Workshop

‘Indigeneity’, Orality, and Liminal Ontologies: Methodological Pluralisms and Approaches to Culture

January 14-17, 2020
Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam, Northeast India

Abstracts
Cover photo: Sarlongkiri Ingti. This photo was taken in 2016 during the Karbi Youth Festival, held annually in Karbi People’s Hall, Taralangso (Diphu, Karbi Anglong). It depicts the Karbi Rongketong, a traditional procession on the opening day of the festival. Rongketong is usually a custom carried out during the Karbi three-day ritual called Chomkan.

The workshop is organised by:
Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu & Centre for Karbi Studies, Diphu, Karbi Anglong in collaboration with Nordic Centre in India (NCI), New Delhi; Marginalised & Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC), University College Cork (UCC), Ireland; University of Tartu Asian Centre, Estonia; Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, India; Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark with support from Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Karbi Anglong, Assam & the Estonian Research Council (projects PRG670 and PUTJD746)

ISBN: 978-9949-29-494-7

Printed by Mawsawa Printing Press

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Preface

In April 2013, we – Dharamsing Teron and Margaret Lyngdoh – first met at Chomangkan, a Karbi festival. The seeds for a collaborative research plan were then sown as we looked towards the possible ways we could share and create knowledge together. We joined others in recognising that the oral Karbi tradition exists in a state of transition, evolving and changing due to its inevitable encounters with modernity. United by our interest in cultural preservation, we began documenting Karbi oral texts. The need to pursue this initiative in coordination with thorough academic exploration has contributed to the organisation of this Winter Workshop.

In hindsight, we recognise that the rebuilding, re-creation, and recognition of a sense of pride in ‘being Karbi’ has been central to this undertaking. For Karbi youth, the inheritance of abandonment and cultural trauma as a result of years of (neo)colonialism and ideological manipulation has led to a certain degree of apathy and ambivalence towards Karbi heritage. Through projects that prioritise and value Karbi myths, epics, songs, legends, and rituals, we are able to assist in the reconstruction of Karbi consciousness and identity.

The Karbi were historically governed by a system of ‘traditional’ administration that functioned similarly to that of the more ‘organised’ tribal kingdoms, like those of the Kachari, Ahom, and Jaintia. However, in the modern day, Karbi chiefs function only as cultural and religious arbiters. During British rule, the Karbi were deeply marginalised, viewed by colonisers as ‘savages’ devoid of any valuable culture. Considered to be ‘peaceful and unwarlike’ by British rulers, the Karbi were mostly ignored by the administration as they were considered ‘non-threatening’. But the rulers’ divisive attitude and desire for taxes ultimately divided Karbi traditional territory into two sections, Hill and Plain, a result which had devastating political, cultural, religious, and social consequences.

When American Baptist missionaries arrived in ‘Mikir Country’ – ‘Mikir’ being an exonym for Karbi – they believed the Karbi would be easy to convert, so they approached the community through lenses similar to those of the colonial government. The Karbi were historically among the first to come into contact with Christian missionaries, and wide-spread conversion did occur. Karbi belief was reconfigured, finding new ways to survive. Missionary education allowed for new academic developments
and helped shape the first Karbi intellectuals, who played a significant role in the nationalist awakening. Towards the end of colonial rule, in 1940, educated community leader Ru Samsonsing Ingti was instrumental in raising the issue of the ‘Karbi homeland’; this consequently led to the formation of Karbi Adorbar, the first Karbi nationalist organisation, in 1947.

Samsonsing Ingti’s dream for a homeland became a reality after his death with the formation of the ‘Mikir Hills Autonomous District Council’ in 1951 under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Subsequent years, the rising wave of nationalist aspiration led to demands for enhancement to the rudimentary autonomy of the Sixth Schedule. More unrest and protest ensued as demands diversified, leading in 1995 to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This, however, was not fully implemented. As a result, violent insurgent movements erupted in the nineties, this time culminating in a 2011 Memorandum of Settlement (MoS), signed by the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity, the Government of Assam, and the Union Government; as of today, the MoS awaits ratification by an Act of Parliament. The Karbi are currently recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

This Workshop is funded primarily by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and headed by the Chief Executive Member of KAAC, the Honorable Tuliram Ronghang. We hope that this event facilitates a co-operation that will foster and generate interest in Karbi folklore as an area of research. We are glad that a key part of the Workshop is the participation of young Karbi scholars. We further hope that this Winter Workshop, as a platform, can successfully host productive interactions between local, national, international, indigenous, and Karbi scholars, amongst others, and will inspire further research, activism, and social work.

Welcome to the Workshop!

Dharamsing Teron, Centre for Karbi Studies, Diphu
Margaret Lyngdoh, University of Tartu
Introduction

This Winter Workshop brings international scholars of all academic levels into the dense belief-environment of Karbi Anglong, Assam, Northeast India. Participants have the opportunity to explore the ‘indigeneity’ of Eastern Assam, with a special focus on the orality and liminal ontologies of the Karbi, one of the most populous ‘indigenous’ groups in Assam and a Scheduled Tribe (a minority community recognised by the Constitution of India). This collaboration allows for investigation into the various political, academic, and vernacular meanings of the significantly contested term ‘indigeneity’. The Karbi speak a Tibeto-Burman language, and much of their expressive culture exists in the form of orally transmitted narratives. A sizeable number of oral narratives comprising multiple genres can be found in variation across Karbi Anglong.

The organisers have chosen Diphu, situated close to the border of Assam and Meghalaya, because it is rich in valuable folkloristic and anthropological knowledge that remains to be explored. One aspect of Karbi Anglong is its designation as a ‘spirit-scape’ in which non-human entities thrive and liminal realities are inhabited, enacted, and transformed daily. There is a strong belief in other-than-human beings, such as the household deity Peng, who negotiates between familial lineages and the otherworld with the help of the thekere (ritual specialist). Orality – and the relationship between sound and ‘spirits’ – is central to Karbi belief: ‘tribal’ identity is connected with migration narratives and the mosera, which recounts Karbi origin. The Chomangkan, which guides the ‘soul’ to the ‘land of ancestors’ after death, completes this circle, as does the three-day kacharhe song performed among the (sometimes erotic) funerary songs typical to the secondary mortuary festival. Sound becomes both a medium for liminality and a declaration of ‘indigeneity’.

The Winter Workshop examines these marginalised worldviews, alternative ontologies, and liminal phenomena to reconsider the comprehensions and boundaries of ‘indigeneity’, the impact and history of orality, and the central role that liminality plays in Karbi life. ‘Indigenous’, ‘orality’, and ‘liminality’ are not homogenized things, and scholars currently engage in discourse about what it is that even constitutes these ideas, terms, and practices (cf. Johnson and Kraft 2017 on ‘indigeneity’). Discussions of ‘vernacular religion’ (Primiano 1995), the ‘ontological/recursive turn’
(Descola 1992 & 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Latour 2013), and the ‘folkloristics of religion’ (Valk 2017) will also be incorporated into the Workshop.

The importance of liminality – the liminal rites, the middle stage in each of van Gennep’s rites of passage (1909) – was championed by Victor Turner, who discovered van Gennep’s work on the topic at a liminal threshold in his own life and was immediately inspired to write on liminality as a state or object ‘betwixt and between’ (Thomassen 2009; Turner 1967). Turner would go on to coin the term ‘liminoid’: a non-critical experience of liminality that can be playful, and one that he equated with leisure rather than ritual or transition. As Thomassen writes, in traditional anthropology: “there is a way into liminality and there is a way out of it” (Thomassen 2009). But what, then, can be said of the liminality of ontologies, ever-shifting worldviews, populated by threads of history, never permanent but ever present? And of the fieldworker who, like Turner, finds himself in a personal liminal state while investigating liminality?

Liminal ontologies exist outside of and beyond binary ideas of reality and realities. One ontology can interrupt and insert itself onto another; multiple ontologies and their subsequent belief-worlds can become entangled. It is increasingly acknowledged in scholarship that the perception of mundane reality is not the exclusive domain of the human, and object-oriented ontology would have us question whether ours is the primary perception to be investigated in the first instance: knowledge is not the sole demesne of humans, but also can be claimed by other-than-human entities and even non-human persons (cf. Harvey 2005). Liminal ontologies are abstract environments in progress, continuously redefining themselves yet never exiting their liminal state. In this way, they differ from earlier anthropological assertions concerning liminality.

For the fieldworker, liminality is both an object of study in the amorphous cosmologies we document and the state we inhabit while doing so. Our awareness of liminality elevates the interview, allowing at least one party (and hopefully both parties) to eventually understand parts of what the other perceives (akin to Brigg’s idea of ‘vernacular theorizing’ [2008]; reminiscent of Shulman’s suggestion that liminal ontologies occur when two groups meet and integrate [2019]). However, it is this same knowledge of liminality that keeps us aware of the limitations and ambiguities of any given interview. Ontologically, a fieldworker may find herself similarly between known notions of the mind and the expanding new worlds of the
‘other’. The experience of liminality in the field, unbound by its nature, can be both liberating and confining, progressive and constrictive.

Lectures and discussions address multiple issues relating to the concepts of ‘indigeneity’, orality, and liminality and – a main focus of this undertaking – ‘liminal ontologies’ – their content, their boundaries, and the experiences comprised thereby. The Winter Workshop in Karbi Anglong allows for analyses of relevant approaches to these topics and an examination of methodological pluralisms.

Margaret Lyngdoh, University of Tartu
Claire S. Scheid, Independent Researcher

References


The Karbi, who call themselves Arlen, constitute one of the major indigenous communities, or Indo-Mongoloid tribes, of Northeast India – the natural habitat of hundreds of ethnic groups. Although they are concentrated in the hilly terrain of the Karbi Anglong Hills Autonomous District in Assam, they are also scattered across the plains districts of Kamrup, Nagaon and Golaghat and the hills district of Dima Hasao (the erstwhile N.C. Hills district). Surrounded by many other indigenous ethnic communities, the Karbi have distinct folklore traits and materials in the form of oral songs, ballads, myths, legends, and sayings, which are bound to the local soil, landscape, hills, hillock, and forest. They retain their own language, oral folklore, folk customs, and traditional religion, which testify to the indigeneity of the tribe (Hanse 2017). The folklore materials of this indigenous tribe of Assam are still preserved and performed orally by folk singers called lunse and ochepi (Datta et al. 1994) as well as common Karbi people on diverse occasions and contexts. Orality is therefore the guiding characteristic of Karbi folklore material. The basic orality of language is permanent (Ong 2002: 7) – even though the Karbi tribe have put some of their oral songs and narratives into writing. There are distinct folklore materials unique to this indigenous ethnic group, but much of this verbal folklore reveals features of the tribal person’s contact with tribal/non-tribal peoples of the region (Northeast India) and even inter-tribal and inter-nontribal relations of mistrust, intrigue, conflict and hostility (Datta et al. 1994). These verbal folklore materials, with all the features of indigeneity and orality, are good specimens of folklore with features of intercultural communication between the Karbi and other neighbouring
communities, both tribal and non-tribal. The present paper makes an attempt to critically engage with these issues of Karbi folklore using some examples from oral narratives including creation myths, ballads and local legends featuring intercultural communication.

Anil Kumar Boro is Head of the Folklore Research Department and Director in Charge of the Centre for Performing Arts, Gauhati University. He writes in English, Bodo, and Assamese languages and has participated in a number of global conferences and exchanges. In addition to his academic studies, his work includes poetry collections, literary criticism, travelogues, and children’s books. His publications have been translated into English, Hindi, Assamese, and Marathi, among other languages.

References
Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews

Lidia Guzy
University College Cork

This presentation introduces the category of marginalised and endangered worldviews. By approaching these categories from diverse disciplines (anthropology, folklore, study of religions, history, law, environmental sciences) and diverse regions of the world (Brazil, Russia, India and Europe) the aim is to foster dialogue and exchange on critical problems faced by endangered cultures and marginalised communities in the contemporary world. The paper also aims to draw on the implications for global society of the destruction and impoverishment of human and ecological cultural diversity.

Who are the marginalised? Marginalisation as a concept is often equated with social exclusion, the systematic relegation of someone or some group to an inferior, less powerful and less influential position in society. Such processes of marginalisation within modern states are often driven by national discourses that value and propagate the ideal of an undifferentiated, unified body of citizens, thus underscoring the norms of dominant or majority groups in society (Young 1989). Ethnic, religious, linguistic and indigenous minority groups find themselves systematically disadvantaged and excluded by such discursive practices as they are forced to conform to the social, cultural, political and economic forms of organisation and value systems of majority societies.

Who or what is endangered? The marginalisation of linguistic, cultural and indigenous communities goes hand in hand with a systematic exploitation and degradation of the natural environment upon which so many of them depend. This dependency is not merely economic, it is also the lifeblood of their cultural worlds. Creativity and the production of indigenous knowledge is the product of distinct indigenous epistemologies (Brabec de Mori 2016: 80). Such epistemologies are grounded and sustainable through the material, environmental and ecological worlds inhabited by communities. The products of indigenous knowledge have value for the dominant wider society, although there is little recognition of the unique epistemological frameworks that gave birth to such knowledge, the “indigenous explanations” that appear “meaningless for the modern
world” (Brabec de Mori 2016: 80–81). The rejection of indigenous epistemologies can be accredited to the devaluation and near extinction of ontological frameworks other than the prevailing western ‘naturalistic’ scientific ontology. With the ontological turn in French anthropology (Descola 1992, 2005, 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998) as well as the discourse on neo-animism (Harvey 2005), hegemonic anthropocentric and dualistic perspectives have been broadly questioned. An emerging “new kind of ecological anthropology” (Descola and Pálsson 1996: 2) is blurring the supposed clear demarcation line between nature and culture, opening up new approaches to understanding alternative taxonomies, epistemologies and ecologies.

Contemporary indigenous ecological knowledge systems relate to shamanic eco-cosmologies (Århem 1996: 166-184; Kopenawa and Albert 2013) and the non-dualistic perspective on human and non-human agencies in a mutually shared world and cosmos. Ontological pluralities include the diverse perspectives of humans, non-humans and other-than-human elements regarding each other, interconnecting with each other as different personalities in a mutually interconnected world and cosmos (see Viveiros de Castro 2015).

Within the process of industrial extraction of natural resources, diverse indigenous communities are deprived of their fundamental human rights to a secured livelihood and the means to preserve their eco-cosmological systems. An industrial neo-colonial intrusion into mineral rich indigenous territories is taking place worldwide. With ecological degradation, vulnerable indigenous eco-cosmologies, perspectivist ontologies and their associated rituals become critically threatened.

**Lidia Guzy** is Head of Study of Religions Department and Lecturer in Contemporary South Asian Religions, University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland. She is a social anthropologist and scientist of religions, specialising in the anthropology of religions and global indigenous studies. She is a Director of the Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC), Member of Latin American Strategy Group, and Board member of the India Study Centre Cork (ISCC) at UCC.
References
In Finland the discussion about so-called invader species (*vieraslajit*) has been especially heated over the last five years. The central topic has been certain flowers and other plants that are spreading in Finland and need more rigorous treatment as dangerous invaders. While there is a certain justification for worrying about indigenous species losing the ‘competition’ with ‘more aggressive’ invader species, the discourses about invader species seem also to have the moral dimension of ‘natural’ species resisting everything coming from outside the country. The idea of moral rightfulness seems to connect metaphorically to discourses about immigration and the ‘right kind of people’ belonging to Finland’s population. The rise of populism and racist politics in Finland seem to confirm this. On the other hand, the people acting against invader species seem to be socially differentiated from the people supporting populist politics. My question is: what kind of rhetoric of Indigeneity we can find behind them, and do these rhetorics somehow compete and perhaps even contradict each other when seen as part of a larger framework of worldviews? What is the relationship of discourses on the rights of the Indigenous (‘first’) people (for example the Saami people in Finland) with the discourses about plant life and immigration? In other words, is the discourse of indigeneity one or many, and, if so, are some forms of it in need of critical consideration regardless of the importance of the concept of Indigeneity in the global view?

Adjunct professor Jyrki Pöysä is working as a university researcher at the Karelian Institute, at the University of Eastern Finland. Pöysä is leading the Academy of Finland research project “Russia as a Field and an Archive” (2017-2021) and the Kone foundation research project “A Return to Interspecific Coexistence – Posthuman Interpretations from Folklore, Oral History, and Popular Culture” (2019-2021). Pöysä’s main research interests include qualitative methodology, narrative studies, oral history, workers’ history, research history, archives, and media and popular culture.
The definition of ‘liminal ontologies’ varies greatly depending on how one chooses to define ‘liminal’ and ‘ontologies’. This paper proposes a new paradigm for anthropological enquiry in a post-ontological turn landscape that reimagines van Gennep’s ‘threshold’ state of liminality as a way of being that exists as a comparatively unstable ‘betwixt and between’ experience that is more conceptual than temporal, and understands ontologies to be lenses through which sense and relationality are created and sustained by humans in response to the stimuli around them. ‘Liminal ontologies’, therefore, can be viewed as lifeworlds in which the qualities of instability and in-betwixtness are among the defining characteristics.

It can be said that researchers enter liminal ontologies of their own while in the field; similarly, the ontologies they encounter therein may also be liminal, particularly if they work with people whose interactions consistently include both the human and the non-human; whose home is in a state of rapid globalisation; whose beliefs are the result of doctrinal entanglements in flux. These ontologies then intersect, creating webs that may further influence one another. In this way, anthropological enquiry – for both the ‘seeker’ and the ‘sought’ – is a very mired thing.

Some have compared human liminal states to topographical liminal places, such as water boundaries, e.g. the estuary, the littoral, the inlet. German anthropologist Philipp Schorch, inspired by Hawaiian scholar Manulani Meyer, recently spoke of the muliwai, a Hawaiian term for the place where the river reaches the sea. “Metaphorically,” says Schorch, “the muliwai is a location and state of dissonance where (and when) two elements meet, but it is not ‘a space in-between’; rather, it is its own space, a territory unique in each circumstance, depending on the size and strength of the river, the width of the opening, and the strength of the rain. Rather than being a threat to its inhabitants, this living, breathing, and changing muliwai is a source of life and potentiality.” The magic of the muliwai as
a fieldwork model is that it is both liminal and substantive; rather than being considered confined by its liminal quality, it is recognised as an independent space with its own identity, own location, and even own forms of life that cannot exist elsewhere.

An epistemology based in liminal ontologies allows us to see value in instability and to recognise liminality as a disrupter that allows for both the new and the nuance in a given situation. It should be viewed as more than the brief storm between two longer calms. Using examples from fieldwork conducted in Northeast India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, this paper offers a framework and vocabulary with which to discuss the multivalence that is woven into interactions – be they between the fieldworker and the local, between the marginalised and the state, or between the human and the non-human – and into experience, aiming to illustrate that, in certain situations, the ‘threshold’ continues to play a common, and vital, role in daily life, pushing even further Turner’s idea of ‘normative communitas’.

**Claire S. Scheid’s** doctoral dissertation at National University of Ireland – University College Cork examined the Donyipolo movement and the formalisation of indigenous faith among the Adi in the Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, India. She has previously done fieldwork with the Lepcha and the Lhopo (Bhutia) in Sikkim, India. She is interested in the processes by which Himalayan ethnic communities reimagine, restructure, and represent their religious beliefs in modernity.

**References**


In the Event of ‘Shared Breath’: Verbal Charms among Indigenous Veps in Northwest Russia

Laura Siragusa
University of Helsinki

My paper challenges the notion of ‘liminal ontologies’ by presenting verbal charms (puheged, vajhed/pakitas in Vepsian) among the Veps, an Indigenous minority group in Northwest Russia. Vepsian verbal charms are ritualised ways of speaking that are customarily used to prompt a change in both human beings and environments. The Veps understand that in the act of ‘blowing’ (puhuda) air and reciting ‘specific words’ (vajhed), human and often non-human agencies join forces to bring about change in people and the environment. In fact, the event of ‘blowing specific words’ can be transformative when channels of communication between human and non-human agencies are open. This encounter, which might resemble the notion of liminal ontologies, is what I refer to as “events” (cf. Kapferer 2015), a transformative and suspended period of time in which human and non-human agencies come together. The event is prompted by the act of blowing specific words, or what I also call “shared breath” (Siragusa et al. forthcoming). By presenting the relational and dynamic aspects of verbal charms and focusing on the movement of air and the utterance of specific words, I aim to summon the actuality of a strict boundary between language and materiality (cf. Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017; Keane 2008; Wiener 2013). In the event of shared breath, the rigid separation between ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ realms begins to be felt as an artificial construction.

Laura Siragusa is a researcher at the University of Helsinki. Her interests comprise questions related to the revival of heritage languages, language ecology, verbal art and its relations to non-human animals and other beings, domestication, and health. Since 2008 she has been working with Veps, a Finno-Ugric minority, in northwestern Russia. While her initial interest regarded the promotion of Vepsian heritage language, she later augmented her focus to verbal art and healing practices and human-an-
imal relations as expressed in language. In 2015 she also began working with Saami in the Kola peninsula, Russia. Here she investigates domestication, reindeer herding practices, and health. At the moment (2018), she is working on three main projects: 1. Links between (indigenous) ways of speaking and environmental change; 2. Language responsibility; 3. Indigenous conceptualization of sustainability. In 2018, she and colleague Dr. Ferguson (Univ. Nevada, Reno) established an EASA network on Linguistic Anthropology (ELAN) to further develop this discipline within the European context.

References
‘Human Sacrifice’ and Power over Life and Death: Notes on Royal Sovereignty in a Former Princely State in Odisha

Uwe Skoda
Aarhus University

The paper explores ideas of royal sovereignty in Central Eastern India that build on an intersection with firstly the presence of deities, especially goddesses; secondly alliances such as a pivotal tie between the kings and indigenous or autochthonous people in the realm; and thirdly power over life and death. A central element in this construction of sovereignty and a sacrificial polity are narratives around human sacrifices or blood sacrifices broadly which directly manifest power over life and death, as well as the threat of ‘spectral’ violence. These narratives, which are materialised in royal chronicles as well as in temples, are put forward as memories of a by-gone era or as rumours in conversations; at the same time they also appear in rituals, especially during or around Dasara. ‘Human sacrifice’, with its textual (oral and written) as well as ritual or performative dimensions, as encountered in a relatively remote Odishan hinterland, is commonly surrounded by secrecy, invisibility and taboo, indicating the sensitivity and gravity of the matter as well as the extraordinary and liminal dimension of such sacrifices.

Uwe Skoda is Associate Professor for India and South Asia Studies at the Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark. Currently, he is working on the one hand on visual culture and on the other in the field of political anthropology—particularly transformations of kingship, indigenous people, and domestic politics. His recent books include: Bonding with the Lord. Jagannath, Popular Culture and Community Formation (2019, co-edited with Jyotirmaya Tripathy, New Delhi: Bloomsbury); India and its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape (2018, co-edited with Birgit Lettmann, New Delhi: Sage); Highland Odisha: Life and Society beyond the Coastal World (2017, with Biswamoy Pati, New Delhi: Primus).
Representing the Karbi: The Call for a New Research Paradigm

Dharamsing Teron
Centre for Karbi Studies

According to the oral epic Mosera, the Karbi migrated from the “navel of the earth” through the “white mountains” to Northeast India. Another group of Karbi came down to the Assamese plains “chasing the sun”. Until recently, the Karbi were known as the Mikir, a name given to them by the Assamese (Barkataki 1969: 50). When the British arrived in 1826, traditional Karbi territories were treated as blank spaces and were hence invisible. The British, however, conceded that the Karbi, spread across the Cachar Plains, Sylhet, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, North Cachar, Khasi and the Jaintia Hills, and numbering 94,829, were the “most numerous and homogenous of the many Tibeto-Burman races inhabiting the Province of Assam” (Stack and Lyall 1908: 1). The new rulers and the Christian missionaries represented the Karbi as “heathen” (Carvell 1902: 87) and “worshippers of malignant demons” (Waddell 1901: 32), and, at the same time, described them both as “savage and blood-thirsty” and “mild and unwarlike”. The fertile valleys of the rivers Chomna (Jamuna), Klopli (Kupli/Kopili) and Diayung, which finally became the Karbi homeland after a series of migrations forced by several tribal states, produced plenty of cotton and paddy. This attracted the colonisers, as the Karbi were the most industrious farmers, and hence the colonisers taxed them more without giving them their due. Yet the Karbi were ignored in the colonial administrative design as they did not pose a threat and divided their traditional territory into the artificial categories of Hill and Plain, which continues to devastate them politically, culturally, and socially. Karbi, 85% of them induced to opium addiction, were completely ruined under colonial rule.

This paper questions the representation of Karbi in colonial ethnography and calls for a new research paradigm.
Dharamsing Teron is an indigenous research activist from Diphu, Karbi Anglong. He graduated in History from Diphu Govt. College, Gauhati University, in 1983. He has been at the forefront of the Autonomy movement of Karbi people as one of its founding leaders from 1986 and has been actively associated with the Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) since 1978, devoted to promoting the cultural heritage of the Karbis. He was elected to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) for a term (1989-1996) and to the Assam Legislative Assembly for a term (2001-2005). His ongoing activities include documenting Karbi folklore, oral history, and ritual practices, as well as presenting papers on Karbi folklore, folk-belief, and cultural practices in various national/international workshops and seminars in India. He is the founder and current Director of Centre for Karbi Studies (2015), an indigenous research initiative based in Diphu. He lives in Rongmili, Diphu with his wife, Junaki Rongpipi, and three sons.

References
Modernisation of the Western world through the progress of sciences, the advancement of technology and the spread of Enlightenment ideas prepared the ground for a major shift in dominant worldview. Max Weber famously designated this transition as disenchantment (*Entzauberung*), because he saw no place for spirits, magic or mysterious forces in the rationalised and intellectualised reality. Influential works, such as *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, argued for the supremacy of the sciences over the magic and ‘superstition’ of ‘savage peoples’ in faraway colonies. The uneducated peasants of Europe, who carried ‘folklore’, also represented these obsolete ‘traditional’ cultures, which modernisation had pushed to the edge of oblivion.

Recent scholarship has shown that the idea of ‘mythless modernity’ and the decline of magic and the supernatural in the Western world during the last centuries contradicts both the history of culture and current social realities (Asprem 2014; Bell 2012; Jones 2017; Josephson-Storm 2017; McCorristine 2010; etc.). Even though the institutional religions have been losing power in Europe, supernatural beliefs and magical practices have not gone away, but rather thrive and appear in new forms today. However, during the era of modernity the supernatural realm has often been reconfigured and relocated into new contexts – such as folklore, fiction, arts, entertainment, and cultural heritage – as realms of human creativity. The supernatural has also emerged in the doctrines of psychoanalysis, psychology, psychiatry, and more recently cognitive sciences, as it has been re-located from the outside world into human consciousness. Hence, the mind has been interpreted as a pathologically inclined reservoir of irrationality, delusion and phantasms.

The lecture sheds light on some discursive processes and doctrines that have given new meanings to the supernatural: from spiritism, parapsychology, folklore studies and anthropology to dialectic materialism, scientific atheism and museumisation. The lecture argues that indigenous
cultures, folklore, marginalised belief systems and even the world of fiction form an abundant resource of ontologies that offer alternatives to materialism and physicalism as the dominant mental regime of Western modernity – which has its practical advantages but also its epistemological limits, as it can hardly encompass the infinite lifeworld and human experience.

Ülo Valk is professor of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu. His publications include *The Black Gentleman: Manifestations of the Devil in Estonian Folk Religion* (2001), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life...* (2012; co-edited with M. Bowman) and *Storied and Supernatural Places...* (2018; co-edited with D. Sävborg). His recent research has focused on belief narratives, place-lore, folklore in social context, and history of folkloristics.

**References**


An Exhibition of Photographs

Curated by
Suryasikha Pathak
Assam University, Diphu Campus
Kaustav Saikia
District Museum, Karbi Anglong

En(Gendering) Education: Images of Women in Colonial Assam (1911-1948)

The introduction of Western education to India is perceived as a ‘gift’ from the British Raj to the indigenous people. New histories are questioning these very notions about the colonial past and attempting to rewrite the encounter between the colonised and coloniser, and, likewise, the ‘heathen’ and the ‘Christian’.

Scholars have used different resources with the intent of reorganising the social histories of communities. Photographs are one such resource that takes us back in time to retell stories that otherwise would be lost. This exhibition is about the power of photographs to articulate narratives about mission-run schools.

From the beginning of the 19th century, education was popularised among common people due to initiatives taken by the colonial state, missionaries, and indigenous efforts. With the arrival of new technology, i.e. the photo camera, the progressive nature of the school was captured vividly bringing forth teachers and students in animated conversations and everyday scenes. The activities of the schools are beautifully depicted in these photos – beginning in the early decades of the 20th century and lasting until the late 1940s. The rich history of the mission schools shown in the photos illustrates not merely the celebratory mood, but also evidences the struggles of setting up education in new spaces bound by tradition, especially issues like the education of girls. The discursive aspect of his-
historical photographs acts as a link to the colonial past, exhibited in diverse circumstances. Apart from their archival role, such photographs function as active agents that negotiate cross-cultural memory across spatial boundaries. The meaning of a photographic document also changes with the changing context of viewing and the way it is presented to the viewer.

In the contemporary context, photographs as ‘objects’ are becoming more intangible, often existing only in the digital format. The uniqueness of the photograph as object lies in the fact that the concept of the ‘original print’ functions differently than in other forms of art. Each reproduction adds new contexts to the photograph and its interpretation. Therefore, mission photographs exist in a dialogue with modernity that helps preserve everyday scenes through the possibility of an infinite reproducibility that present-day technology aids.

These photographs, taken between 1900 and the 1940s, i.e. across almost half a century, and all across Northeast India, mark the mission’s project of education and the indigenous people involved in it. Written records of the mission, very rich in their narrative, created an image of the frontier. Tangible visual images then manage to ‘document’ a past that could be reconfigured into a memory for the viewer. These images retell the history of indigenous participation in construction of a past, a past often presented as a space for the foreign missionary. The presence of indigenous people in the mission’s project of secular education can be located not merely with the empowering agenda from above, but also as an act of appropriation from below.
Presentations

Contemporary Mari Vernacular Religious Communities: The Revival and Invention of Tradition

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The existence of an animistic religious culture in the 21st century is an indication of the preservation of the mythological worldview in modern society. My research is devoted to the vernacular beliefs tradition of the Mari people, preserved in the area of the Volga region in Russia.

The multinational territory of the Volga river basin in Russia is a part of the world where religion has long served as a marker of communal identification. This is true in particular for the Mari people (one of the local ethnic groups of the region). Despite living side by side with Orthodox Christians and Muslims, they have preserved their own unique religious tradition.

The organisation of Mari vernacular religion was registered in 1991 in Moscow. The revival of ethnic religious tradition took place as a part of the national uprising of the early post-Soviet period, in the 1990s. Today the Mari religious movement is known as the Mari Traditional Religion (MRT). It was recognised at the beginning of the 2000s as an official religion in the Republic of Mari El along with Orthodoxy and Russian Islam.

In order to adapt to the circumstances of the modern religious market the Mari vernacular tradition of family and patrimonial worship ceremonies took the form of an institutional structure consisting of priests and the network of Mari religious communities in the districts of the republic and in neighbouring regions with Mari populations. The interaction of Mari communities outside Mari El is being strengthened through the formalising of local groups of adherents to Mari beliefs. In my report I will observe the strategy of building the communication network between Mari religious activists and the role of the community leaders and their ritual performances.
In my doctoral study, I examine how women in tribal society participate in their assertion for tribal identity, rejecting non-tribal stateship. More specifically, I have chosen the Bodoland Movement in Assam to examine how everyday expressions of resistance can be understood through the mnemonics of folklore attached to the resistance movement. Though my field visits in 2017-2018 to Udalguri, one the districts of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), I found a recurring folk story about Bodos revolting against the colonial rule of Assam's tea plantation, particularly in a place called Rangapara. The place and the story of revolt coming from my participants in the present context when I went to study about the Bodoland Movement express the centuries-old marginalisation that they have faced. The exploitation of the land and the history of my participants’ ancestors’ labour – deliberately sold cheaply – are given minimal documentation in the writing of Assam’s history. But what is not mentioned at all is their wisdom and knowledge of the plantation process, which requires skill, clearing large areas of jungle and turning it into farm land.

Thus the ‘essence’ of the journey of oral narratives through a particular society, creating the possibility of generational ‘lore’, transcends the limitations of local history documentation. The connection of Bodo-Kacharis’ agitation reflects their Indigenous position in the state, fighting for their rights with the colonial powers, and, hundreds of years later, demanding their rights of self-determination – hence the need to understand the oral narratives that go into the making of the Bodoland Movement today.
This paper aims to explore the various forms of representation of the Karbi, an Indigenous oral community in Assam. It will engage with formal (institutional, political, administrative, legislative, rational-legal), cultural, and epistemological representation (a comparative analysis of discourses and debates on representation of the ‘Indigenous’ across the global academic gamut). Within the larger overarching structural and institutional mechanism of the state, which is the ultimate solicitor of legitimacy, the oral community has achieved representation in two broad forms: institutional and legislative, i.e. vis-à-vis the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC); and, cultural, i.e. by asserting the distinct Karbi cultural identity. This development is a result of contemporary popular movements and efforts formally led by the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) party since the early 1980s. What makes the study interesting is the prominent intersections of traditional and modern aspects of governance, law, administration and culture. The traditional political system of the Karbi is one intricately related to administration of community land and characteristics of kinship, kingship and clanship systems that continue to be practiced today alongside the formally recognized KAAC. An erstwhile oral tradition, the official language of the Council continues to be English, although there is demand for Karbi to be one of the official languages. The Karbi script uses the English alphabet, as is also the case with several recognised erstwhile indigenous communities in Assam. Among other sources, the paper at this stage will draw theoretical and conceptual comparisons with ethnographic studies on the Maori Indigenous tribe, wherein anthropologist Linda T. Smith revisits the practice of writing history and the importance of theorising history to develop a narrative that is free of colonial and imperial narratives on Indigenous peoples, but instead engages with the community to create an organic anthology of their lived experiences and history (Smith 1999). The purpose of this paper is also
to assess how far Indigeneity has been theorised or adequately and epistemologically represented in academia beyond the articulations of ILO Convention 169, as well as the UNWGIP (UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples). As this paper is also part of the author’s ongoing PhD research, it will draw upon narratives (collected through KIIls and IDIs) from the field to articulate a model of levels of Indigeneity with relation to the Indigenous community in question that also represents the aspirations of the Karbi people in their imagination of themselves. This model will be discussed in detail in the essay. The essay will throughout engage with discourse analysis and hermeneutics to understand the current epistemological scope for accommodating these indigenous aspirations of representation, autonomy, concept of cultural signifiers, inscriptions and meaning fixations of an oral tradition like that of the Karbi community.

Reference
In-between Sound and Landscape: During the Dree Festival among the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh

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In this paper I aim to discuss and share my musical encounters and experiences as a music enthusiast during the golden jubilee celebration of the Dree festival among the Apatanis in Arunachal Pradesh, held in July 2017. The Apatanis are primarily an agrarian community residing in Ziro Valley, Lower Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh. Dree was historically a household agricultural ritual from time immemorial, until 1966, when the Apatanis started to celebrate it more collectively as a harvest festival. In this paper, I will also illustrate and discuss the emergence of a new ritual and performance space that has arisen to accommodate music, songs, dances and chants by nyibus (shamans) from the older forms of ritual along with modern popular song and contemporary forms of dance performance. According to the Apatani anthropologist Hage Bida, writing in Ritual and Belief System of the Apatanis, “Apatani society is in its transition phase” (2018: 108). Thus, in this paper, I also address the transition factors that I encountered in Apatani society when conducting fieldwork for fifteen days during the festival. I contextualise this by drawing from the accounts of Austrian ethnologist Christoph von Führer-Haimendorf, which I read during my archival research in London in 2019. This paper is written from a diachronic perspective in which the primary data is collected in July 2017 and secondary data is based on the archival records of Haimendorf. In this paper gender is also a variable of study as I look at transitions in music and dance practice.

References
Supernatural Beliefs in Karbi: 
Dream Interpretation

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People have always been curious about their dreams. All around the world, tribals have a unique belief system for interpreting dreams. The interpretation might be pure guesswork and without evidence, but the role it performs in enriching oral literature is indeed praiseworthy. In the modern period, although it is rare to find intact traditional beliefs and cultural practices, some tribes have kept them viable, although ever-growing globalisation severely threatens them. The Karbi tribe is one of the significant tribes of India known for maintaining their culture and traditional beliefs today. The present study discusses the dream interpretations found in the oral literature of the Karbi tribe. The sources of this study are interviews with older members of the tribe and secondary sources available online.
Rituals, Identity and Orality among the Karbi in Northeast India

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The Karbi are an ethnic tribal group scattered across Northeast India with a concentration in Assam. They are mainly hill dwellers. The Karbi grew up in the midst of nature and have a deep faith in the existence of God, known as Hemphu Mukrang. It is obvious that the Karbi are not atheists; they follow a type of animism. Their beliefs focus on their surroundings, such as thick forests, big rivers, mountains, and waterfalls; even the moon and sun are worshipped as God. Generally, the Karbi worship God directly rather than in temples or shrines. They make a mound of earth as an altar, called the Dovan, in order to worship. The main scope of this paper is to study the different Karbi ritual practices. Several key Karbi rituals are Chomangkan, Adamasar, Chojon, and Rongker.

Karbi rituals are performed in the form of oral narratives, folk tales, folk songs, folk dances, ballads and other legends. All rituals are performed orally by older high-status adult males who have inherited the requisite knowledge from their forefathers. This paper will highlight how oral sources and oral narratives play an important role in ritual practice from one generation to the next.

Finally, this work will explain the cultural importance of Karbi ritual in relation to their identity. Ritual practice has played a significant role in sustaining Karbi identity by transmitting knowledge and assisting in the construction of cultural identity from childhood to death. This paper will emphasise how ritual practice among the Karbi give them their own sense of identity and their sense of singularity among other Assamese tribal groups.
Locating the Karbi Culture through Traditional Animistic Beliefs and Folk Festivals

Laxmi Hansepi
Gauhati University

Festivals are an important cultural aspect of any community. They serve various purposes and establish social interaction in the community by fostering understanding and emotional integration. Various features like history, religion, traditions, etc., contribute towards the development of festivals. The main purpose of festivals is to evolve, promote and preserve the culture of people in a community in a given place. The Karbi, also known as the Mikirs, are one of the indigenous groups of Assam. The Karbi celebrate a number of festivals and have elaborate ceremonies. It is through these festivals that the Karbi have a sense of identity. The word ‘folk’ means a group of people sharing at least one common cultural trait. This trait could be in any form, such as language, religion or way of life. The Karbi lack any written history because they don’t have their own script. It was only from the 20th century that the Karbi adopted the Roman script in order to document their culture and history through oral interviews and proper analysis of folklore. More than 85 percent of the Karbi practice the traditional Animist beliefs called Honghari. The traditional festivals of the Karbis like Chomangkan, Chojun, Rongker, etc., require animal sacrifice, which is a common trait of Animism. The Karbi folk festivals and Honghari are in many ways inter-connected as they go hand-in-hand. This paper aims to understand the role of traditional festivals in preserving the cultural essence of the community and to analyse how religion and festivals are inter-connected.
‘Auroville Timelines’ – a Media Pedagogy and Video Arts Activity Anchored in Intentional Universal Township, Auroville

Richa Hushing and Rrivu Laha
Richa & Rrivu Productions, Mumbai;
Auroville Film Institute/Auroville Timelines, Auroville

“The same thing which in the history of the universe made the earth the symbolic representation of the universe so as to concentrate the work on one point, the same phenomenon is now taking place: India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that the … cure will be found. And then, that is why … I was made to start Auroville.” – Mother's Agenda, Vol. 9, 3rd February 1968.

Believed to be an occult phenomenon, Auroville was founded in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa, a Western occultist in India, and spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, an Indian seer and revolutionary from the period of India’s struggle for independence. Auroville is the first and only internationally endorsed on-going experiment in human unity and transformation of consciousness.

Charmed by the utopian dream which begins, “There should be somewhere on earth a place which no nation could claim as its own…”, influenced by the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s, as radical youth from the West explored the Eastern landscapes and philosophies more and more, Auroville magnetised these free radicals and put them to restore this native landscape to its futuristic dream – in collaboration with indigenous Tamilians in Tamil Nadu.

Auroville Timelines incidentally began at the 50th anniversary of Auroville. An experiment in media pedagogy, Auroville Timelines uses cinema as an integral art to observe, assimilate and critically express the cosmovision of Auroville. It attempts to create mnemonic devices to articulate ‘The Dream’.
Baruch Spinoza once declared: “For no one has thus far determined the power of the body, that is, no one has yet been taught by experience what the body can do”. We, then, ask, what exactly happens with the body of someone who has achieved supra-human modes of existence? What could be said about the corporeality of Buddhist ‘saints’?

According to Buddhist tantric traditions, highly developed beings have a three-fold body – the physical (Nirmanakaya) and two more levels of corporeal subtlety that are achieved in the process of enlightenment (Sambhogakaya and Dharmakaya). As seen in Buddhist texts and contemporary rituals, there are many ways for achieving these subtler levels of embodiment and becoming a bodhisattva. Surprisingly, eating the bodily remains of a dead ‘saint’ – what we can call hagiophagy – is one of the known ways to ‘unfold’ the body. After ingesting a saint, a new liminal subjectivity emerges for the practitioner that is neither a fusion of two people nor the separated individualities from before the ritual. In this rhizomatic liminal zone, the practitioner gains access to new modes of existence and becomes one step closer to enlightenment.

The rituals of hagiophagy allow both a multiplicity and a dissolution of ontological categories, constituting, thus, a possible line of flight from the contemporary notions of corporeality. That is, by answering what a Buddhist saint’s body can do, we can convey ideas useful for a de-alienation of the modern body.
Exploring Urban Legends: A Karbi Perspective

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It was in the year 1981 that Jan Harold Brunvand, the renowned folklorist, introduced ‘Urban Legend’ to the people as a modern genre in folklore (Brunvand 1981).

Our knowledge of urban legends must have come early at the hands of our grandparents, uncles, aunts, parents, elderly helpers at home; tales told perhaps in the kitchen, by the fireside, or in the bedroom when we were told bedtime stories. This lore has passed from generation to generation, community to community, prevailing in our memories because it was either horrifying, fearsome or even hilarious. We have all grown up with such legends.

There are urban legends in Karbi folklore that have been, and are still, circulating, such as Bikha’s memorial stone erected at Borjuri, stones erected at Nartiang, the apish and ursine Tiso, about the road leading to Borkok Kro Chunro Arong, Rongbin and many more. There is lore about man-spirit inter-dimensional relations, revenants, and even trans-dimensional phenomena. Some may write these off as figments of imagination and superstition. Either way, these urban legends have remained on the lips of both the old and new generations. Brunvand writes that the lack of verification in no way diminishes the appeal that urban legends have for us.

This paper is a humble attempt to share the lore of the people from the perspective of urban legends.

Reference
Reconfiguring Tribal Identity:  
An Identity at the Threshold

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The ‘Indigenous identity’ is usually seen in historiographic and ethnographic narratives as a transitional state between antiquity and modernity. The idea of Indigeneity in the Indian context is problematised with questions of epistemology, history, legality and politics. The paper will reflect on the politics of Indigeneity and ethno-nationalist identity in the North-east Indian context and examine the cognitive dissonance of the ‘betwixt and between’ within the negotiated space. Drawing upon the Mizo myth of pialral (a myth dealing with the afterlife), I will attempt an in-depth study of the Mizo collective memory of pain, insult and subordination that has necessitated the reconstruction of an identity that transitions from a badge of shame to that of pride and empowerment. The paper will examine how ‘tribal identity’, although an identity imposed by more dominant forces (Xaxa 1999), has been internalised and becomes, in the words of Gilroy talking about African-American identity, “an increasingly powerful but still very limited signifier of prestige” (Gilroy 1993). It is interesting to observe how this discursive identity builds on narratives that are essentially masculinist and whether a reconfiguration of an ungendered Mizo identity is possible.

References
Death, Liminality and the Japanese in Kuki Stories

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The paper explores stories and songs dealing with the presence and death of Japanese soldiers in Northeast India during and after the Second World War, as well as their marginality in Northeast Indian societies. These stories, as well as songs, transmitted from generation to generation, continue to be narrated primarily by Kuki, an indigenous community that settled primarily in Manipur (but with connections to Mizo and Chin in neighbouring areas). The paper argues for a rather liminal existence of these outsider soldiers, who died under conditions of war but continue to reappear particularly in the memory and imagination of local elders. It thereby connects the themes of orality among indigenous groups with ideas about death and liminality and presents a largely overlooked topic.
The Traditional Karbi House and Its Significance

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Home has always been a gathering place, shelter and sanctuary providing an escape from the intrusiveness of the world. The concept of the house is constructed differently by different groups of people. Historically each culture has acquired certain forms and concepts in their settlement patterns evolving out of the socio-physical and socio-cultural context, leading, over time and due to local preferences, to a traditional type of habitation.

The Karbi prefer to settle in the plains rather that the hills, believing that establishing a village in the hills or in the vicinity of streams and mountains brings disease and destruction (a-hi-ih-keso), and, in this way, their traditional house is unlike those of other tribal communities in Northeast India. “Every culture has its own creation myth, its own cosmology”, as Dennis J. McKenna says.

Karbi traditional houses are made entirely of wood, bamboo and thatch. The skills and architectural knowledge that the Karbi possess can be seen in the construction of these houses.
1. *Hem thengsong / Hem tun / Hem-pi* (stilt house): a main house where the Karbi live with all their belongings.
3. *Rit mandu*: a temporary shelter like a gazebo with no ornamentation.

Every feature of the house or structure has its own significance. Each house is the reflection of the people dwelling in it, showing their lifestyle and characteristics. Therefore, building is a result of interaction between man and his nature.

Reference
Narrative is an accommodating genre; its purview can range from life experiences to exploring the realm of legends. The paper will foreground two types of narrative that display a liminal quality. First, tales and legends that have crossed borders and survive as variant narratives; second, narratives that have migration within their narrative content. Owing to the tendency to overcome boundaries, narratives are rendered as sites of contact, thus resulting in amalgamation of cultures and traditions. Simultaneously, narratives also function as sites of contest that witness assertions and constructions of identity. Narratives truly cross borders, as they remain untethered to both limiting temporal and spatial domains.

The trajectory of the paper, while acknowledging the Finnish method, will focus on the parochial influences that have been etched into migration and migrating narratives. The blurring boundaries of contact have in the past resulted in ownership claims on the narratives concerned. Additionally, parochial narratives function as registers of community memory; thus, incidents of alien contact are automatically absorbed into its folds.

Taking these observations into consideration, I will be applying them to examine the narratives of an Indigenous community in Sikkim (India), the Mutanchi Ruumkup Róngkups, or Lepchas. The community is a minority in the region. Sikkim, which boasts three international borders and one inter-state border, provides a fertile ground to examine the earliest narratives surviving and emerging from the Mutanchi community, thus allowing one to understand the agency of oral narratives in the lives of the people concerned.
Liminal Ontologies in Wu Chengen’s Journey to the West

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Independent Researcher

Journey to the West is a Chinese folk novel from the 16th century by Wu Chengen. It represents the religious ideas of 16th-century Ming China as a plurality of Daoist, Buddhist and folkloristic through material found and made fun of in the book. The story is about a monk who, accompanied by four spirits, brings Buddhist scriptures from India to China, facing many adventures along the way.

As a so-called ‘folk novel’ the Journey to the West combines textual and vernacular traditions and gives an insight into Chinese Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian thought as well as Chinese folk religion. In this way it deals with liminality on two different levels. The text itself constitutes a border area where different traditions meet, and the story tells of many supernatural encounters where the human world interacts with spirit worlds as the human and non-human main characters try to orient themselves in a complex cosmos inhabited by different beings from bodhisattvas to humans to evil spirits.

How then is it possible to orientate in such a cosmos and in such a text that combines different ontologies? A possible answer could be presented by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) notion of perspectivism, which describes the peculiarities of the cosmology of peoples from the Amazonian region. It states that all beings see themselves as humans and the identities of all beings and species depend on perspective. This presentation aims to demonstrate that similar ideas can be found in the Journey to the West.
This paper contrasts the experiences of liminality among volunteers with the Chewa people of Malawi in a rural village in the central region, where volunteers are hosted. Although the Chewa serve as the (political) majority of the country, in this village they are the Christian minority among the Islamic Yao population. This positions the Chewa in a different ‘outsider’ position from the volunteers, yet this marginality translates into strengthened bonds between the Chewa and the volunteers, the Yaos being less accessible for them. I argue that both ideas of outsiderness create a liminality in the encounter between the Chewa and volunteers at the margins.

First, analysing the Chewa Gule Wamkulu dance as orality, liminality manifests through the dancers who communicate with the ancestors and instruct on the code of moral conduct, the mwambo. Traditionally performed at all rites of passage, the dance now mainly functions as a performance for the volunteers and/or tourists who experience this as ‘traditional Malawian culture’.

Second, I will investigate how this performance and its history feed into orally transmitted narratives in which multiple ontologies and their subsequent belief-worlds become entangled at the margins of the rural village: the neoliberal environment of the volunteers and Christian Chewa beliefs. Here, the performance of the Gulu Wankulu functions as a mode of resistance against the marginalisation of the Chewa, made possible only through the presence of the volunteers who provide a site for performance.

Finally, I will consider to what extent this encounter creates an ontology in itself.
The Traditional Beliefs and Indigeneity of the Meitei Community in Manipur

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Manipur is a state in Northeast India located in the easternmost part of the country. It shares its international boundary with Myanmar and is recognised as a land-link to ASEAN countries under the Act East Policy. The physical division of the state is in a 1:9 ratio of plain to valley. The tiny valley is inhabited by the Meitei community as the majority, mingled with a major chunk of people from a multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds. It is a state persistently under the influence of globalisation, which poses a threat to its Indigeneity.

Sacred groves are maintained in the name of Umang Lai, the forest deity or the deity of the woods, under whose jurisdiction each village is believed to flourish. The belief system has a priest and priestess with the local name amaiba and amaibi. They are believed to be possessed by the spirit of God, living in transition between God and human, conveying the message of the god Lai-pao (Lai - God, pao - message) in the form of oracles. These oracles are understood literally by the people.

The space of Indigeneity is shrinking under the influence of multiple external factors, and its roots are eroding. Several research studies, documentation, and films are being made and concerted efforts are being made to increase awareness. Ecology, feminism and Indigeneity are some of the subjects of these interdependent studies.
Encounters with liminality in the Karbi context occur in vernacular life. Obvious ritualised backdrops support community expectations of the creation of liminality. The soundscape of the secondary post-mortem, *Chomkan*, conflates the world of the living and the dead for the duration of the three-day festival. The medium facilitating this entanglement is a lament called *Kacharhe*, sung continuously for three days by the women, who ‘lead’ the souls of the dead to the land of the dead. This presents an example of ‘interrupted’ liminality in which the in-betweenness of (in this case) realities is created in order for the living to facilitate the completion of the human lifecycle: the *miring rang*.

But how is it possible to understand perpetual liminality? Would it still be liminal if it were perpetual? Case studies derived from primary fieldwork could help us understand and ascertain this phenomenon better. Certain individuals I have interviewed inhabit multiple realities. The mediation occurs in the form of physical illness or the ability to interact with other-than-human entities. It could be the unknown restless dead, ancestors, or even the ‘spirit’ of place. The mediums in such cases never perceive their circumstances as fortunate, and sometimes view their ‘gift’ as being a misfortune that follows them after the non-ritualised abandonment of the house spirit, *Peng*. They suffer lifelong afflictions.

I hope to approximate an understanding of these phenomena in my presentation using first-person narratives of ‘supernatural’ encounters. All data in this presentation is derived from primary fieldwork.
Ka Lukhmi and Liminality in Ri Bhoi

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“Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions”

(Turner 2009: 95-96).

In the Bhoi region of the Khasi Hills, liminality can be found in various aspects of cultural practice, ranging from belief practice, rituals and sacred places to material culture, social customs and arts and crafts. The Bhoi region is located in the northern part of Meghalaya bordering Assam; its inhabitants are called ki Bhoi. This term Bhoi is widely understood by outside people as Khasi, but to the people of Ri Bhoi it is a generic name that refers to the Khasi who called themselves Karew and also to their neighbouring friends, the Karbi and Marngar. The socio-cultural practices of ka shaw bhoi give evidence that the term does not refer to one ethnic group; in fact, ethnicity in this region is very much in a liminal state. Gurdon, in his book The Khasis, said, “The people known as Bhoi in these hills, many of whom are really Karbi, live in the low hills to the north and northeast of the districts, the term ‘Bhoi’ being a territorial name rather than tribal”. The Bhoi can be divided into Jinthongs, Mynris, Rytngkhongs, and the Khasi-Bhoi, i.e. Khasi who inhabit the low country to the north of the district, which is generally called the Bhoi. But what unified the people of Ri Bhoi – whether U Karew, Karbi or Marngar – is their belief practice of ka Lukhmi. So does belief in ka Lukhmi fall between social groups, thus betwixt and between the social fixed point? This paper will discuss the liminal aspect of beliefs and practices on ka Lukhmi and how different social groups in the Bhoi region understood ka Lukhmi and how these practices link them.
References
The Colonial Hierarchy of Supernatural Beings in Nganasan Mythological Narratives

Maria Momzikova
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In the mythological narratives of the Nganasan Indigenous people in the Taimyr Peninsula in Russia, recorded in the 20th century, one can find among the Indigenous deities several Russian characters connected with Russian Orthodoxy, such as the Russian God (Lyosa-nguo) and Mikolka. These two deities occupy the part of the mythological space that can be considered the Russian space with izbas (peasant houses), a Russian doctor and Russian soldiers. The indigenous mythological space in contrast usually consists of tundra, reindeer, chooms (indigenous tent houses), and male and female characters in traditional fur parkas.

These mythological narratives show us hierarchical relations between the Russian and the Nganasan supernatural beings: the Russian God has more power than the Nganasan cultural hero Deiba-nguo and can punish him, affecting the Nganasan people’s wellbeing. Because of the history of the colonisation of the Taimyr Peninsula by the Russian Empire, and then by the Soviet Union, I would like to consider this hierarchy a colonial hierarchy of supernatural beings. I argue that in such a hierarchy, the highly hierarchical deity from the religion of the cities takes a more powerful position against Indigenous deities.

However, this hierarchy is not absolute. Nganasan deities who interact with Russian characters are close to people and are connected with ethnic groups and their interethic relations. Supernatural beings related to natural phenomena, such as the Earth, Sun, Life Mothers, stay apart from the colonial hierarchy of supernatural beings.
Exploring the Animated Documentary as an Ethnographic Tool

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Animated documentary may, at first glance, seem to be an oxymoron, a marriage of two odds where one is rooted in fantasy and the other in reality. Documentary has been addressed as a discourse of the real, a dialogue between the filmmaker and the audience within the dimensions of awareness, information and education (Jayasankar and Monteiro 2016) and a “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933) where the filmmaker attempts to portray “the world rather than a world” (Roe 2011). Animation, on the other hand, portrays the “art of movement that exists on film alone” (Norman McLaren) that explores all forms of storytelling and narrative through its various mediums. While academics around the world debate the techniques, form, definition and legitimisation of animated documentaries, filmmakers continue to explore the medium as a form of art, expanding the boundaries and challenging the demarcations and definitions. With this context in mind, I explore animated documentary as an ethnographic tool of data collection, data representation and validation.

Moving ahead with Norman McLaren’s definition, I propose a simplistic definition of animated documentary as movement of inanimate (non-living) images that portray the perceived reality of the animate (living). This definition would also contain the ancient narratives where images were used to document and re-tell ‘perceived reality’. Here again the responsibility to construct a ‘reality’ limited by their perception and craft, guided by the intention of the patrons, to present to the audience ‘constructed reality’ is on the shoulders of the storytellers, as with the filmmakers of today. In the above categorisation, animation accelerates the perspective of the filmmaker and influences the understanding of the audience. However, the role of the protagonist is left to the filmmaker and his/her lens. In response to the above debate, I introduce ‘collaborative perspective of filmmaking’, where the protagonist participates in the making of the film (to different degrees) and thus leaves traces of their
perspective. Thus, the community participates in data collection and data representation. Further, I state examples from my work where I legitimise and validate animated documentaries by collaborating with communities whose stories are being shaped. Animated documentaries thus rest on the relationship between the community (subject), ethnographer (filmmaker) and academia (audience).

References
Three Ways to be an Androgynous Hero in Ukrainian Wonder Tales

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In Ukrainian tradition sex determines the gender role, but there are some categories which stand outside gender roles, i.e. children up to seven years old and women after the age of childbirth. The former have no social role or markers or gender patterns, while the latter provide mediation. Considering this, we may suggest that a binary gender–sex system exists among socially defined people and that any people or creatures outside it exist as ‘other gender’ in a ritual sense.

Talking about this ritual sense, we find it in Ukrainian wonder tales. During the test, the hero/heroine goes into a liminal dimension in the form of the wood, the underworld or a hut. Being in the liminal dimension signifies the loss of all gender features and appearance of a different, androgynous, state. Therefore, we may assume that the hero’s/heroine’s motion between sacral and profane into the liminality and out occurs in three ways:

A linear journey: from sacral to profane (children up to seven years old: “The Rolling-Pea-Boy”, “The Seven-years-old Girl”).

A circular journey: from profane to sacral and back (“The Mare’s Head”, and every plot with a strongman as the hero).

A reverse circular journey: from sacral to profane and back (“The Princess Frog”, “Gummy Duck” and plots with ‘shape-shifting’ heroes/heroines).

With this in mind we can say that there are different types of androgynous heros/heroines. The type of androgyne depends on how, and if, he/she escapes liminality.
Traditional Oral Narratives: Declining Practice in a Contemporary Karbi Society

Longkiram Phangcho
Damdama College

As the chronology of the history of human civilisation reached the 21st century, where words like Technology, Information Technology, the Internet, etc., echo daily in our ears and play across our straining eyes, we seem to have forgotten the rich oral traditions of many communities that lived into this century. Their cultures remained intact, languages striving for recognition, traditional customs still followed more or less; yet many such practices are still ignored, as a result of which they start to lose their value in society. One among them is traditional oral narrative and storytelling. This paper will study and analyse the problems and challenges that caused the decline in traditional oral narratives in Karbi society, one of the major indigenous groups in Northeast India. People have been telling stories for a very long time. Some oral narratives are thousands of years old, changing as they were passed from one storyteller to the next. Stories come to life when a good storyteller engages with the hearts and souls of the audience. But as modern means of communication touch the generation of the 1990s, such practice is declining rapidly. Oral narratives are not just stories to be told but are also sources of history, acting as a device that connects us to the past. Emphasis is laid on such oral tradition as a valid and viable source in the reconstruction of the history of the Karbi community not only in Karbi Anglong but also in the whole of Northeast India.
Pluralism in Identity: Investigations around ‘Chaanvad’

Garima Plawat
Ambedkar University Delhi

Dedicated to the spirit of the people of India
Who discovered their gods...
When the wind blew through the pipal tree
And who saw meaning in an unhewn stone.

Kheda Vali Chaanvad is a village deity who lies on the boundaries of four villages (Tayyabpur, Hulaasan, Maanpur, Shekhpur) in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in the northern part of India. She exists not just on the threshold of the physical boundaries but also in the realm of her complex identities. Kheda means a settlement. An aspect of a ruined settlement is also attached to this word. The suffix Chaanvad harbours in itself a plethora of identities. Almost every informant during my fieldwork told me that this word was a distortion or appropriation of the name of the goddess Chamunda, who is one of the main goddesses in Hinduism. However, I was informed either directly or tangentially that Kheda Vali was not really the goddess Chamunda. She was like Chamunda Devi owing to her fierce attributes. Interestingly, Kheda Vali is considered a benevolent deity in all the villages, unlike the goddess Chamunda, who is a form of the fearsome Kali, considered the goddess of war. I am still in the process of finding out why, then, the suffix Chaanvad is used for Kheda Vali. Does Chaanvad become a site where the boundaries between a village deity and the gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon blur? Does it become an amalgamation of these two worlds? Or does Chaanvad become in itself an entirely different category of religiosity and belief system? The rituals attached to the deity’s worship present a rich blend of practices which are indigenous in nature as well as borrowed from the Hindu pantheon. The dreams associated with the deity also reflect multiplicity in her identity. During my fieldwork, the interviewees also informed me about the deities of other villages, who also had the suffix Chaanvad in their names. Thus, in my paper I will try to investigate what constitutes Chaanvad. Is it an identity or a category or does it defy either of these classifications?
A Phenomenological Study of ‘Nihu Kachiri’: A Culturally Specific Syndrome among the Karbi Tribe

Kareng Ronghangpi
Independent Researcher

Many ancient cultures associate mental illness with religious punishment or demonic possession. This can be seen in ancient Egyptian, Indian, Greek and Roman writings. From the Chinese perspective mental illness was due to an imbalance in yin and yang, here again including the topic of demonic possession. Mental illness has also been referred to as a religious and personal problem since ancient times. Treatment of these mental diseases was with prayer or traditional medicine. Similarities can be seen across different tribes and in different cultures alongside similar beliefs about the causes.

The earliest form of mental illness known to the Karbi tribe was Nihu kachiri, which means longing for or seeking the maternal uncle, where an individual is said to have been held under the spell of his or her maternal uncle (hi-I, which means the devil). This particular mental illness affects children and adolescents of both sexes and, if not treated in time, could lead to complete madness. Folk medicine has a long history in Karbi tradition and is still prevalent in Karbi society today. The diagnosis of this illness involves performing a religious ceremony involving the maternal uncle and the individual suffering from the illness.

This paper focuses on the illness and on the lore associated with the illness, as well as the ceremony to eradicate the illness.
The Traditional Health Care Practices of the Karbi

Bamonkiri Rongpi
Assam University

The treatment of disease varies from group to group. It has been noted that, in traditional societies, belief in the interference of different supernatural agencies is particularly strong in the context of health and disease. Many indigenous socio-cultural activities revolve around gods and spirits. Sickness, disease and treatments thereof were also prevalent before the advent of Western medicine. But how were these treated? It was done, as is still practiced, through indigenous methods of healthcare, traditional medicines and magico-religious healing, particularly in these societies.

Northeast India, and particularly Assam, is a rich zone of ethnic diversity. The Karbi are the early settlers of Karbi Anglong district in Assam. They have their own indigenous knowledge of healthcare. It has been noticed in a number of cases that, even if they do not have access to Western medical facilities, they can still address their ailments through different medicinal plants which are available in their locality and forest, and also through various rituals.
This paper seeks to shed light on the nature of ‘Indigenous studies’ as a concept in the social sciences arena.

The many views within Indigenous cultures convey the idea that this field of study requires an interdisciplinary approach, relying on other sciences, local epistemologies and their many voices: Indigenous women, indigenous youth, councils of elders and knowledge holders, just to name a few. By bringing up these last examples I want to clarify that Indigenous peoples hold diversity not only as communal sectors but also within their own body of members. Thus, we need to have an interdisciplinary method within this discipline, and at the same time be specific as to which voices we want to visualise.

I aim to propose that Indigenous peoples’ voices are a summary of different identities that intersect in one category. With a number of reflexions from both the writing retreat and my ethnographic experience among the Wixarika (viirrarika) people from Western Mexico I analyse the Indigeneity idea as a fluctuating category. Moreover, I introduce the perspective of ‘outsider’, a person who does not belong to the Indigenous group in question and whose reflexions visualise the necessity of collaboration between different ways of producing knowledge. In so doing, Indigenous studies could highlight an insightful but yet basic purpose of social sciences as a whole: the coexistence of identities nourish our perspective to see the reality.
Dalits, also known as untouchables, in eastern Uttar Pradesh and parts of Bihar in India, perform the *Kathghodva* dance at marriages or happy occasions and at specific Hindu religious sites. Literally, *Kathghodva* is a compound comprising *Kath*, i.e. wooden, and *Ghodva*, i.e. horse. The performers primarily belong to the *Chamar* caste, whose traditional occupation based on the Hindu social order was leather tanning. The socio-political movement of neo-Buddhism, started by Ambedkar, has totally changed the dynamics of the community, although the performance still takes place and has done so for at least three to four centuries.

The central story behind the performance, which is performed alongside local community stories in a humorous way, is of a king named Mirza Ghalib Mughal. The symbol and imagery of this tradition establish an alternative history. The space the performance creates is unique in the sense that the performers break the silence imposed upon them in the society in which they live. In addition, the role of women and their stories in the performance shows how women are imagined within Dalit folklore.

It is worth noting that very few such traditions, based on Dalit lives and struggles, exist in India. I propose investigating the nuances of this unique tradition in order to understand its significance in the lives of the Dalit community.
Sacred Trees and Forests of the Finns and Finno-Ugric Peoples

Tiina Seppä
University of Eastern Finland

Within Finno-Ugric studies, monographs about small indigenous people’s religions make up a specific literary genre. These works were published by the Finno-Ugric Society in a series called Religions of the Finnic Tribes (Suomen suvun uskomnot) between 1900 and 1942 compiled by famous researchers of religion and culture who had usually also performed their own ethnographic fieldwork among these peoples.

In my presentation I read descriptions of vernacular belief as ‘nature belief’, concentrating specifically on descriptions of sacred groves from Finno-Ugric peoples and their neighbours. The original, pre-Christian, word for the sacred woods in Finland seems to have been Hiisi (in Estonia, Hiis). According to several researchers of linguistics, anthropology and folklore studies, it seems that the Hiisi places in Finland were sacred groves located at the centres of communities. Later, after Christianity, the name Hiisi came to mean some distant and difficult place, used as a pejorative term.

My special research interests are gender and agency and how they are made visible or absent. In addition, the non-human agencies of these rituals need to be analysed, on top of which it is important to analyse the relationship between vernacular belief and official forms of Christianity within this framework of re-interpretation.

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Urban Camouflage, Threatened Ethnicity:
The Search for Synthesis

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Gauhati University

The process of industrialisation in the period of the 18th century, primarily in the West, brought together processes of urbanisation worldwide, including on the Indian subcontinent. Although the bottom line of the processes of industrialisation was economic growth they were never restricted within trade, industry and turnover exclusively. However, now economic growth has started to dominate every sphere of life. Basically, developing countries like India in the twenty-first century experience urbanisation with a rapid escalation that has adverse consequences in the semi-urban and remote areas that are mainly dominated by ethnic inhabitants.

In his book Ethnicity: Source of Strength? Source of Conflict? Yinger defines ethnic group as a segment of a larger society which is seen by others to be different in some combination of the following characteristics: language, religion, race and ancestral homeland with its related culture. Members of the ethnic group also perceive themselves in that way and participate in shared activities built around their (real or mythical) common origin or culture. India's Northeast is a major hub of different ethnic groups that are going through ethnic unrest. Acute poverty and inequality, political manoeuvring and deleterious effects of hasty globalisation are some of the critical factors that are responsible for the intensification of ethnic assertions in India.

However, the defence that these ethnic groups have made for their own identity against the crisis is a matter of critical assessment. Karbi youth festivals that are celebrated in different parts of Assam are the major source of study of the influence of urbanisation and its effects among the tribe. This paper is an attempt to look into the causes and manifestations of urban camouflage and the search for the prospect of a synthesis regarding threatened ethnicity.

Reference
The act of storytelling is present in almost all communities across the world. When it enters the domain of performance, it carries with it certain divisions to which the storyteller is expected to adhere.

In the village of Sikandar Rao, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, there is a practice of storytelling which carries in itself unique characteristics. Men narrate the stories in the prose form, whereas women narrate them via songs. The influential upper caste Brahmins, called kathavachaks, i.e. traditional storytellers, of the region do not have any agency in narrating these stories, thus giving this practice a unique social character and cultural background. Does this practice of storytelling create a threshold where the rigid social boundaries find themselves dissolving?

People who do not belong to the upper caste are sometimes found performing dances, songs, etc. However, in this case an act which is predominantly a domestic one, found within the confines of a house, is taken out into the public. The different castes sit together and the hierarchy is checked when the stories are told. Does this practice also become a transitional state where the boundaries of public and private are also revised and given new Identities? I will try to examine how the boundaries of caste and spatiality are redefined when stories are told through the night.
The Ao Naga tribe of Northeast India believe in a non-human entity named Aonglemla, a feminine entity who inhabits dense forests and marshy locations. Known for possessing long hair, backwards feet and cackling laughter that echoes all over the forest, an encounter with Aonglemla is usually considered bad luck and a sign that some kind of misfortune will occur to the individual, their family and/or acquaintances. There is already a widely circulated narrative tradition in which encounters with Aonglemla and their aftermath are discussed among members of the community, and outside. While orally transmitted folklore has helped create an image of Aonglemla as a malevolent non-human entity that unleashes evil and misfortune upon humans, existing narratives suggest that there are far more complex layers to the circulation of this narrative.

This paper explores the relationship between Aonglemla and the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland and how discursive social, religious and cultural shifts have influenced how this entity is conceived and represented today. It also delves into how digital media has become a popular medium for the transmission and continuity of narratives detailing encounters with Aonglemla. Originally written as part of the Zubaan-Sasakawa Peace Foundation Research Grants for Young Researchers from the Northeast 2018, the primary fieldwork for this research project was carried out between October 2018 and June 2019 in Nagaland state.
Arnold van Gannep’s contributions as one of the key figures in the social sciences were significant. He observed that in a person’s life, ceremonies play an important and significant role. Each individual ceremony is known as a life crisis. He called them rites of passage. In every culture, people perform activities that are associated with different ceremonies of life. Ceremonies of life can be categorised into three types or phases. They are separation, transition and incorporation. “Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies. Rites of incorporation are prominent at marriages. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation. They may also be reduced to a minimum in adoption, the delivery of a second child, during remarriages, or in the passage from the second to the third age group.” This is main concept that van Gannep contributed to the social sciences. He understood that the law of life in this universe is humankind. Apart from this, he also observed that the law of nature is seasonal due to changes in celestial bodies like the moon.

We can also see that in Karbi culture these phases, or ‘rites of passage’, are present. For this workshop, I would like to focus on van Gennep’s key concept of rites of separation, in the Karbi context. The Karbi have a distinct and unique way of life and a unique worldview. The underlying structure in humankind after death is that the soul departs from the body, which is seen in this context as a form of separation. The soul will reach its eternal place, called Chomrongme (heaven). The interesting thing to note here is that the Karbi have a concrete concept of soul, and the soul needs to be sanctified to reach Chomrongme. This means that the soul is in a liminal period after death and before reaching Chomrongme. Victor Turner has called this state “betwixt and between”. The Karbi have to perform a funeral ceremony called Chomangkan. If the Chomangkan is not performed, then it is believed that the individual’s soul will not be sanctified. In such a situation, the soul can be said to be neither here nor there. A soul that is in this marginal period between earth and heaven is in an inter-structural situation.
If the soul is in a liminal period it is structurally negative, and its characteristic is identified as having nothing, no status. This is a very significant observation for the Karbi because they live in a cyclical society. Only by performing the rites of *Chomangkan* can the transition between states of the soul be culturally recognised; only then will the soul be in a particular place.

**References**


A Brief History of *Duk* (Facial Tattoo): The Process and Origin, and its Decline

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Tattoo simply means a form of body modification. The sites could be anywhere on the recipient’s body, where a desired design is imprinted by inserting ink or pigments into the dermis layer of the skin. For centuries, before tattoo was commercially popularised by big celebrities, Indigenous peoples across the globe practiced this art to signify spirituality, status, position, identity, adornment and other socio-cultural attributes.

Interestingly, the Karbi of Northeast India also have a rich tattoo tradition. The practice and concept of tattoo in Karbi society is unique. The recipient is a young girl who is tattooed specifically only on her face. This facial tattoo is known as *duk* in the Karbi language.

There are many tales about the origin of *duk* in the form of oral narratives. The tale that is most widely distributed says that the Karbi women were being abducted because of their extreme beauty by the commanders and subordinates of the invading Burmese army during the 1820s. Because of this, the Karbi women, including their daughters, began tattooing their faces to make themselves look less appealing so that they would not be taken away. Lyall and Stack (Stack 1908) also gave a superficial note about Burmese war and tattoos. However, Lyall and Stack did not mention anything about the Burmese atrocities, nor did they use the word *duk*, nor did they mention that the tradition had anything to do with Karbi young girls tattooing their faces to make themselves less attractive.

There is one available narrative song today about the origins of *duk* in which the song tells the story of two sisters, Sangso and Sangri, and how they eagerly wished to have the *duk* tattoos because tradition said they should.

In informal conversations with a few living ‘*duk* wearers’, they only speak about beautification and societal values.

The Naga are the closest neighbours of the Karbi. Hutton (1921) gave an account of the tattoo tradition of the Naga tribes, but only wrote about societal values. Therefore, until new research findings come to light, it
could be assumed that the acceptable and justifiable theory about the history of *duk* is that it stems from beautification, societal values, identity and spirituality.

In the present day the *duk* tradition is a dying art. Today, all *duk* wearers are above the age of 40-45, which means the tradition came to a sudden stop after the 1980s.

An online survey was conducted among young Karbi girls (aged 20-30) asking for opinions on “Why you as a contemporary young Karbi woman don’t wear *duk*?” The majority of them speak about a lack of importance and encouragement, a sense of insecurity, fear of the painful process and dislike of ruining their natural faces.

Another factor that has led to the decline in the tradition is religion. Families who embraced Christianity were discouraged by missionaries from being tattooed, as were followers of *Lokhimon* in recent years.

**References**


The Karbis are one of the major indigenous groups of Assam, located in the Karbi Anglong district in Northeast India. Linguistically the Karbi are in the Tibeto-Burman group. Karbi social structure is based on clan organisation, viz. the Ingti, Rongpi, Terang, Teron and Timung. The Karbi are divided into spatial units/provinces of (1) the Hill Karbi and (2) the Dumrali Karbi.

The Karbi have numerous religious practices alongside an indigenous primary traditional religion. Karbi culture is based on oral tradition and contains a huge repertoire of oral expressive forms transmitted verbally. Contemporary encounters between tradition and modernity have led to major transformations in cultural practices, affecting the culture bearers in terms of cultural relevance. Orality is the foundation stone of Karbi cultural repertoires and therefore it is essential to study the narrative to better understand the Karbi universe.

The evaluation process of my paper will focus on the significance of the rich oral repertoire embedded in the migration narrative, i.e. Môsêra, which means ‘recalling the past’ and is referred to as the master/origin narrative of the Karbi.

This research will focus on the narrative aspect of Môsêra and concisely analyse two versions that exist among the Hill and Dumrali Karbi and explicate the variations and similarities present in the formation of different origin narratives to further determine the course of historical and geographical nuances responsible for the narrative’s different versions and the role it serves the community in the topical scenario based on the contextual and place-dependent analysis. By assessing different features found among the groups I hope to stitch the framework of the narrative together coherently.
Jodonang: Indigeneity and Religious Identity

Senganglu Thaimei
Delhi University

Born in Puiluan village in Nungba sub-division of the erstwhile Tamenglong district of Manipur, Jodonang (1905-1931) is considered the fountainhead of ethnic consciousness among the Zeliangrongs. His 'rediscov-ery' of the Bhuvan cave after responding to the call of Bisnu (the most powerful of the pantheon of seven brothers) linked him to the legend of Gairemnang, the mortal son of the deity. Gairemnang is believed to be the first person to have trekked the Bhuvan hill, the abode of his father, located in today’s Assam. In a widely told oral narrative, Gairemnang was born to become the first king of his people, but forfeited his kingship after he failed to follow his father’s instructions and was instead ordained to be a poet. Jadonang’s claim of trysts with the deity Bisnu through dreams, in addition to testimonials of mysterious trances and supernatural occurrences in his childhood, led to the speculation that he could be the promised deliverer of his people, the fulfilment of what was left unaccomplished by Gairemnang.

Jadonang, as a muh or a priest, with the help of revelations through dreams, envisaged consolidating a traditional system of faith into an organised religion and regrouping the four scattered kindred tribes as one people. This phenomenon, which occurred in the 1920s, became the foundation of various indigenous cultural and religious movements that followed throughout the century among the Zeliangrongs. The paper will explore the processes of consolidating an indigenous religion built on the bedrock of a worldview that does not demarcate the spiritual from political identity in the corporeal world. In order to achieve that, along with biographies of Jadonang, I will examine rare locally published booklets written by priests. The study of the booklets will show how they are more than merely treatises on religious rituals and ceremonies, they are also assertions of their Indigeneity as they include testimonials of revelations from the gods through dreams exhorting the dreamers to follow the path of Jadonang, successor to the cultural legend Gairemnang.
Human Alterity and Liminality:
The Case of the Wild Man in Alpine Folklore

Michele Tita
Independent Researcher

Humans have always had a significant interest in themselves and other humans throughout history, even before the advent of anthropology. People have always tried to define the distinctive features of humanity, often in opposition to the wildness and primitivity of ethnically other humans (Rousseau 1755; Tylor 1871).

Within the Indigenous communities of the European Alps the idea of human alterity has emerged along with the figure of the ‘wild man’, described as a human-like being completely covered in hair and living as a social outsider. According to local folktales (Centini 1989: 15-22) he used to get in touch with humans and teach them how to make cheese. However, some people would have scared and insulted the wild man for his appearance, leading to him adopting a solitary life.

The wild man is certainly a liminal figure, with both feral and human features and the ability to transform natural objects into cultural artefacts. This paper explores the indigenous figure of the wild man as an example of liminality between the vernacular definitions of human and non-human/pre-human, highlighting the importance of this figure to local identity.

References
Improvising Anthropology: Verrier Elwin and the Frontier Administration in NEFA (1954-1964)

Koyna Tomar
University of Pennsylvania

In the 1950s Verrier Elwin moved to Shillong to assist the government of the North East Frontier Agency as their anthropological consultant. In NEFA, compared to Central India, where he had previously lived and worked for many years, Elwin’s ‘touring periods’ were limited to a few weeks. In this short time he had to conduct fieldwork, prepare reports and make recommendations on matters of policy. While much consideration has been given to Elwin’s anthropology, his photographs, currently in the personal collection of Ashok Elwin, remain understudied. By focusing on Elwin’s visual anthropology over a decade I will discuss the role of visual technologies in fieldwork. Often travelling on his own, Elwin’s work with inhabitants of NEFA can be seen as a liminal encounter where the practice of photography continuously shaped his subjectivity as an anthropologist. Finally, I will discuss the ‘constrictive’ role that representations can have by highlighting how photographs – subjective inscriptions of inter-personal encounters – were turned into objective artefacts in their own right as they circulated within and beyond NEFA.
# List of Participants

## Plenary speakers

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