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Tiger Transformation among the Khasis of Northeastern India

Belief Worlds and Shifting Realities

Margaret Lyngdoh

Introduction

Northeastern India, made up of eight states, is endowed with a rich racial diversity and multiple cultural traditions. The “diversity of languages of this

region, constituting about 9 percent of the total landmass of India, can be guessed from the fact that this region has more than 200 languages” (Subba and Wouters 2013: 113). The rich ethnic composition of the region also points to a diversity of folklore and traditions. A common denominator found across these ethnicities constitutes the tradition of the tiger people, and specifically the belief that the human consciousness can merge with that of a tiger. In this context, the tigerman/tigerwoman is a liminal human-animal being moving across alternate realities that are typical to the community it belongs. In some cases, however, this phenomenon is valued negatively, for example among the Naga who perceive it as sickness (Hutton 1920), as an action of malevolent spirits (Brighenti 2011; Beggiora 2013), or – like in case of the Kondhs of Orissa – as a curse.

Patrick Newman gives a comprehensive account of tigerman beliefs in India and Southeast Asia based on colonial records of British ethnographers (2012). Specifically, he discusses the extent to which tigerman beliefs influenced and dictated social relations in India, China, and Southeast Asia. The book illustrates the expressive shock that colonial writers frequently demonstrated when they had come in contact with those alternative epistemologies. Nonetheless, although the book is a useful inventory of the weretiger narratives, it is also tinted by certain discomfort that Newman feels about the subject.

As a scholar coming from that region, I am uncomfortable with the “credulous gullibility” that the author invests upon the native worldview. I would rather draw attention to the function and the role that these human/animals play in the society that they belong to.¹ In January 2014, during my fieldwork in the village of Mayong located on the border between Meghalaya and Assam and famous for its magic and healing, I collected an account about the tiger-transformations which are projected into the past. According to the local healer (*bez*), Prabin Saikia, the last such transformation took place in the year 1901 and resulted in an accidental killing of the tigerman’s wife. Today the inhabitants of that border village attribute the ability to turn into the tiger not to themselves but to tribal communities inhabiting the surrounding area, specifically to the Garo, the Karbi, and the Khasis.

European Wolf Tradition and Lycanthropy

Similar beliefs also exist elsewhere, including the Western world as evidenced by popular movies, songs, and television series (cf. Blécourt 2013). Indeed, much research and effort has been devoted over time to the conceptualisation of the werewolf traditions in Europe and the other parts of the world.² Scientific research into claims of werewolf experiences had resulted in their identification with the condition called lycanthropy. In contemporary psychology, these symptoms are rather associated with schizophrenia and affective disorders (Surawicz and Banta 1975; Rosenstock and Vincent 1977). Werewolf beliefs have also been very present in folkloric expressions across. Specifically, a witch or a magician could turn into a werewolf by putting on a belt made of wolfskin or rubbing a salve all over the body, and in some cases, even drinking a cup of specially prepared beer. In a conversation held with Merili Metsvahi,³ I was told that in the Estonian werewolf tradition, one way to transform was to circle a stone three times. Sometimes a witch could turn somebody into a werewolf against his will, and if this happened, the only way to turn back into a human being was to offer a piece of bread as an act of goodwill. Becoming a werewolf was therefore a mimetic action of assuming the being of an animal as a conscious or involuntary act of will for whatever purpose.

The Khasis

The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group inhabiting the state of Meghalaya in north-east India, where they number around 1.5 million (Statistical Profile 2013: 167). There are five main communities among them, namely the Khyntiam, the Pnar, the Bhoi, the War, and the Lyngngam; they belong to the Austroasiatic Mon-Khmer linguistic family. The dominant language is Khasi, and specifically the Sohra dialect of the East Khasi Hills district. The Khasis follow the matrilineal social setup where lineage is traced from a primeval ancestress (Iawbei). In his ethnographic work on the Khasis, first published in 1906, the colonial officer, Major P. R. T. Gurdon, noted that:

1 In his seminal work on the Naga tribes of northeastern India, Hutton also discusses the Naga transformation of humans into leopards, where wounds, sustained by the animal form would manifest themselves on the human body in the form of boils (1920: 45 f.).

2 Jameson (1933); Senn (1982); Lecouteux (2003); Parker (2006).

3 Merili Metsvahi is Senior Researcher and expert in the Estonian werewolf tradition at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu.

... mother [is] the head and source, and only bond of union, of the family: in the most primitive part of the hills, the Synteng country, she is the only owner of real property, and through her alone is inheritance transmitted (1914: 8).

The birth of a girl child is particularly celebrated and the ancestral property is passed down to the youngest daughter who remains its custodian. The maternal uncle plays a key role in the performance of rituals and duties toward the clan and his sisters' family. This, however, does not imply that the status of male children, or the father as head of the family, is reduced in any way. Indeed, one of the most significant functions of the male to protect and provide for his family.

Although the matrilineal system among the Khasis is evolving, it remains a significant and honoured social institution. The majority of the Khasis today are Christian converts, and only a small percentage of them still practice the traditional indigenous religion called Niam Tynrai ("root religion"). There are two main Christian denominations among the Khasis – the Catholics and the Presbyterians, with charismatic and evangelical groups forming significant minorities. Catholics and Presbyterians have different attitudes towards indigenous Khasi beliefs and practices: while the Presbyterians demand a complete discontinuity with the traditional Khasi religion, the Catholics make an attempt to assimilate Khasi traditions into their doctrine and ritual practice. These are important factors that also shape the worldview and attitudes of Christian converts who are living in the capital city of Shillong and in the neighbouring villages with a strong Christian representation. Non-Christian Khasis living in those villages are nonetheless pushed to the margins of society and discriminated against as corroborated by my fieldwork results obtained in the region, in the years 2007–2015.

The Khasi Tiger People

The tigerman tradition is most visible among the Bhoi, a community of the Khasis that inhabit in the northern section of Meghalaya. Although the Bhoi are predominantly Christians, Khasi religious beliefs are strong among them. The way of life is primarily agrarian, with paddy cultivation as the mainstay of local economy. In general, the Khasis have an inclusive cosmology in which nature is not separated from human beings but rather linked to them. This connection is manifested in the relational ontology typical for the Khasi conception of life.

Bengt G. Karlsson, for instance, in his work about the political ecology of northeastern India recounts an incident when ordinary people at a bus stop began to tell him stories about how, in the olden days when the forest cover was thick, men and animals lived in co-existence with each other. Today, however, the indiscriminate logging of forests is endangering animals that begin to lose their natural habitat (2011: 83 f.).

One manifestation of that ontology among the Bhoi is the concept of the tigermen/women who traverse various realities for reasons. Human tigers among the Bhoi are known as *khla phuli*, and the transformation of a human into a tiger is called *ia khla*. The etymology of these words is somewhat obscure: although *khla* literally means "tiger," the meaning of the word *phuli* is not exactly known, as stated by my informants.⁴ In the second case, the word, *ia* means to "become" and *khla* – "tiger." Now, there are two kinds of tiger transformations among the Bhoi: the male tigerman – *sansaram*, which literally means "five-clawed." The rationale behind this word is that – contrary to the real tiger which has five claws in its front paws and four in his hind paws – the human tiger has five claws both in his front and the hind paws. The second type of human tiger is the *khruk* that is smaller and usually female. According to another informant, Ha Makri, the word *phuli* cannot be actually translated because its literal meaning is already lost.⁵ The tigermen and women are associated with special sacred places in the forests of Ri Bhoi. One such place is the dwelling of the guardian deity of tiger people of the Makri clan. The name of this deity is Pdahkyndeng and his dwelling place is a cave called Krem Lymbit which is also home to a large number of bats. Ha Makri told me that when cattle and livestock are lost, local people attribute this to the tiger deity that feeds on the livestock. Similarly, if a person is lost in this cave then, as my informant explains, the soul-essence or *rngiew* of that person is chosen by the tiger deity to be his cattle herder. Finally, it is believed that the bats in this cave comprise the cattle of the tiger deity.

The Khasis envision the human being as composed of *ka met* (body) and *ka mynsiem* (soul). Additionally, they also believe in another, more important component of a human being, and specifically the quality called *rngiew* which, simply put, means

4 Ha Makri, 40, Pahamskhen village; Kre Makri, 80, Mawiong village. Interviewed in January 2012

5 Ha Makri, resident of Pahamskhen, Raid Khatar Nonglyngdoh, Ri Bhoi, aged 40, farmer and daily labourer. The interview was carried out on 12 February, 2012.

an innate ability of an individual to succeed and to overcome challenges in daily life. This is the most sacred part of a human being which renders a person invulnerable and impervious to the evil eye or *sabuit* of others, to overcome misfortunes, to succeed, and to prosper. As explained by Khasi writer, H. Onderson Mawrie, the *rngiew* “is that Power of Man which is inherently born in him and he has it by virtue of being a Man” (1981: 8). My informant, Sweetymon Rynjah says in addition: *Ka Rgiew ka dei ka bor maia ba kynja Blei, ba u Blei u la pynkup, pynphong ia u briew ha ka jingwan longbriew jong u.*⁶ (“The Rngiew is a god-like quality in men; the Supreme Being clothes, invests a human being with divinity when a he/she comes out of the womb”). Then whatever he/she acquires or achieves in a lifetimes depends on him/her. The *rngiew* stays with a person through life and manifests itself in the person’s attitudes. If their personality and way of life are in line with 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 that harm should befall them.

The ability to turn into a tiger is an attribute of the *rngiew* of a person and it is conferred on the individual by his/her ancestors (*syngi*). Dising Marin, a tigerman, now deceased, stated in an interview carried out on 21 July 2009, that when a tiger person is summoned by the tiger deity to transform, it is initially manifested by a soporific state and the tiger person begins to yawn, and soon falls asleep. The tiger person’s *rngiew* consequently leaves him, transforms into a tiger, and “goes forth.” Sometimes, there is a physical manifestation of the weretiger, and village members have told me that the special footmarks of the weretiger have been seen around the household of the tiger person. The transformation of a man into tiger not only implies a shift in the state of the “outer clothing” but it also encompasses an esoteric dimension: a weretiger specifically enters into the realm of ancestral spirits to receive knowledge from them which is then disseminated to the village or clan members.

The Kondhs of Orissa (cf. Beggiora 2013: 97; Brighenti 2011) view tigermen as negative, malevolent entities capable of harming people and performing malicious actions. The transformation occurs through a magical ritual that projects the person’s soul onto the body of a living tiger. But for the Khasi tiger people, the transformation takes place on a metaphysical level and the change is linked to the world of ancestors, the alternate reality of the spirit

tigers, as well as to the physical reality. Khasi tigermen are not malevolent and only special persons are chosen divinely by the ancestors or the tiger deities. In certain cases, the ability is hereditary.

On the other hand, the *khruk* is a smaller, usually female tigerwoman who generally wanders alone. The woman chosen to become a tigerwoman is special, in the sense that the ability is bestowed upon her by ancestral spirits of the clan that she belongs to. She is also the only one who can prepare the rice beer to be used in various ritual contexts. This is one of the most significant functions of the female weretiger, who is also the custodian of the clan essence (*longkur*).

Narratives Concerning Tiger People

Part I

In this section, I present a number of narratives concerning tiger people recounted by tiger people themselves. I shall also intend to understand and explain the transformational experience of those individuals.

The first time that Tah Makri felt the onset of the tiger transformation was about fifteen years ago. As the eldest female member of the family, Tah was required to brew the rice beer, which was necessary for the upcoming ritual to honor of the clan deity. The experience occurred during the process of preparing the brew:

Question: “How did it come upon you? Did you feel it when it did?”

Tah: “Yes, I felt it. I was garbed completely in a many patterned cover.”⁷

This phenomenon could be interpreted in terms of “perspectivism” as theorised by Eduard Viveiros de Castro. In his article, de Castro brought into focus Amerindian cosmologies, wherein the conceptual divide between nature and culture is blurred. He writes: “Animals 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, materialisable, let us say, in a human

⁶ Personal communication; 20 November 2015.

⁷ Interview held on 21 January, 2010.

bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask” (1998: 470f.).

The “clothing” that Tah was garbed with suggests a similarity in ideas to be found both in Amerindian and in Khasi ontologies, in the sense that such ability involved the consent of the clan deity and the spirits of the clan ancestors. This means that Tah was chosen by the tiger spirit of the Makri clan. Only then the ability was conferred on her. In 2013, Tah was about sixty seven years old and lived in Ri Bhoi. There was an element of sacredness in her lifestyle; certain foods were restricted for her consumption, such as black pumpkin, crab, and other things, and she should not eat food that was contaminated by another person – her food had to remain untouched and pure. Tah took the alternative form of a small white tiger.

In an interview held with Swell Lyngdoh at Korstep Village in Ri Bhoi, on 28 December 2012, I was narrated the following story of how she first became a tiger woman. Swell inherited her abilities from her mother’s elder sister. She told me that the first time she felt the change it was like a dream. She dreamed that she was creeping along the gardens of people in the village and eating their cucumbers. One night, she became aware that she went to the pigsty belonging to a local family and she clawed a pig by its neck. She dragged the pig by its neck into the forest and left it there underneath a bamboo grove. Next morning, there was a hue and cry in the village about the disappearance of the pig. It was then that Swell Lyngdoh was able to tell the villagers where to look for the missing pig that she had eaten in her tiger state. While her body slept at home, her tiger went forth. Her tiger form is coloured black, with white stripes.

Another *sansaram*, Hilda Hat Makri from the village of Plasha in Ri Bhoi, better known as Ka Hat, narrated her alternative experience so. Hat is about forty years old. Her father was a *sansaram* and the tiger ability was just passed down to her. Here is an excerpt from an interview with her:

Question: “When was the first time you transformed?”

Hat Makri: “It was like a dream, an old man came in my dream; he had a staff, which he held like this [she gestures]. It was yellow like gold and he said to me, ‘Don’t eat food that is left over by someone else ...,’ Every time I slept he came into my dream. I am not allowed to eat the food that is left over by my siblings, and it is taboo for me to eat the crab and certain types of pumpkin. And if I ate these things, I always dreamed of this old man.”

Khasi Vernacular Dream Hermeneutics

Dreams and their interpretations in Khasi epistemology are sometimes the only means to communicate with those who have passed away, or with entities who do not inhabit the physical world that human beings are not easily allowed access into. According to Sadik Lyngdoh, Thlen (the evil spirit that demands human blood in exchange for riches) appears in the form of a snake in the person’s dream and asks him/her, “If you serve me and nurture me; I will give you wealth and fortune?”⁸

Another example of communication with the supernatural world by means of dreams is presented in the following narrative collected in Shillong. The names were changed:

Leena was in a location far away from Shillong City. On January 28, 2014, she was very restless and unable to sleep, although she was very tired. So she prayed the “Hail Mary” prayer and eventually fell asleep. She dreamed that she was with her father, sitting on some stairs. Then she saw her mother who has been long dead and she said to her father, “Papa, do you love my mother?” To this, her father replied, “Look there, on that mountain? Can you see?” Leena replied, “I don’t want to look on the mountain, I want to know if you love my mother!” To this her father replied, “That’s exactly what I am telling you, look there on top of that mountain is your mother and she is praying and interceding for me.” Disturbed by this dream, the next morning Leena called her brother and asked him to go and check on her father. Leena’s brother went and discovered their father in a semi-conscious condition. He was rushed to the hospital where he died about a day and a half later.

The family from which this narrative has been collected is Catholic. Christian elements may be noted here where a soul can pray for someone else and ask the Virgin Mary to intercede for them. The deeply personal elements point to the individual’s religious affiliation and yet the nature of the dream itself seems to suggest access to knowledge which could not have been naturally acquired.

Justin Kharkongor, a taxi driver in Shillong City, mentioned the following in a conversation with me held on 1 February, 2014: “When one is asleep, his/her *rngiew* goes roaming. It is dangerous to disturb the sleeping position or deface the sleeper’s face (using charcoal or any colouring agents, for example) in case the soul does not recognise the body on its way back.” This statement supports the idea that dreams and dreaming are for the Khasis not just

⁸ Email exchange, 20 May, 2010.

psychological renderings of unfulfilled desires and wishes (cf. Fromm 1951: 114–147), but may rather be said to be the willful wondering of the *rngiew* into other realities.⁹

The most important aspect of dreaming refers to the belief concerning the tigerman and the wandering of one's soul in the other worlds (*ramja* in the Bhoi language and *ramia* in the Sohra Khasi language). More importantly, according to the Bhoi the *ramja* is inhabited by tiger people. So it was in the tiger dream that Hat Makri, a tigerwoman, was given strict instructions to heed orders every time the tiger people went off in a pack. The rule is that the oldest and most venerated tiger deity, Barthamblong, would lead the pack, followed by Satrughan Singh – another tiger spirit. The tiger people would proceed in a line and they would have to step exactly in the footprints of the preceding tiger, or else they would be severely punished. Consequently, even if thirty tigers pass by only one set of footprints would show. We also find this motif in the article written by Khasi folklorist Desmond Khar-mawphlang (2001: 168). Eventually, Hat Makri became unhappy with her status as tigerwoman; for her it was *ka jingwan tap ksuid*, or becoming possessed by evil spirits. It may be mentioned that Hat's father was also a highly respected tigerman. Hat Makri could not understand why, even though she was a Christian, she inherited that ability. After she gave birth to her children, Hat was advised by her mother to renounce old Khasi ways because it is believed that if a weretiger is wounded, shot, or killed, the human form would also suffer. Following the advice of her mother, she began to eat the taboo foods. At first, she suffered terribly almost for two years but then her dreams stopped. Hat's experience is a typical example of the ideological conflict between Christianity and the traditional Khasi belief system.

In the Nongtraï region, in western Khasi Hills, in the villages of Nongmyndo and Porla, tigermen have the function of protecting clan members. Kennedy Nachugrey, about thirty-nine years of age, is a tigerman. He converted to Christianity in 1985, began to eat taboo foods – onion, black pumpkin, crab – after which the intensity of tiger-dreaming eventually lessened. However, in an interview that

I held with him on January 21, 2013, he recounted the following story:

It happened in 1995, in November, and I am telling you what I have truly experienced. While I was at Porla Village, I was married with one particular lady and we had a baby boy together. It was a Saturday so I told my wife, "Please will you go to the field and pluck some mustard leaves and vegetables – eggplants, chili, and other things because tomorrow is a Sunday and then it would be difficult to find vegetables." I was at home looking after the baby. After midday it began to rain, and the rain was just a drizzle. And my son also, he fell asleep so I put him on the bed. And I, well I could not visit the neighbour because my son was sleeping. So I was also alone at home and I felt very sleepy. Then after, I fell asleep. As I was sleeping next to my son, I had this dream. I dreamt that, that wife of mine came out of a little hut like the kind that we make in a field in order to take shelter in, and to take rest in. My wife came out of one such hut and I saw that she stealthily moved into the forest. There was a tree with huge leaves. She cut off one of these huge leaves and laid them down on the floor. Then she sat there for some time. Then she took some betel nut from her bag and began to peel this. And while she was cutting this betel nut a man came out, he was her lover and he had come to meet her. And the minute he came, they fell upon one another and they began to embrace and to kiss. And after doing all that, they sat together and they began to converse about this and that. And then that woman, my wife, gave him some betel nut. And at that point I woke up because my son had also woken up by then. So I sat on the bed and began to ponder upon that strange dream. No, it was not that way. In the dream, while I was looking at the couple, I was wondering how it was that the woman, who was my wife, was playing around with another man. Why was she doing that? I was thinking what it was that I could do that would separate them. I crept up closer to them, and close by there was a decent sized boulder. So I rolled that boulder onto their direction and they sprang apart and fled from that place. My wife ran towards the field and her lover fled in the direction of the river Rdiak along with his fishing implements. That boulder that I rolled, did not hurt them, just frightened them off. I woke up and I was very disturbed by the dream ... In the evening my wife returned back to our home and began to busy herself with household tasks. While she was preparing the tea, I asked her the truth about the whole matter. I also told her what it was that I had dreamed. She was angry and she said to me, "You are a suspicious man and of course this is why you dreamed up that whole thing. Do you have any proof of this?" I said to her, "If you want the truth, wait a little while!" I then hurried back to the place where they had been and really, I found betel nut, the huge leaves laid on the ground. I went to the place where I had watched them from and found there, the foot marks of a tiger. And I took the proof of these items back home. My wife became very sad at seeing these items and she did not say another word. In that year itself, we separated and I came to this village.

⁹ A popular folk game of the Khasis is *teer*, or *siat khnam* (archery), which is said to be of divine origin (Laloo 1978: 45). Today it is the only form of legalised gambling in Meghalaya. The main principle of betting is that, if a person dreams of a snake, he will bet on the number seven; if he dreams of death, then it is the number nine, and so on. One betting counter located in Polo, Shillong, is appropriately named "Dream Merchant" because of the game's association with dreams.

This narrative, very personal and melancholic, reinforces the belief that a tigerman is bound by tradition, to uphold social norms and values. The Khasis believe that human misconduct would be dealt with by a tiger, lightning and, among the Lyngngam, Nongtraï, and the Muliang – by the *sangkhini*, or snake people. We find this idea also among the Bhoi sub-community, namely, that a tiger person embodies the being, the essence of the clan. Kre Makri of Mawiong village in Raid¹⁰ Khatar Nonglyngdoh is a *khruk*, and her family spoke of her as *kaba bat syrngi*, which literally means “she holds the ancestors.”

Kre’s tigerwoman abilities belong to the world of the ancestors, and as such, she is the custodian of ancestral ways of the clan. It is important to add that, according to the Bhoi tradition, not everyone can become an ancestor; this privilege is reserved only to those who were tiger-shamans, and lived according to the norms that are prescribed by the ancestors. Desmond L. Kharmawphlang confirmed in an interview, the Bhoi belief in the tigermen returning to the world of ancestors after their death. Talking about one particular deceased tigermen, Joit Makri, Kharmawphlang said: “When U Joit Makri died, he died *hok* (“well”)! This means, he negotiated with the *syrngi* (ancestor spirits) before he went into the *ramia* (lit. “dream world,” but it is used here to express the concept “world of the ancestors”). The negotiation is a lifelong affair, a continuous process of exchange (as is learning), but when he had to depart, he had to find a place to join the pantheon of ancestors. Through the clan reverence he becomes apotheosised.”¹¹

Through this it may be inferred that the tigermen are conduits of tradition, acquiring knowledge and transmitting it to the community. Once again it should be mentioned that tigermen usually are also the shamans of the clan they belong to and on their death, they become responsible for the wellbeing of it, participating actively in the further development of the clan. In this respect, a specific clan ritual may be mentioned, the “Knia Lyngdoh” which takes place every year. This ceremony is performed by the Lyngdoh, or the ritual performer, often a tigerman (in the Bhoi context) and also the current maternal uncle of the family. He offers up betel nut and leaves to the spirits of as many deceased maternal uncles as he is able to recall. The names of the deceased shamans are spoken out. Then, one name is divined and the spirit of this ancestor becomes the guardian spirit of the clan for one year.

10 A cluster of villages under a single administrative unit is called *raid*.

11 Email exchange, 20 May, 2010.

The single most difference between the *khruk* and the *sansaram*, according to Talet Makri in an interview carried out on December 17, 2013, is that the *khruk* is responsible for the prosperity of the clan and for brewing of the sacred rice beer used for the veneration of the family spirits; whereas the *sansaram* is responsible for the inheritance of the laws (*jutang*) of the tiger deity which includes the performance of the propitiation rituals, the transmission of the tiger tradition. The shaman tiger then represents the link that connects the tigermen with ancestors.

Part 2

In the second part, I will focus on the tigerman/women narratives as perceived by the community that recounts and preserves them. One such narrative was recounted by Phinis Markhap, in Raid Myrdon in an interview conducted on January 16, 2012:

Question: “Have you ever had a personal experience with a female weretiger?”

Answer: “That madam, I myself have encountered. Do you see this lane here? I taught at the school and I had to pass by this lane every day. I had collected my salary on that day and it was a little late at night. There was an animal, small like a dog, that was walking ... along the trail that cows use ... it got the scent of cattle. And I thought to myself ‘what animal is this’? ... Then it turned towards me and I saw that it had the head of a tiger. I couldn’t think anymore, I was nervous, I flung my axe at it and it hit the animal on the ribs. It fell down ... There was a woman who keeps a shop in the village, and she fell ill for an entire month. I was single at the time, and I stayed at the government quarters, and I frequented her shop to buy my groceries. One day this woman said to me, ‘O Sir, I was only being playful and you attacked me.’ I was surprised at this and I asked her, ‘Madam, how can you say this?’ And she said to me, ‘Do you remember that evening when you threw your axe at me?’”

This text illustrates the somewhat playful character of the tiger people in their relationships with the community. For example, the community of weretigers has their own games and pastimes which they play when they get together. The jungles of Bhoi are dense and the relative isolation of the area offers good forest cover to wild animals. A game played by the tigers with tall bamboos is called *rynghang*. Specifically, the bamboos will be bent and the tiger is then required to jump over it as soon as the bamboos are released. If the tiger is agile enough, s/he will escape; if not, he will be hurt and the others have a great time laughing at his discomfort. It is a social world that the weretigers inhabit, with its own rules and conventions that involve a certain

amount of secrecy and myth. The role these tigers have in the physical reality is that they are responsible for the protection of the village boundaries from the encroachment of other tigers. In case a trespassing weretiger is caught, he is punished according to the laws of the weretigers.

Dising Marin carried this responsibility of warning the villagers if there are other tigers in the vicinity of the village. Children and cattle-herders are advised not to venture into a particular location. Concerning the *khruk*, she fulfills her duties towards the community by informing the villagers about the whereabouts of lost livestock or cattle. Interestingly enough, the process of communicating this knowledge is carried out through the medium of spirits. See, for example, the following excerpt from an interview with Phren Makri, inhabitant of Mawphrew, Raid Marngar:

Question: “When one of your livestock animals disappears, what do you do?”

Answer: “We ask the *khruk* if it is her kind who has carried away our animal. See, all the *khruk*, under this *raid*, before they eat, they consult together as to what it is that they will eat that particular night – pig, calf, goat, or poultry. So, if they decide to eat the pig that belongs to me, they will first have to obtain the permission of the *syngi* (ancestor). They decide with him the exact amount they are willing to pay for the pig. We do not know how much ... that is how the *khruk* knows, for she is also part of them. Our *syngi* decides to ‘sell’ the pig to the *khruk* for their food. We have no hand or role to play in this.”

Another aspect of the weretiger tradition is that almost all the male tigersmen, I have interviewed, are shamans. They heal people, perform rituals associated with agriculture and are key tradition bearers in the society. Upon their death, it is customary to keep the dead body at home for three days. During this interim period of waiting, people in the village do not venture out of their homes after death because the other tigersmen surround the home of the dead weretiger in an act of homage and to mourn. The tiger wife/husband and their children also go to mourn for the bereaved tiger shaman. Thus, there are footmarks of tigers all around the home that the villagers find in the morning. Nonetheless, the depletion of the forest cover, the growing population, the migration of the younger generation to towns and cities of the region for purposes of education work and better living conditions have led to a significant erosion of indigenous beliefs and practices. The persistence of the belief in tiger people weretigers constitutes therefore an important element in the maintenance of group identity. An active engagement between the past may account for the sustainabil-

ity of the tigersman tradition. On the other hand, one needs to be aware of the fact that cultures exist in the state of a constant flux, with folklore phenomenon adjusting to new developments and thus adapting to the emerging needs of the community. In his article on the tigersman beliefs among the Khasis, Desmond Kharmawphlang contends, for instance, that the tiger narratives have “a powerful element of religious association that underlines the practice” (2001: 163). He quotes tigersman Sarot Maji:

Question: “What is the reason for turning into tigers?”

Maji: “For the reason of clinging, holding.”

Question: “Clinging to what?”

Maji: “To religion.”

If we look closer into the tiger transformation and contextualise it in the greater framework of the Khasi system of beliefs as well as the changing landscape and the Christianisation of the community, the tiger tradition becomes something more than an expression of the survival of the indigenous religion. Lidia Guzy, lecturer at the Study of Religions Department at University College Cork (Ireland), in a conversation on this topic, told me that cultures are resilient, in the sense that they are able to sustain themselves in response to crisis. If we look at the tigersman tradition of the Khasis from this perspective, we may be able to interpret the tiger transformation as a means whereby the Khasi culture can reorient its beliefs and the meaning it has for local communities to respond to modernity, which has accompanied Christianisation. Almost all the tiger people I have interviewed were Christian converts, and I noted a conflict between the Christian tenets and traditional customary practices. Christian doctrines and precepts are accommodated within a person’s consciousness, parallel to and alongside with traditional beliefs.

A glimpse into the nature of existence in the weretiger-reality was given by Dising Marin. In my conversation with him held in the summer of 2009, he talked about the relationship between human tigers and spirit tigers, their life spans their clan and life ways which closely resemble the society of humans:

Question: “How is he now?” (I refer to Pdahkyndeng, the tiger deity)

D. S.: “He is very old, poor thing; ... He is older than I am and he cannot walk anymore. He sits by the fire quietly”

Question: “What about his food and drink?”

D.S: “Food and drink he takes alright”

Question: “What about the others, Bah Di? (referring to other tiger deities);

D. S.: “His (Pdahkyndeng’s) children are healthy and well. He has two girls and two boys, but their father is really old (Pdahkyndeng). He cannot see very well. One of his daughters has taken a husband, who has left her; then a second and a third. But she does not have any children ... Oh she is very beautiful, but she does not have any children. (Aside another gentleman presents a comment: “That all falls on luck, what can be done?”);

D.S: “Look here daughter (referring to me), Pdahkyndeng’s daughter invites me, tells me that her father wants to see me ... This particular daughter of Pdahkyndeng loves me very much, is very fond of me”;

Question: “But Bah Di, do you know the names of other tigers?”

D. S.: “There is him and Waitlamblei ... You know of Waitlamblei don’t you” ...

Dising Marin, tigerman of the Makri clan died in spring 2012. Family members told me that he had been shot by a hunter in his neck with an arrow, while he was in his tiger form. His body suffered and he was unable to swallow or eat anything. He lingered in this way for a few weeks and then passed away. His wife, later on in that year told me that Dising had sought the help of the daughter of Pdahkyndeng, the guardian deity of the weretigers of the Makri clan with whom he had a good relationship. But she refused to help him because Dising had converted to Christianity.

Christianity among the Khasis was introduced about a century and half ago. There is a marked difference between the Christianity that is practised in the urban areas and the rural areas. The material for this article was collected from the peripheral region of the Khasi Hills, where all the villages are converted into Christianity. But the indigenous beliefs of the community continue to be practiced. The reconciliation between the two belief systems occurs in the spiritual landscape of the individual where the search for meaning assumes priority. For example, Troi Lyngdoh, 57 years old of Mawphrew Village, Khatar Nonglyngdoh is a devout Christian but he continues to perform the *pynhir myndhan*, the propitiatory ritual of Lukhmi, the deity of paddy to ensure a good harvest.

Conclusion

The tigerman tradition functions to mediate the relationship between humans and the environment in which they live. Eco-sensitive narratives such as these suggest the interconnected nature of per-

spectives which shape attitudes towards the living world that these communities inhabit. Moreover, there exists also a relational ontology which attributes a dynamic, co-operative interaction between the living environment and man as a thinking, intelligent being. The experience of the tiger-people and the snake people are similar except that tiger people are tied to the ecology of a place and the snake people are associated with the water realm. There was something honest and regretful, coupled with a sense of bewilderment in what my informant Dolishon Dingan, the village healer of Nongmyndo had to say about his religious beliefs as a Christian and the fact that he belongs to the clan who transform into Sangkhini, a human-snake. The principle of transformation for the Khla Phuli and the Sansaram are the same, and is closely tied to the self-identity of a human-animal.

It is only in our generation today that we are now Christians. We in our clan know that our clan is the Sangkhini clan, but we are now Christian converts. After we converted to Christianity, the knowledge about the world and what is happening around us that we had as Sangkhninis, became unclear and unreliable. I just know that until now I am a Sangkhini and I know in myself what it is that makes a Sangkhini. But the foreknowledge of things yet to happen, in which month they would come to pass, that in this year these things will take place – I am unable to know anymore. Because I have broken the rules (taboo or hukum), because i have eaten arum, because I have eaten garlic, because I might have killed a snake, the sangkhini don’t come to me (in dreams) any more. I just know that I belong to the clan of the Sangkhini, and until now I am a Sangkhini.

A similar conversation was carried out with Tigerman Kennedy Nachugrey, who spoke in a similar manner about his conversion to Christianity and how it affected his experience of the loss of his tiger transformation ability. Lastly, it is pertinent to mention that I have presented this article mostly in the form of interview excerpts because I wanted to make the voices of this marginalised, indigenous people audible; so that they could speak about their experiences in their own context and in doing so, contest stereotypes that are imposed upon human-animal transformations by the majority of Khasis living in the urban areas.

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