasi tiger–men and women. In one interview I carried out with a tiger–woman, Tah Makri of Mawphrew village, Ri Bhoi District, I asked her when the first time was that she became a tiger–woman. As the eldest female member of the family, Tah was required to brew the rice beer for the ritual, in honour of the clan deity that was to take place. She related that during this process of preparing the brew, the *garbing* came upon her. This concept of *garbing* is representative of the investiture of the tiger ability or “clothing” upon a human being selected by the ancestor deities or *syrngi*, composed of the *rngiew* of those people who lived according to the life ways prescribed by the guardian deities or *ryngkew*. Transformation then presents the possibility of changing one’s manifestation from one outer covering to another while maintaining a continuous spirit. “Clothing”, as part of the change in appearance is a central process in a highly transformational world. Animal clothing, in Khasi ontology, conceals an uninterruptedness of identity and spirit.

It would be relevant here to bring up the research on neo–animism, which highlights the focus on an engaged, intentioned, reciprocal relationship between human and non–human entities within a community’s ontology. Neo–animism, extensively theorized by Graham Harvey (2013a, 2013b), poses the questions: How should we relate? What are the appropriate ways of behaving with the natural environment? Harvey highlights a sensitive, emphatic relation that indigenous people in Canada share with nature. Nature is invested with the qualities of relationality, reciprocal responses and mutuality. In this dissertation, these questions of human relationships and engagement with place, as evidenced through Khasi “respectful behaviour” and gift–giving to non–human entities like *ryngkew* and *lei Shyllong* (the Shillong deity), are analysed within the framework of the indigenous religion of the Khasi sub–communities. In the backdrop of the relationship between humans and the natural world around him or her, the element of reciprocity is stressed. Inanimate things in nature like rocks, trees, rivers and plants share the mutuality of existence, not as distant, disparate objects, but as alive, respectful, relational and sharing exchangeable perspectives. Human beings, in the new approach in animism are not privileged, and nature is invested with personality and intentionality towards every living being.

These approaches towards the worldview of the non–European cultures overthrow the earlier, primary distinction assumed between nature and culture. Previous anthropological thought concentrated on the distinction between what is “natural” and belonging to the normative, separate entity, that nature was enclosed in; and what is “cultural” and belonged to the rationalistic, socio–economic human setup. I quote Philippe Descola in this context:

The dualism of nature and culture inevitably generates strategies of anthropological explanation that are congruent with this distinction and which gravitate around one or another of two monist poles, one naturalist and the other culturalist. The former asserts that culture, being a mere adaptation to biological and

ecological constraints, should be explained exclusively by the kind of mechanisms uncovered by the natural sciences; the latter surmises that culture constitutes an entirely distinct order of reality which entertains only contingent relations with the natural environment and the requisites of human metabolism. (Descola 2011: 14–15)

The transgression between the two separate entities – humanity and animality – represents what anthropology acknowledges as the human–nature relationship. However, in non–Western communities, nature has always been a social entity. Although the category of anthropological distinction was applied in looking at the Khasi community (see Shangpliang 2009: 221–223), it was not helpful in fully understanding the relational ontology, which encompasses the human, the human–animal, the non–human and the inanimate beings that make up the Khasi cosmology.

I must also make mention that the tiger men in Northern Khasi Hills are shamans of the village, or cluster of villages, to which they belong. (I use the word “shaman” because these specialists are believed to be endowed with healing powers, soul flight ability, and intrinsic connection with ancestors.) This shamanistic aspect of the tiger people gives them a status that is both human and non–human, traversing the realm of the ancestors, the tiger–people reality, and the realm of dreams (Nayak 2014: 564).

3. SUMMARY OF ARTICLES

Article I: Lyngdoh, Margaret 2012. The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Shillong: Khasi Belief Narratives and Violence Against Women. *Asian Ethnology* 71 (2), 207–224.

This article discusses the folklore catalysed through narratives about an actual murder which took place in 2002. These narratives seemed to address the cases of violence against women in a matrilineal society. When in 2008, the killer was sentenced to life imprisonment, the rumours of a young woman hailing taxis and vanishing mysteriously from them began to circulate. This incident took place in Shillong with its westernised outlook in the context of Christianity. This was a haunting which followed an international pattern and the result of the haunting are westernised in its character (Davies 2007), for example, the taxi driver does not die or become ill. He only gets a bad case of shock. This follows the Western pattern of ghostly hauntings not the indigenous one where a curse (*tyrut*) is born at a place where such a tragedy has occurred. My findings suggest that this international legend type was adapted to the Khasi context in order to critique governmental infrastructure, the religious institutions which exist in contestation and conflict with one another and the archaic system of the matriliney. Further, the vanishing hitchhiker theme explores how an international legend has generated a locally constructed set of orally transmitted narratives. The narratives derive from the framework of traditional belief systems among the Khasi community in Northeastern India and incorporate within them Western conceptions of hauntings and beliefs about the restless dead. I attempted to examine how this legend critiques paradigm shifts in the socio-economic structures that are dependent on government policies and infrastructural development. Alongside this analysis, the article further explores how the urban legend is supported by the living Khasic system of belief and social reality.

I began to study the transmission of this narrative from the point of view of the subversion of the traditional Khasi social setup, where women are supposedly revered and held in high esteem. Concurrent to this, the article looks at the urban space and its transformation: earlier the home and the hearth was the place where stories and community news was disseminated. The transition of the storytelling space from the traditional hearth/kitchen to the urban backseat of taxi cabs suggests that the tellers are people who remain anonymous to one another, share narratives for the duration of the taxi ride and then move on with their lives. For a brief time, a “folk group” is created, consisting of people who share stories about the traffic jams, the political situation or whatever topic becomes relevant. I may mention that in contemporary Khasi vernacular life, this article relates appropriately to the current traffic situation in Shillong city where the narrow roads are unable to accommodate the overwhelming number of daily commuters.

Article II: Lyngdoh, Margaret 2015. On Wealth and Jealousy among the Khasis: Thlen, Demonization and the Other. *Internationales Asienforum* 46 (1–2), 69–84.

This article analyses the transformation of a mythical malevolent entity, Thlen, from a creature of myth into legend and finally into the vernacular reality of the Khasi sub-community. It is believed among the Khasis that if a family rears Thlen, then they will be blessed with good fortune and wealth. In return this family has to feed Thlen with human blood. In addition, such a family recruits “agents” who hunt people to kill in order to feed Thlen. Belief in this supernatural entity has led to community violence, mob lynchings, ostracisms, and various acts of injustice and discrimination. The article uses one incident, which occurred in 2013, in which three men were hacked to death on the accusation that they were keepers of the Thlen.

In this article, I look at the dark folklore and how the negative consequence of belief lead to division, ostracism of individuals and violence. I interpreted the data I had using a contextual approach, because the topic was very sensitive and the imposition of “western” theories on Khasi cultural categories did not seem to help to understand why such incidents were occurring with such frequency and with such devastating results. However, my background in folklore theory was the very thing that enabled me to understand the processes that set in motion the chain of violence attributed to the Thlen. I first tried to understand the various origin narratives of Thlen structurally because it seemed to me that this narrative has two parts: the first was the mythical story and the second has the more legend-like motifs which make this belief relevant to the Khasi community. However, I connected the analysis of the narrative with actual events, which have occurred over the last four years connected with Thlen violence. These incidents related with Thlen seemed to culminate in the single event that I made an attempt to interpret. However, because public trauma over the event was very fresh, community members were reluctant to talk about the event where three people were murdered by a mob.

Violence connected with Thlen belief seems to be linked to the unstable political situation and the fear of the Other. Interestingly enough, in this context, Khasis do not “other” people of a different community, but fellow Khasis who are, perhaps, wealthier or belong to the demonised indigenous religion, or who are simply strangers in a given village or place. The pervasiveness of fear then leads to jealousy, demonisation and othering of people who in certain ways do not conform. The result of this is communicated in the various narratives about events associated with the Thlen that have been collected from the news media over the last four years. In order to clarify the consequences and pragmatics of the narrative, some of these occurrences are mentioned so as to illustrate the role of narrative in mob mentality during certain events. The article also looks at the links between wealth and demonisation. The transformation of the urban Khasi society from a traditional one to a modern, Christianised community also

contributes to the recurrence of waves of Thlen violence. I also analyse the role of narratives and their transmission.

Article III: Lyngdoh, Margaret (forthcoming). Tiger Transformation Among the Khasis of Northeastern India: Belief Worlds and Shifting Realities. *Anthropos* 111(2).

Data for this article was collected from Northern Khasi Hills primarily from among the Bhoi sub-community of the Khasis. The tiger men/women are specially chosen by ancestors who have been tiger-persons before them. The transformation from human to non-human takes place in a reality that in the western world is called sleep. In this article, I look at the non dualistic, inclusive worldview that is implicit in Khasi ontology. Non-human entities (tiger men and women), object persons (the cave named *Krem Lymbit*), the natural surroundings (the spirit tiger, Barthamblong who inhabits a place made up of granite boulders near Korstep village, the place in the scared grove which is the playground of the spirit tigers), and the spirit beings inhabit and traverse realities which are beyond the ability of our sensory awareness.

This article reflects the continuity of consciousness (*rngiew*) through the various realms and realities that a tiger man/woman, ancestor spirits and the ritual performer traverse. Socially tied to the pragmatics of rules or *jutang* that are laid down by the ancestors, the tiger men carry on the *jutang* associated with the guardian deity of the tiger people. The tiger women, in turn are responsible for the maintenance of the clan essence of being (*longkur*). This then ensures the continuity of the matrilineal social system. In my view, the tiger people tradition helps to maintain the natural social order which may be understood within the boundaries of Khasi ontology.

Besides this, the relationship with the natural environment, the upholding of the natural order and the Bhoi dream hermeneutics are analysed. As an outcome of several interviews that I have carried out with four female tiger women, and two tiger men, I have now come to understand the role and function that is played by the human tigers in the larger context of the Khasi social system. The Khasi society is matrilineal in character where it is the responsibility of the women to be custodians of tradition and clan rules. As such the Khruk plays the specific role of being the inheritor and bearer of the customs, practices and knowledge, which are related with upholding the religious values, rites, and rituals.

My research findings suggest that the *ramia* is a dream or vision world, which is inhabited by tiger men and women, ancestor spirits and the tiger deity. It is rather difficult to translate the implications of this term in a western context because the word *ramia*, is also used by the Khasis to denote a kind of madness, when a person is not in his or her senses, or is not socially or personally aware of his or her surroundings. So, in the case of divine possession, for example, the person's spirit leaves the body, but the physical body remains and does its daily

tasks. But if such a body, without its *rngiew*, talks with someone else then the speaker does not make sense and is said to *kren ramia* (lit. ‘talk *ramia*’). It is a different cultural, economic, and social world that the tigers inhabit with set rules and regulations. The environment including the natural habitat is part of this transformation. But human engagement with the natural environment co-evolves and is shaped by mutual adaptation.

Whereas the tigerman holds on to the rules of the guardian deity of the tigers and, in turn, of the clan ancestors in a framework that is clan and community oriented. The question that I asked in this context is: Why does the tiger people tradition persist in light of the dwindling forest cover, and the virtual absence of real tigers (clouded leopards and other kinds of wild animals belonging to the cat family)? My answer highlights the sustainability of culture and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Also, the significance of this tradition lies in the changing perception of the community towards human–animal transformations as it (the community) moves to accommodate Christianity and modernity.

Article IV: Lyngdoh, Margaret (forthcoming). Spirit Propitiation and Corpse Re-animation: Belief Negotiations Among the Khasis of Northeastern India. In: Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (eds.), *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

This article deals with narratives transmitted about death, corpse reanimation, and endo-mortuary cannibalism. The data for this article was collected from Lyngngam and Nongtraï areas of West Khasi Hills. The Lyngngam tend to be lumped together as a cohesive sub-community of the Khasis but they have their own “communities” who are named Lyngngam, Muliang and Nongtraï (Ehrensfels 1955). Firstly, I recorded practices among the Khyntiam Khasis, the rules which are followed in the wake of a “bad” death so as to establish a context for the material I move on to discuss. Further, I discuss practices, narrated to me by community members, in the villages of Nongmyndo, Langdongdai and Seiñduli about the mortuary practices of a particular clan, which involves the necessity of human sacrifice.

In this article I also analyse the negotiations and strategies of meaning making which are carried out by Christian converts to various denominations of Christianity and the processes by which non-convert Khasis are “othered” and/or demonised and pushed out of the realm of belonging to the Khasi community. These characteristics were observed in the generic motifs present in the narratives that I was collecting and listening to. These narratives, presented in their variations, are interpreted within a framework of othering communities living in the peripheral areas of the Khasi Hills. I looked at the question of why these narratives are still being transmitted, given that the entirety of my fieldwork participants and informants were Christians, church elders, and devout members of the Church. Here I hypothesise that such narratives remain on the outside; leftovers from an earlier belief system which cannot

accommodate them anymore. Christianity in this context also remains silent because these narratives also exist outside of the demonising discourse of the Church. And the processes, which underline stereotyping, othering and demonisation presents a crucial point in my research. In other instances, I had almost come to a conclusion that the Church has a tendency to demonise that which is “outside” its ideology. So why did the “Christians” who were telling me the narratives of spirit propitiation, corpse re-animation et cetera, not tell me about these narratives about death in a pejorative manner? Why were the Church men, who I interviewed, not demonising the members of the clan reportedly responsible for the head-hunting? In the interviews, there was no condemnation or demonisation of the Rashir clan, to whom are ascribed unnatural mortuary practices. These accounts were narrated as a matter of fact and without opinion. The only emotion that I could ascertain about the way that my informants feel about this topic is fear. But this also is relegated to the past.



Fig. 5. At the Rashir Hill, these stones scattered over a radius of one kilometre represent human heads, sacrificed and used during the funerary rituals of the Rashir clan in the past. January 2013, near Nongmatsaw Village, Nongtraï Region.

Further, what is significant about the Rashir clan narratives is the issue of secrecy. Outside of Lyngngam area, there seems to be no indication that the practices of the Rashir clan are well known. The stereotyping of the Lyngngam

sub-community (including Muliang and Nongtraï) is evident in the popular pan-Khasi phrase, *Lyngngam bam briew* (lit. ‘people from Lyngngam are cannibals’). As such, these narratives, although known by the community, are not shared or talked about openly. One may infer then, that there is a fear that if such narratives become common knowledge, it would lead to further stereotyping and marginalisation of a community which is already on the boundary of having the label of “non-Khasi” ascribed to them. One of the origin narrative of the Rashir is recorded in this article and is invaluable in deducing how the othering of this clan is sustained through narrative. This etiological narrative about the Rashir clan assumes significance in its relationship with the marginalising tendencies of the Lyngngam proper against those Lyngngam who have a Garo (another prominent ethnic community in Meghalaya) origin. This narrative serves to divide the Lyngngam into two – those who are indigenous, and those who are “said” to have migrated from present-day Bangladesh, or belonging to the Garo ethnicity (Shamphliang 1994).

4. TO SUM UP: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

It is possible to arrive at a few significant conclusions based on the cultural, sociological and religious contexts described in this thesis. Using supernatural folklore to frame the premises of this study it became possible to look at the larger vernacular discourses of sense-making processes within the Khasi communities. An overwhelming role is played in such meaning-making mechanisms of the individual within the society, through affirmations of identity. On the one hand, exist the official, institutional positivist assertions of a common identity by Khasi intellectuals and leaders; and on the other, the actual, vernacular and shifting articulations of personhood, individuality and differentiated identity which are fluid, shifting and utilised according to need. This is also because the Khasis constitute “one” ethnicity among the 200+ other communities in Northeastern India. The vocalised assertion of a single, bounded identity then becomes affirmative of the attempts of the community trying to find its place.

This point leads to the second implication of this thesis: folklore and folklore genres play an important role in the creation and sustaining of ethnic identity. One way to view at folklore is to ascribe to it the ability to unite and to create social cohesion. In this sense, folklore and folklore genres function as identity markers, an implement which is positive in helping the Khasi communities to assert itself, attain statehood and to be awarded the Scheduled Tribe Status according to which benefits are given on the basis of the marginalised, backward status of the Khasi communities. But folklore also serves to divide, and to create distance and othering of social groups within the Khasi communities themselves, which lead to stereotyping and peripheralisation. Orally transmitted genres become instruments used to perpetuate violence and social division, which in turn lead to the insight that articulations of folklore are multivalent and that it is possible to “undo” a stereotype by a malicious folklore through folkloristic study and analyses. These conclusions lead to the next step – addressing the communities involved and their leaders in order to explain the mechanisms of folklore in generating fear, conflicts and stigmatisation, but this social undertaking remains outside the boundaries of current academic research.

This point therefore brings to the forefront one of the key focus of this thesis: how folklore can serve to separate and be used as an excuse to support an ethnocentric worldview in the Khasi case. But within this articulated “Khasi identity”. Certain groups of people are relegated to the periphery of social and political institutions. In the vernacular interactions between the Khasis from the different areas of the Khasi Hills, negative attributes of savagery, anthropophagy and “demon worship” exist. Such malicious stereotyping becomes an instrument used to excuse othering, excommunication, violence et cetera. Belief narratives are used to aid the construction of a “narrative of fear”. This folkloristic study analysed such discourses directly; how people cope and interact with multiple genres in the same framework.

The attempts made by colonial authors and by later Khasi intellectuals to lump together various Khasi communities (for various reasons like the demand

for statehood, inclusion into the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution et cetera) necessitated the construction of a homogenous Khasi identity. These efforts are undermined by the discourse of othering, exclusion, stereotyping and distance, which come out strongly in the folklore, which originates from the peripheral areas of the Khasi hills. If there is a common link between the different communities, which make up the construct of “Khasi”, I propose that Christianity provides this link. This connection, combined with the desire of the people themselves to be looked at as a single ethnicity and to be called as the ‘children of the seven huts’ (*Hyññiewtrep* which recalls the mythic origin of the Khasi clans), renders this desire to be a single ethnicity relevant and validates it. However, to homogenise and to create an equal belief system is impossible, because the Khasis are in fact an assemblage of the Khyntiam, Bhoi, War, Jaintia and Lyngngam, where each community, has its own sub-communities, languages and dialects.

Also, this work furthers the debate about the role of folklore and belief in society as it is revealed through contesting religious frameworks operating within a given group of people. It provokes thought concerning the earlier notion of folklore as unifying: belief is not fixed, but rather shifts as an activator of memory, utilised in the Khasi context to affirm identity. And identity, as it is utilised in present-day Meghalaya, is politicised to the extent that an ethnocentric xenophobia becomes the result. The divisive authority of folklore is employed to reinforce these tendencies and the only connection between the different sub-communities of the Khasis is Christianity.

This work is my humble attempt to bring to the forefront the diverse practices of the Khasi sub-communities, which strive to persist in the cultural memory while they are simultaneously overshadowed by the “inclusive” political agendas of the government of India. Folklore is both dividing and unifying among the Khasi. It highlights the history of social division that is a result of new religious systems, immigration, and globalisation. It varies greatly according to region: even within a given community, rites and rituals are not hegemonic, or homogenous. Yet it is also the culture’s attempt to remember a shared history, one that has been fractured by change and is now re-woven in new forms through vernacular belief and narrative.

To sum up the findings from the material, which I collected from the urbanised, capital city of Shillong, I may point to the sense of uncertainty which is revealed when people spoke to me about competing beliefs which they encounter in their daily lives. Such a response may depend on the risks of living in a town with a fast growing migrant population, without any infrastructure to support the increasing demands. Maybe one way is to look at the diverse narratives as a means whereby to represent diversity, nuance and contradiction. In this context, what theoretical tools can we use to approach that aside from constantly reaffirming that we aren’t attempting to represent an entire culture? I hope that through this work, more scholars will be motivated to work in Northeast India. There is so much in the area that is not yet documented, not yet acknowledged, and not yet understood.

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Interview Resources

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Teisenemine, traditsioon ja elatud tõelus: Kirde-India khaside rahvapärased usundilised maailmad

Khasid on etniline kogukond Kirde-Indias, keda India valitsuse 2013. aasta rahvastikustatistika järgi on 1,5 miljonit. Khasidel kehtib matrilineaarne ehk naisliinis pärimisõigus, põlvnemist arvestatakse muistse esiema järgi ja tütreid jäävad pärast abiellumist emakoju elama. Khasi ühiskonnakorrale on iseloomulik pidada esmatahtsaks hõimusedeid ja see väljendub ka traditsioonilises uskumustesüsteemis. Usund muutus põhjalikult 19. sajandil, kui piirkonda saabusid britid ja kristlikud misjonärid. 19. sajandi teisel poolel pöördusid khasid massiliselt ristiisku. Tänapäeval on enamik khasidest kristlased, neist suurim osakaal on presbüterlastel ja katoliiklastel, kuid esindatud on ka väiksemad kristlikud usuvoolud.

Kristluse ülevõtmisega kaasnes ühiskondlike ning religioossete normide ja tavade muutumine, mille mõjud ulatuvad ka individuaalpsühholoogilisele tasandile. Kristlusest ja sellega seotud moderniseerumisest tingitud siirde- ja konfliktifenomenid väljenduvad mitmetes folklooriliikides. Traditsioonilise khasi maailmavaate ja uute, “moodsate” kristlike väärtuste vahel toimunud kompromissotsingud ja lõimumisprotsessid ning traditsioonilisel usundil põhinenud vanas khasi eluviisis toimunud katkestus tõid kaasa trauma, mis leiab muuhulgas väljenduse rahvajuttudes, needsamad rahvajutud aga võivad mõnikord kogukonnas pingeid veelgi suurendada.

Käesolev väitekiri koondab kokku khaside hulgas korraldatud välitööde põhjal tehtud tähtsamad järeldused ja tõlgendused, keskendudes usundi ja selle transformatsiooniprotsesside rollile khaside kogukonnas. Olen tänulik kogukonnaliikmetele, kes aitasid mul oma maailmavaadet paremini mõista – välitööde käigus oli mul võimalus osaleda aktiivselt informantide igapäevaelus ja tutvuda sügavuti kohalike inimestega, kellega sõlmitud suhted kestavad siiani. Seega aitas välitööde protsess mul süvitsi mõista mitmesuguseid folkloorseid praktikaid ja nendega seoses ilmnevaid identiteedierisusi, millele on seni vähe tähelepanu pööratud.

Üks käesoleva väitekirja peamisi tulemusi on ühtse khasi kujuteldava identiteedi dekonstrueerimine. Khasi autorid on kaua aega väitnud, et erinevad kogukonnad, millest khasi etniline rühm koosneb, on homogeenised. Mainekad khasi intellektuaalid, kes tajusid khasi põlisusundeid ohustatuna, püüdsid mitmesugustes, pea kogu 20. sajandi vältel ilmunud kirjutistes destilleerida khasi “religiooni” olemuslikke jooni. Selle tingis vajadus kasutada ühtsena eristuvat identiteeti kristlike misjonäride tegevuse mõjudele vastandumiseks ja hiljem khaside näitamiseks etnilises mõttes eraldiseisva rühmana, mis oli vajalik, et taotleda autonoomse osariigi staatust. Praegune Meghalaya osariik koondab endasse kolm poliitiliselt tunnustatud etnilist rühma: khasid, jaintiad ja garod. Neist kahte esimest rühma kujutatakse sageli ühtesulanuna ja identsena.

Minu uurimistöö näitab siiski, et khasid ja jaintiad ei moodusta homogeenset kogukonda, vaid koosnevad pigem omaette väiksematest rühmadest.

Khasi etniline rühm on konglomeraat erinevatest kogukondadest, koosnedes peamiselt khynriamidest, jaintiastest, bhoidest, waridest ja lyngngamidest. Igal rühmal on oma uskumused ja religioosse kultuuri väljendused, olgugi et ülalkirjeldatud usuvahetuse tulemusel on enamik kohalikke üle võtnud ristiusu. Välitööandmete analüüsi käigus muutuvad nähtavaks erinevad lähenemismoodused ja kompromissotsingud, mis on andnud usundifenomenidele tähendusi Lääne ideede ja khasi traditsiooniliste ideede hübriidses kontekstis: põlisuskumuste säilimise muudab võimalikuks nende demoniseerimine kristliku kiriku kaudu. Just sellel taustal on võimalik mõista sotsiaalsetes institutsioonides asetleidnud transformatsioone. Väitekirjas analüüsitakse kriitiliselt traditsiooni ja vernakulaarse usundi kohta käibel olevaid folkloristlikke teooriaid khasi miljöo foonil. Sellise lähenemise tulemusena tuli ümber hinnata seda, mis üldse moodustab traditsiooni ja mis mitte. Mitmesugused kombed, ka juhuslikumat laadi rituaalsed tegevused, on khaside silmis traditsioonid, mida on antud edasi põlvest põlve, kuid kui mingit tegevust peetakse genuiinselt traditsiooniliseks, on selle kriteeriumiks jumalikkuse või pühaduse komponent, mis ühtlasi legitimeerib selle tegevuse. Seetõttu peetakse näiteks jumaliku tahte väljaselgitamise nimel vältimatult vajalikuks ühe khasi rituaali käigus linnusisikonna põhjal ennustamist, – nimelt eksisteerivad sellist rituaali kirjeldavad narratiivid, millesse suhtutakse kui kinnitusse, et selle tava on sätestanud jumal ise.

Folkloristikas kasutatava vernakulaarse religiooni mõistet selgitab oma uurimuses Leonard Primiano (1995). Tema lähenemine osutus khaside sotsiaalse elu põhitasandil toimunud transformatsioonide vaatlemisel otstarbekaks. See meetod võimaldas mittekallutatult uurida tähenduse konstrueerimise strateegiaid üksikisiku ja kogukonna vaatepunktist ning andis vabaduse tõlgendada ja mõista religiooni loovalt – sageli rääkisid kohalikud elanikud mulle enda valitud “keskteest”, mis suutis ühitada põlisuskumused kristlusest tulenevate nõuetega. Ma tuginen oma töös seega kahele ülalkirjeldatud vaateviisile: traditsiooni kontseptsioonile, mille kohta ranges khasidel kasutatavas tähenduses kehtib termin *jutang* ehk inimese ja jumala vahel sõlmitud püha leping, ning vernakulaarse religiooni kontseptsioonile, mis võtab arvesse individuaalset loovust traditsiooni kontekstis. Need kaks ideed tundusid olevat käsitatavad poleemiliste vastanditena, kuid khaside usundialaste kompromissipüüete valguses ilmnes, et kuigi traditsiooni kontseptsiooni peetakse alati ülimuslikuks, on siiski erinevaid, loovaid viise, kuidas traditsiooni tegelikkuses praktiseeritakse.

Käesolev väitekiri keskendub üleloomulikele traditsioonidele tänapäeva ühiskonnas – nii linlikus miljöös kui ka perifeersetes maapiirkondades Khasi mägedes. Neljas artiklis analüüsin kriitiliselt ühe kummitusjutu levikut, mis õhustab kehtivaid sotsiaalseid ja infrastruktuurilisi institutsioone Shillongis; vägivald ja muid negatiivsed tagajärgi, mille on piirkonnas esile kutsunud narratiivid pahatahtlikust verejanulisest üleloomulikust olendist; uskumusi seoses inimese loomaks muutumise võimega ja vastavasisulisel narratiivide nende uskumuste säilimise tagajana kogukonnas; ning teispoolsusega seotud uskumusi

Khasi mägede perifeersetes piirkondades ja nende toimet inimrühmade stereotüüpiseerimisel ja marginaliseerimisel. Need neli artiklit tutvustavad ja uurivad loovalt selliseid khaside traditsioone, mida pole varem dokumenteeritud. Artiklid näitlikustavad, kuidas kristlikud tõekspidamised kohandatakse olemasolevate normide ja väärtushinnangutega ning kuidas põlisuskumused taasesitatakse uues omaks võetud ristiusu kontekstis, milles khaside identiteet, emajärgsus ja hõimused on absorbeeritud kristliku eetika diskursusesse. Need khasi kultuuri elemendid, mida ei ole võimalik kohandada kristlikule maailmavaatele vastuvõetavaks, demoniseeritakse, mis tahes tahtmata tagab nende säilimise.

Artikkel I: Lyngdoh, Margaret 2012. The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Shillong: Khasi Belief Narratives and Violence Against Women. *Asian Ethnology* 71 (2), 207–224.

Analüüsin oma artiklis folkloori, mille katalüsaator oli üks tegelik, 2002. aastal aset leidnud mõrvajuhtum. Kui mõrvarile mõisteti 2008. aastal eluaegne vanglakaristus, hakkasid levima kuuldused noorest naisest, kes peatab taksosid ja seejärel neist müstilisel moel haihtub. Esmapilgul tundus, et need narratiivid on reaktsioon naistevastasele vägivallale, mis oli puhkenud pärast matrilineaarse ehk emajärgse ühiskonna mõranemist. Jutud olid lokaliseeritud Shillongi läänelikku miljöosse ja kristlikku konteksti. Ent kirjeldatud kummitusjuhtumid järgisid rahvusvaheliselt tuntud mudelit ning kummitamise tagajärge võib pidada “läänelikuks” (Davies 2007), näiteks ei esine tekstides taksojuhi surma või haigeksjäämise episoodi, vaid tema kannatused piirduvad hingelise šokiga. Selline süzeeliin järgib läänelikes kummituslugudes esinevat mudelit, mitte kohalikku põlisusundilist seletust, mille järgi selliste tragöödiade toimumiskohtadest saab neetud paik (*tyrut*). Minu materjali põhjal võib järeldada, et see rahvusvaheline muistenditüüp on kohandatud khasi kontekstile sobivaks ja selle selles loos on eesmärk kritiseerida riiklikku infrastruktuuri, üksteisega konkureerivaid ja üksteise suhtes konfliktialdis olevaid kiriklikke institutsioone ning traditsioonilist emajärgset süsteemi. Artiklis jälgitakse haihtuva hääletaja teema põhjal, kuidas üks rahvusvaheline narratiiv on genereerinud lokaalselt konstrueeritud suulise levikuga narratiivide kompleksi. Need narratiivid on saanud ainest Kirde-India khasi kogukonna traditsioonilise uskumustesüsteemi raamistikust, kuid kaasavad ühtlasi Läänes levinud kontseptsioone kummitamise ja rahutute surnute kohta. Uurin oma artiklis, kuidas täpsemalt see narratiivikompleks kritiseerib paradigmanihkeid sotsiaalmajanduslikes struktuurides, mis sõltuvad valitsuse määrustest ja taristu arengust. Lisaks sellele analüüsin, kuidas elav khasi uskumustesüsteem ja sotsiaalne reaalsus toetavad omakorda rahvusvahelist linnamuistendit.

Mulle pakkus see narratiiv huvi kui näide traditsioonilise khasi ühiskondliku korralduse allakäigust – traditsiooniliselt oleks ju pidanud selle ühiskonna naistele osaks saada austus ja lugupidamine. Lisaks analüüsin artiklis linlikku ruumi ja selle transformeerumist: varem olid kodu ja köök peamised kohad, kus

räägiti lugusid ja vahetati kogukonnauudiseid. Jutuvestmisruumi kandumine traditsioonilisest keskkonnast linlikku konteksti takso tagaistmele viitab sellele, et jutustajateks on anonüümsed isikud, kes jäävad üksteisele lõpuni tundmatuks, vahetavad lugusid ühe taksosõidu jooksul ja lähevad seejärel oma eluga edasi. Põgusaks hetkeks moodustatakse “rahvarühm”, mis koosneb inimestest, kes jagavad ühist, liiklusummikute, poliitilise olukorra või muude esilekerkinud teemadega seonduvat jutupagasit. Väärrib märkimist, et tänapäevases khaside argielus haakuvad temaatilised narratiivid tegeliku liiklusolukorraga Shillongi linnas, kus kitsad teed ei suuda mahutada igapäevaste sõitjate üha kasvavat massi.

Artikkel II: Lyngdoh, Margaret 2015. On Wealth and Jealousy among the Khasis: Thlen, Demonization and the Other. *Internationales Asienforum* 46 (1–2), 69–84.

Artikkel analüüsib *thleni*-nimelise müütilise pahatahtliku olendi transformeerumist müüditegelasest muistendiolendiks ja edasikandumist ühe khasi kogukonna argisesse tegelikkusesse. Khaside seas on tuntud uskumus, et kui ühel perekonnal on *thlen*, siis tagab see pereliikmetele hea õnne ja jõukuse. Vastutasuks peab see perekond aga toitma *thlen*'i inimverega. Lisaks peab selline pere värbama endale “agente”, kes jahivad inimesi, et hankida verd *thlen*'i toitmiseks. Usk sellesse üleloomulikku olendisse on toonud kogukonnas kaasa vägivalda, grupiviisilisi omakohtujuhtumeid, põlu alla panekuid ning mitmesuguseid ebaõigluse ja diskrimineerimisakte. Viitan artiklis ühele 2013. aastal toimunud juhtumile, mille käigus tapeti kolm meest, kuna neid süüdistati *thlen*'i pidamises.

Selles artiklis vaatlen folkloori tumedamat poolt ja seda, kuidas usund võib põhjustada kogukonna leeridesse jagunemist ja vägivalda. Ma kasutan oma andmete tõlgendamisel kontekstuaalset lähenemist, kuna teema on väga tundlik ning sellega tegelemisel jäi mulje, et “läänelike” teooriate rakendamine khasi kultuuriliste kategooriate uurimisel ei too selgust, miks niisugused olukorrad sedavõrd suure sagedusega ja sedavõrd laastavate tagajärgedega aset leiavad. Siiski aitasid minu teadmised folklooriteooriast mul mõista protsesse, mis käivitasid *thlen*'iga seotud vägivaldaahela. Kõigepealt üritasin ma mõista erinevaid *thlen*'i tekkelugusid struktuuralselt, kuna mulle tundus, et see narratiiv koosneb kahest osast: ühelt poolt müütilisest loost ja teiselt poolt muistendilikumatest motiividest, mis muudavad vastavad uskumused khaside kogukonnas aktuaalseks. Kuid lisaks sidusin ma oma narratiivianalüüsi viimase nelja aasta jooksul toimunud tegelike vägivallasündmustega. Kõik need vahejuhtumid näisid leidvat kulminatsiooni ühes konkreetses juhtumis, mida olen artiklis interpreteerinud. Paraku oli toimunud sündmustest tingitud kogukondlik trauma minu välitööde ajal veel väga värske, mistõttu kogukonnaliikmed ei olnud kuigi altd neist rääkima.

Thlen'i puudutavate uskumustega seotud vägivald näib olevat seotud eba-stabiilse poliitilise olukorraga ja hirmuga kultuurilise "teise" ees. Huvitaval kombel ei taju aga khasid selles kontekstis kultuurilise teisena mitte teise kogukonna liikmeid, vaid omaenda Khasi kogukonna liikmeid, kes on vaid ehk teistest jõukamad või viljelevad demoniseeritud põlisusundit või on mingis kindlas külas või piirkonnas võõrad. Hirm põhjustab kadedust, demoniseerimist ja kehtivate normidega kokkusobimatute isikute tajumist kultuurilise teise staatuses. Vastavaid reaktsioone võib jälgida erinevate *thlen*'iga seotud episoodide kujul, mille ma olen välja noppinud viimase nelja aasta uudismeediast. Eesmärgiga selgitada selle narratiivi tagajärgi ja pragmaatikat tsiteerin ka oma artiklis mõningaid selliseid kajastusi, kuna need illustreerivad seda, milline on narratiivide roll *thlen*'iga seotud omakohtupuhangute juures. Lisaks vaatlen artiklis seoseid jõukuse ja demoniseerimise vahel ning jutustamise ja edasi-jutustamise dünaamikaid. Artiklis leiab tõestust oletus, et khaside linliku eluviisini viinud transformatsioonid traditsioonilisest kogukonnast moodsaks kristlikuks kogukonnaks on omakorda kaasa aidanud *thlen*'iga seotud vägivaldajuhtumite puhkemisele.

Artikkel III: Lyngdoh, Margaret (ilmumas). Tiger Transformation Among the Khasis of Northeastern India: Belief Worlds and Shifting Realities. *Anthropos* 111 (2).

Artikli aluseks olevad andmed on kogutud Põhja-Khasi mägedes (Northern Khasi Hills) peamiselt khaside Bhoi kogukonna esindajatelt. Välitööde käigus selgus, et kohaliku uskumuse järgi valivad tiigerinimesed välja nende esivanemad, kes on ise kunagi olnud samuti tiigerinimesed. Muutumine inimesest mitteinimeseks toimub sellises reaalsuses, mida Lääne maailmavaate kohaselt peetakse uneks. Vaatlen oma materjali lähtuvalt mittedualistlikust, holistilisest maailmavaatest, mis on Khasi ontoloogia olemuslik osa. Mitteinimesest olendid (tiigermehed ja -naised), personifitseeritud objektid (koobas nimega *Krem Lymbit*), maastikuline ümbrus (graniitrahnud Korstepi küla lähedal kui vaimtiiger Barthamblongi elupaik, püha hiiesalu kui vaimtiigrite mängupaik) ja vaimolendid toimivad ja tegutsevad reaalsustes, mis on tavalise inimmeele vastuvõtuvõimele kättesaamatud.

Valgustan artiklis kujutelmi elu ja teadvuse jätkumisest erinevates sfäärides, milles liiguvad tiigerinimesed, esivanemate vaimud ja rituaalitundjad. Tiigermehed, kes on sotsiaalselt seotud esivanemate sätestatud sakraalsete reeglite (*jutang*) pragmaatikaga, on tiigerjumalusega seotud traditsioonide edasikandjad. Tiigernaised vastutavad klannivaimu või loomuse (*longkur*) säilimise eest. See tagab emajärgsete sotsiaalsete süsteemide järjepidevuse. Seega lähtuvad tiigermehed teadmisesest, et nad peavad kinni pidama tiigerjumaluse sätestatud rituaalsetest tavadest, ning tiigernaised (*Khruk*) lähtuvad teadmisesest, et nende kohus on tagada klannivaimu säilitavate riituste korraldamine. Minu silmis on

tiigerinimeste traditsioonil khasi maailmavaatesse kontekstualiseeritud loomuliku korra säilitamise funktsioon.

Minu uurimistulemuste kohaselt tähistab khasidel unenäo- või visiooni-maailma, milles tiigerinimesed, esivanemad ja tiigerjumalus tegutsevad, nähtuse nimetusega *ramia*. Selle termini nüansse on raske Lääne konteksti tõlkida, kuna khasid kasutavad sõna *ramia* ka siis, kui viitavad teatavale hullusele, kus inimene ei ole täie mõistuse juures või siis ei suuda endale oma ümbrust teadvustada. Näiteks jumaliku seestumise korral lahkub inimese enda hing kehast, kuid tema füüsiline keha jääb kohale ja täidab endiselt oma ülesandeid, ent kui inimene, kelle teadvus (*rngiew*) ei ole kohal, räägib mõne kõrvalolijaga, siis ei saa kõrvalolija tema jutust aru ja selle kohta öeldakse *kren ramia* ehk siis “räägib *ramiat*”.

Seega on tiigrite tegutsemispaik teistsugune kultuuriline, majanduslik ja sotsiaalne maailm, milles kehtivad oma reeglid ja tavad. Maastikulisel ümbrusel on selles transformatsioonis samuti oma roll. Kuid inimese suhe ümbrusega kujuneb vastastikuse adaptatsiooni käigus. Artiklis analüüsingi tiigerinimeste suhet looduskeskkonnaga, nende loomuliku korra säilitaja funktsiooni ja bhoide unenäohermeneutikat. Minu interjuud nelja tiigernaise ja kahe tiigermehega on aidanud mul mõista tiigerinimeste rolli ja funktsiooni khaside sotsiaalse süsteemi laiemas kontekstis. Khaside emajärgses sotsiaalses süsteemis lasub naistel kohustus tegutseda traditsiooni ja klannireeglite säilitajatena. Seega on tiigernaise (*Khruk*) ülesanne olla kommete, rituaalide ja teadmiste hoidja ja edasikandja, tagades nii religioossete väärtuste, riituste ja rituaalide järjepidevuse. Tiigermees seevastu järgib tiigrite kaitsejumaluse ja omakorda esivanemate edasiantud reegleid klannile ja kogukonnale orienteeritud raamistikus. Eelöelduga seoses tõusetus küsimus, miks säilib tiigerinimeste traditsioon, kuigi metsad kahanevad ja tiigreid enam piirkonnas praktiliselt ei eksisteeri ning vähemaks on jäänud ka leopardide ja teisi suuri kaslasi? Vastust tuleb otsida kultuuri jätkusuutlikkusest ja kultuuri võimest adapteeruda vastavalt muutunud oludele. Samuti peitub kirjeldatud traditsiooni relevantsus selles, et seoses kristluse ja modernsete vaadete pealetungiga on inimeste arusaamad loomtransformatsioonidest kogukonnas muutunud, kuid siiski mingil kujul säilinud.

Artikkel IV: Lyngdoh, Margaret (ilmumas). Spirit Propitiation and Corpse Reanimation: Belief Negotiations Among the Khasis of Northeastern India. In: Marion Bowman ja Ülo Valk (toim.), *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

Artikli huvikeskmes on rahvajutud surmast, laiba elluärkamisest ja surmajärgsest rituaalsest kannibalismist. Artiklis kasutatud andmed pärinevad minu välitöödelt lyngngami ja nongtraia hõimu asualal Lääne-Khasi mägedes (West Khasi Hills). Lyngngami hõimu käsitatakse enamasti ühe hõimuna, kuigi selle raames on eristatavad omaette lyngngami, muliangi ja nongtraia kogukonnad. Esmalt talletasin ma khyriami khaside kombestikku, täpsemalt reegleid,

millest peetakse kinni „halbade” surnute valvamisel, ja just see materjal moodustab minu artiklis sisalduva arutelu konteksti. Lisaks analüüsin Nongmyndo, Langdongdai ja Seiñduli elanikelt salvestatud rahvajutte ühe konkreetse klanni surmakombestiku kohta, milles rõhutatakse muuhulgas inimohvri toomise vältimatust.

Lisaks vaatlen kompromissiotsingute ja tähendusloome strateegiaid kristlusesse pöördunud khasidel, ja protsesse, mille käigus mittekristlastest khasid on hakatud käsutama kultuurilise teisena ja/või demoniseeritult ning khasi kogukonna kuuluvussidemetest väljatõrjutuna. Just selliseid ilminguid võis täheldada kogutud narratiivide geneerilistes motiivides. Nende narratiivide erinevate versioonide tõlgendusalus on kohalike elanike hulgas täheldatav tendents tajuda Khasi mägede perifeersetes piirkondades elavaid kogukondi kultuurilise teise staatuses. Mind huvitas küsimus, mis tingib selliste narratiivide jätkuva käibeloleku, kui arvestada, et kõik isikud, kes osalesid minu välitöödes informantidena või muul moel, olid õigupoolest kristlased ja pühendunud kirikuliikmed. Esitan hüpoteesi, et sellised rahvajutud paigutuvad kuhugi usundilise maailmapildi äärealale; need on jäänukid varasemast uskumustesüsteemist, milles tänapäeval pole enam õiget kohta. Nende juttude olemasolu ei saa seletada kristluse mõjudega, kuna sellised narratiivid eksisteerivad ka väljaspool kristliku kiriku demoniseerivat diskursust. Sellised stereotüpiseerimise, kultuurilise teise staatuse omistamise ja demoniseerimise protsessid moodustavadki minu uurimuse tähtsaima huvikeskme. Mõningatel juhtudel näis esmapilgul loogiline järeldada, et kirikul on kalduvus demoniseerida kõike seda, mis jääb “väljapoole” kristlikku ideoloogiat, kuid siin tekkis küsimus, miks ei esitanud “kristlased” neid vaimude lepitamist, laipade elluärkamist ja muust sarnasest rääkivaid rahvajutte pejoratiivsel moel; miks ei kasutanud kirikuesindajad meie intervjuude käigus peaküttideks peetava klanni liikmetest rääkides demoniseerivat hoiakut? Küsitlemise käigus ei ilmnunud mingit märki rashiri klanni hukkamõistmisest või demoniseerimisest, pigem esitati jutte lihtsalt tõsilugudena, lisamata enda hinnangut. Ainus emotsioon, mida informandid selle teemaga seoses väljendasid, oli hirm, kuid ka seda pigem viitega minevikule.

Olulise elemendina tõuseb rashiri klanni narratiivide puhul esile saladuses hoidmise moment. Väljaspool lyngngami hõimu asuala tundusid rashiri klanni kombes olevat vähetuntud. Lyngngami (sealhulgas muliangi ja nongtrai) kogukonna stereotüüpne kujutamine väljendub näiteks populaarses khasi käibefraasis *Lyngngam bam brieu* (otsetõlkes: lyngngami inimesed on inimsööjad). Seega ei jutustata neid narratiive kogukonnas avalikult, olgugi et neid põhimõtteliselt teatakse. Üks võimalik järeldus sellise käitumise kohta on, et see võib olla tingitud hirmust, et kui sellised narratiivid saavad üldtuntuks, siis toob see kaasa veelgi suurema stereotüpiseerimise ja marginaliseerimise kogukonna suhtes, keda juba niigi kiputakse sildistama “mitte-khasideks”. Rashiride tekkelugu kui väärtuslik allikas selle klanni kultuurilise demoniseerimise kohta näitlikustab ühtlasi narratiivi osatähtsust “teise” konstrueerimisel. See lugu jagab lyngngamid kaheks: põliselanikeks ja nendeks, kes olevat sisse rännanud tänapäeva Bangladeshist alalt või kuuluvad etniliselt garode sekka.

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