Deities, Spirits and Demons in Vernacular Beliefs and Rituals in Asia

November 8–10, 2017

Abstracts

Tartu 2017
Conference
Deities, Spirits and Demons in Vernacular Beliefs and Rituals in Asia
University of Tartu
November 8–10, 2017

Wednesday, Nov 8th, 2017

14:00–15:00 Registration
(Lobby of the University of Tartu main building, Ülikooli 18)

15:00–15:15 Opening of the conference
(University of Tartu main building, Ülikooli 18, lecture hall 139)

15:15–16:45 Session I: Ambivalent ontologies: Afterlife in South Asian traditions (University of Tartu main building, Ülikooli 18, lecture hall 139. Chair: Ülo Valk)
15:15–16:15 Amy L. Allocco (Elon University, USA): “Protect us! Support us! You are our family deity!”: Ritual relationships with the dead in Tamil South India (plenary lecture)
16:15–16:45 Brian K. Pennington (Elon University, USA): The once-and never-dead: The Garhwali Devta of Uttarakhand, India

16:45–17:15 Coffee/tea

17:15–19:15 Session II: The non-human others: Theorising supernatural powers (University of Tartu main building, Ülikooli 18, lecture hall 139. Chair: Brian K. Pennington)
17:15–17:45 Frank J. Korom (Boston University, USA): Weathering the storm: Environmental catastrophes and divine wrath in a Bengali bardic tradition
17:45–18:15 Stefano Beggiora (Ca’Foscari University of Venice, Italy): Monsters, ghosts and demons in Himalayan folklore: An ethnographic survey
18:15–18:45 Davide Torri (University of Heidelberg, Germany): A night at the watermill. An enquiry into non-human inhabitants of the Upper Helambu in Nepal
18:45–19:15 Fabio Armand (University Grenoble-Alpes, France): The Himalayan folklore of succubus *Kichkannī*: Towards a neurocognitive anthropology of our ‘imaginaïve’ phantom-bodies

19.15–21.15 Opening reception (University Café, Ülikooli 20)

**Thursday, Nov 9th, 2017**

**9:00–11:00 Session III: Divinities, destinies and ritual strategies:**
**Controlling deities in Hinduism** (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Amy L. Allocco)
9:00–10:00 Fabrizio M. Ferrari (University of Chester, UK): Demonic or divine? Ghaṇṭākaraṇa in Sanskrit and Bengali literature (plenary lecture)
10:00–10:30 Audrius Beinorius (Vilnius University, Lithuania): When stars turn into demons: The practice of a medical astrology in West Bengal
10:30–11:00 Alexis Avdeeff (University of Poitiers, France): Celestial hierarchies, labile pantheons. Tamil Hinduism through the prism of divination

**11:00–11:30 Coffee/tea**

**11:30–13:00 Session IV: Local goddesses in South Asia: Rituals of power and secrecy** (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Frank J. Korom)
11:30–12:00 Lidia Guzy (University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland): The ambivalent powers of vernacular goddesses in India with special reference to Odisha
12:00–12:30 Uwe Skoda (Aarhus University, Denmark): Goddess Basuli, Chhou and the Raja. Cheitra Parba rituals in a former princely state in Odisha/India
12:30–13:00 Margaret Lyngdoh (University of Tartu): Klingmekar: A stigmatised, secret and powerful deity among the Karbi and Khasi in North Eastern India

**13:00–14:30 Lunch (University Café, Ülikooli 20)**
14:30–16:30 Parallel sessions V & VI

Session V: Conceptualising life and afterlife: Perspectives from East Asia (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Alevtina Solovyeva)
14:30–15:00 Jinseok Seo (University of Latvia): The deification process of contemporary political characters in the context of Korean vernacular beliefs a.k.a. Korean shamanism
15:00–15:30 Fumihiko Kobayashi (independent researcher, USA): Saru Gami demons and Yama’i no Kami deities are still out there! Stories of monkey demons and deadly disease deities in Japanese folk culture tradition
15:30–16:00 Kusum Gopal (United Nations, India): “Life is temporary, death is a return”, Song ga Thac Ve: Integrated cosmologies of the living and the dead in Vietnam
16:00–16:30 Nina Grigoreva (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation): The conception of the tree of Si through the narratives and rituals of the Muong in North Vietnam

Session VI: Vernacular Hinduism, indigenous religions and social realities (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 214. Chair: Uwe Skoda)
14:30–15:00 Irene Majo Garigliano (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France): “God will slowly go away from here”. Vernacular beliefs, nostalgia and the expanding pilgrimage to the Kāmākhyā Temple (Assam)
15:00–15:30 Devleena Ghosh (University of Technology, Sydney, Australia): “The bones of our mother”: Adivasis, forests and coal mining in India
15:30–16:00 Tina Otten (University of Münster, Germany): Gods, deities, and kin in birth rituals in Highland Odisha, India
16:00–16:30 Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger (Aarhus University, Denmark): The deities, spirits and demons move along: A case-study among diaspora Hindus living in Mauritius

16:30–17:00 Coffee/tea
17:00–18:30 Parallel sessions VII & VIII

Session VII: Confronting and controlling the supernatural in Mongolia
(Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Stefano Beggiora)
17:00–17:30 Alevtina Solovyeva (University of Tartu): Deities and demons on Mongolian roads
17:30–18:00 Iuliia Liakhova (Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow): Sprinkle, offer and pray: Daily rituals in Mongolian everyday life
18:00–18:30 Dmitrii Nosov (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg): “The mighty old man who never existed”: Motif of a ritual, interrupted by supernatural creatures in the folktales and legends of the Buryats and Mongols

Session VIII: Deities, places and identities: Exploring boundaries and belonging
(Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 214. Chair: Margaret Lyngdoh)
17:00–17:30 Reep Pandi Lepcha (Jadavpur University, India/University of Tartu): Emancipation of mortals to protective divinities in Mutanchi narratives: Negotiating ownership of tradition, gender, and identity struggle in Sikkim
17:30–18:00 Kikee D. Bhutia (University of Tartu): Contested narratives of the deities of Nga Dag monastery in Sikkim
18:00–18:30 Xuan Wang (Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John’s, Canada/University of Tartu): Taoist Guandi Temple, Buddha Butter Sculpture Assembly and Multi-Religious Beliefs in Xiahe Tibetan Autonomous County in China

19:00 Conference dinner

Friday, Nov 10th, 2017

9:00–11:00 Session IX: Supernatural beings in Tibet and the Himalaya: Echoes from textual and ethnographic sources
(Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Valentina Punzi)
9:00–10:00 Charles Ramble (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, France): From ‘Greatest Leaders’ to ‘Gnomes’: The decline of Tibetan vampires and the rituals for their subjugation (plenary lecture)
10:00–10:30 Daniel Berounsky (Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic): Tö (gtod) beings and their characteristics in early Tibetan Tö collection (Gtod ’bum)

10:30–11:00 Alexander K. Smith (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany): Assailing the demon’s fortress: Hierarchy and opposition in Bon rope divination

11:00–11:30 Coffee/tea

11:30–13:00 Session X: Deities in action: Narratives of destroying and healing power in Tibetan communities (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Baburam Saikia)

11:30–12:00 Per Kværne (University of Oslo, Norway): The sku-bla, ‘soul’, of the Tibetan Emperors (7th-9th century CE) and its subsequent metamorphosis

12:00–12:30 Valentina Punzi (“L’Orientale” University of Naples, Italy/ University of Tartu): Burying gold, digging the past: The Ma Bufang regime and contemporary Tibetan-Hui ethnic tensions in Amdo (PRC)

12:30–13:00 Susannah Deane (University of Glasgow, UK): Exploring narratives of spirit-caused illness within a contemporary Tibetan community

13:00–14:30 Lunch (University Café, Ülikooli 20)

14:30–16:30 Session XI: Controlling, taming and communicating with deities and spirits (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Gregory D. Alles)

14:30–15:00 Olga Mazo (Russian State University for the Humanities): Spirits of the earth (Tudi shen) in the everyday life of modern Macau (China)

15:00–15:30 Serena Bindi (Université Paris Descartes, France): When the dead linger in our senses. Sensory experiences and the presence of the dead in Garhwal, Uttarakhand

15:30–16:00 Diana Riboli (Panteio University, Greece): The deities’ up-raising and the invisible god. Shamanism and Christianity among the Chepang (Nepal)

16:00–16:30 Cristiana Turini (University of Macerata, Italy): The power to confront demons in the context of Naxi culture: The role of the dongba and his paraphernalia
16:30–17:00 Coffee/tea

17:00–18:30 Session XII: Dealing with the supernatural: Varieties of vernacular practice (Ülikooli 16, lecture hall 212. Chair: Lidia Guzy)
17:00–17:30 Laur Vallikivi (University of Tartu): The life and death of spirit objects: Nenets reindeer herders’ relations with the Khekhe in arctic Russia
17:30–18:00 Gregory D. Alles (McDaniel College, USA): The vernacular in motion: Jagats, deities, and ancestors in eastern Chhotaudepur district
18:00–18:30 Ülo Valk (University of Tartu): Epistemological uncertainty and narrative variation: On supernatural encounters in Assam

18:30 Closing of the conference
Preface

In 2016 the Asian Centre was established at the University of Tartu to bring together departments and researchers at different faculties with expertise in Asian studies. The centre fosters co-operation within the university and with research centres abroad. One of the founding members of the Asian Centre was the Institute of Cultural Research, which accommodates the Centre of Oriental Studies, the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore and the Department of Ethnology – institutions that all share interest in the cultures of Asia, although the research foci are different.

The academic discipline of folklore studies was started at the University of Tartu in 1919 when the chair of Estonian and Comparative Folklore was founded. Already in these early years folkloristics was established as an international field of research with its distinctive approaches, combining fieldwork with archive-oriented philological methods, and with remarkable emphasis on the study of folk religion (Valk 2014). Folklore was not defined narrowly as a set of oral poetic genres or as textual transmission; rather, scholars also took interest in folkloric practices, in aspects of live performance, and in folklore as a manifestation of everyday life and expression of worldview. Folkloristics of the 21st century is even more open to study the variety and dynamics of cultural expressivity and interpret folklore within its social context and in connection with other forms of culture, including those that are authored and institutionally produced. “Vernacular” as a key word in the study of religion refers not only to its “lived” and “individual” dimension, but also to the ambiguity of people’s religion in its relationship with the hegemonic and the authoritarian, and to its creativity in contesting various manifestations of power (Primiano 1995, 2015). Folkloristic study of religion thus relies on fieldwork and ethnographic observances; it is not a top-down approach that proceeds from the institutionalised, prescribed and normative forms of religion. Rather, it focuses on the grassroots, covering both its individual and shared dimensions acknowledging the expressive multiplicity of religion, even though these live forms can be more difficult to grasp and analyse than scripturally formulated and philosophical truths.
The inter-disciplinary study of religion in Asia has increasingly expanded its spectrum of enquiry. Many scholars today analyse the kaleidoscopic realm of local traditions that are specific to a village or a lineage of transmission. They often work together with tradition-bearers and ritual experts, whose authority in the community is based on the knowledge of heterogeneous corpus of vernacular beliefs and ritual practices about deities, spirits and demons. Local classes of supernatural being have often been marginalised, sometimes even demonised by institutionalised religions, yet they are alive in daily life in Asia and engage with social and political changes in their respective local and national contexts. In addition, narratives about such beliefs transform, all the while evolving with the context wherein they emerge.

The Deities, Spirits and Demons in Vernacular Beliefs and Rituals in Asia conference gathers scholars from the disciplines of folklore, anthropology, religious studies, philology, cultural research and other fields of study related to Asia. In its call for papers the following topics were listed:

- Vernacular theories, beliefs and genres regarding deities, spirits and demons;
- Sacred and haunted places;
- Ritual experts and ritual practices dealing with deities, spirits and demons (exorcism, divination, geomancy, propitiation, etc.);
- Changing and emerging belief narratives in urban contexts in Asia;
- Relationships between the living and the dead;
- Vernacular terminology and the conceptualisation of the supernatural and magic.

In fact, the range of topics in the conference program and in the following abstracts is even wider, in addition to which the depth of the approaches and the overall academic quality of the papers that were offered exceeded all the expectations of the organisers. It is a great honour to host a conference with so many outstanding participants who represent the top-ranking scholarship in Asian religions.

The conference is organized by the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, in co-operation with the Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies, ‘L’Oriente’ University of Naples; Asian Centre, University of Tartu; Tartu Nefa Group, and the Estonian Society for the Study of Religions. It is support-
ed by the University of Tartu, the Estonian Research Council and the Estonian Academy of Sciences.

Organising committee of the conference

References:


Abstracts

Plenary Lectures

“Protect Us! Support Us! You Are Our Family Deity!”: Ritual Relationships with the Dead in Tamil South India

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Drawing on recent ethnographic fieldwork conducted in South India, this paper examines the on-going ritual relationships that many non-Brahmin Hindus maintain with their dead relatives. Specifically, it analyses a category of ritual undertaking to honour a family’s $pūvātaikkāri$, a term which literally means ‘a woman who wears flowers’ and refers to a class of women who died in an auspicious state and thus were eligible to be adorned with flowers. Within this category I focus on two main types of ritual performance: 1) the annual offerings made at a water source during which the dead woman is worshiped, dressed, and fed before being asked to safeguard the family in the coming year, and 2) the occasional invitation ($alaittal$) ceremonies that call the departed back into the world and convince them to take up residence in the family’s home shrine as a protective deity ($vītu teyvam$). These more elaborate rites rely on the skills of ritual musicians ($pampaikkārar$), who summon the dead and encourage them to speak through their living kin in what are often dramatic and tense
exchanges characterised by grief, recrimination, and regret. In closing I identify specific ritual and social possibilities that are created for those who engage in these ongoing transactions with the dead and argue that these possibilities ultimately hinge on the pūvātaikkāri’s willingness and ability to speak. Indeed, in the invitation rites, dialogue is fundamental to human–divine engagement, for the dead must descend on a human host and answer questions, dispense advice, and agree to consult with the family when called upon in the future in order for the ceremony to be deemed successful.

Amy L. Allocco (PhD, Emory University) is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Elon University (North Carolina, USA), where she directs the Multifaith Scholars program. She is the 2012 recipient of Elon’s College of Arts and Sciences Excellence in Teaching Award and previously held the University’s Distinguished Emerging Scholar professorship in Religious Studies. Her research focuses on vernacular Hinduism, especially ritual traditions, goddesses, and women’s religious practices in contemporary South India, where she has been studying and conducting fieldwork for two decades. Several of Allocco’s publications concentrate on Tamil snake goddess traditions and the repertoire of ritual therapies performed to mitigate nāga dōsam, a malignant horoscopic condition that causes delayed marriage and infertility. In 2013 she received The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion’s Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award for an article focused on the narrative strategies and ritual authority of a female Hindu healer. Along with Brian K. Pennington she co-edited a volume titled Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion, which will be forthcoming from SUNY Press this year. Allocco’s current project, Domesticating the Dead: Invitation and Installation Rituals in Tamil South India, is an ethnography of the on-going ritual relationships some Hindus maintain with their deceased kin. Within this repertoire she focuses on ceremonies to honour deceased relatives called pūvātaikkāri (‘the woman wearing flowers’), including both those performed annually to seek generalised blessings and occasional, elaborate invitation rituals in which ritual drummers summon the spirit, convince it to possess a human host, and beg it to ‘come home’ as a protective family deity. Allocco chairs the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) International Connections Committee and serves on the Steering Committee for the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) Women Scholars Network.
Demonic or Divine?
Ghaṇṭākārṇa in Sanskrit and Bengali Literature

Fabrizio M. Ferrari
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The paper will focus on Ghṛṭupūjā, a set of ritual practices performed by women to appease Ghaṇṭākārṇa ('Bell-Ears'), a deity popularly known in Bengal southern districts as Ghṛṭu, Ghāṭu or Ghṛṭudebatā. Sanskrit literature describes Ghaṇṭākārṇa variously. In Vaiṣṇava mythology (e.g. Harivamsa), Bell-Ears is a hungry piśāca who is liberated from his sins by Kṛṣṇa. In Śaiva narratives and in Tantric magical texts, he is listed as one of Śiva’s loyal ganaś, or a powerful guardian deity. Further to that, in Agnipurāṇa he is praised as destroyer of visphoṭaka, an umbrella term used in medical literature to indicate a number of skin diseases such as chickenpox, smallpox, leprosy, vitiligo, scrofula, itches, etc. This specialism is still dominant in Bengal, where Ghaṇṭākārṇa is celebrated as the husband of Śītalā (the North Indian pox goddess) and the one who protects children from itches and cutaneous diseases. In this form, he continues to enjoy popularity and is especially worshipped in women’s votive services (meyeder bratakathā) on Phālgun Saṁkrānti. The paper seeks to contribute to existing literature on representation of illness and ritual strategies in vernacular culture by means of an analysis of a little-known mythological figure at the crossroad between divine and demonic. The study relies on textual sources in Sanskrit and Bengali (including previously unexplored manuscript material) and data from several years of fieldwork in Bengal.

Fabrizio Ferrari is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Chester (UK). He graduated at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Italy) and was awarded a PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (UK). His teaching activity covers three general areas: (1) Indology; (2) Indian medical systems and healing traditions; and (3) Indo-European comparative mythology. His research and publications
focus on the interaction between Indian medicine and vernacular healing traditions. Professor Ferrari has researched extensively on medical and ritual approaches to contagion and disease deities, with particular attention to greater Bengal. His recent publications include Religion, Devotion and Medicine in North India. The Healing Power of Śītalā and a three-volume set (co-edited with Prof Thomas Dähnhardt) on nature and the environment in South Asian myths, rituals and folklore. He is currently working on Indian materia medica and folk deities associated with diseases and healing in Middle Bengali literature and Sanskrit Tantras from Bengal.
From ‘Greatest Leaders’ to ‘Gnomes’: 
The Decline of Tibetan Vampires and the Rituals for their Subjugation

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The vast population of praeternatural beings that populate the Tibetan cosmos includes a category of demon called *sri* (pronounced either *si* or *hri*). Later Buddhist works represent these creatures as minor demons that are bent on sabotaging the spiritual efforts of meditators. Sometimes translated as ‘gnomes’, the *sri* are identified as former human beings who have lived a succession of lives dedicated to harming the Buddhist doctrine. A more widespread view represents them as a class of predatory fiends, nine or thirteen in number that feed off the vitality of different categories of humans and livestock. Because of this trait, the term *sri* has also been translated as ‘vampire’.

Rituals for the destruction of vampires entail trapping their soul or consciousness in a skull (most commonly that of a dog) and burying it in a pit. As an indigenous Tibetan tradition with no apparent Indian Buddhist antecedents, the rite belongs to a category in which the performance is preceded by the narration of a myth that recounts the origin of the vampires and the paradigmatic occasion on which this subjugation ritual was performed in *illo tempore*. In the Buddhist variants the protagonists in the myth are depicted in black-and-white terms as unequivocally (and therefore uninterestingly) good or evil. In contrast, a version of the myth that appears in a vampire-subjugation ritual of the Tibetan Bon religion is disturbingly ambivalent with regard to the characters of the predators, their victims and even the figure of the hero.

This presentation will address the significance of these nuances, both in terms of what they tell us about the narrative structure of the myths – there are clues that they may be derived from dreams – and also the nature of vampires, who may originally have been life-giving divinities that later came to be demonised.
The talk will also address the problem of how rituals such as these can be presented in such a way as to capture and convey their complexity: in order to overcome the limitations of the written word and the medium of film, an interactive website, currently in the process of being developed, tackles the problem by means of links between the corresponding points in ethnographic descriptions of the rituals, translations of the ritual texts, and online video recordings of the performances.

Charles Ramble is Directeur d'études (Professor of Tibetan History and Philology) at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, a position he has held since 2009, and a member of East Asian Civilisations Research Centre (CRCAO, UMR 8155, Paris, France, http://www.crcao.fr/). From 2000 to 2010 he was the Lecturer in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at the University of Oxford, where he continues to hold a position as University Research Lecturer. His publications include The Navel of the Demoness: Tibetan Buddhism and Civil Religion in Highland Nepal (2008), and several volumes in a series entitled Tibetan Sources for a Social History of Mustang (2008, 2016, 2017). His research interests include Tibetan social history, the Bon religion, biographical writing, and Tibetan ritual literature and performance.
Change is a prominent and pervasive feature of life among the adivasi (indigenous, tribal) people of eastern Chhotadepur District, a recently created tribal-majority district in Gujarat. Often perceived locally as coming from the ‘mainstream’ or from the outside, change affects a wide range of social and cultural practices, material and intangible alike. Vernacular religious practices are no different. At the extreme, many people, locally called bhagats, have rejected traditional vernacular religious practices in favour of participation in one of several Hindu sampradayas. Others, known locally as jagats, nungras, and nagats, have resisted such a move and persisted in what are seen as traditional beliefs and rituals. Yet jagat vernacular practices are hardly static and impervious to the forces of change. This paper will explore some of the ways in which jagat vernacular practices concerned with deities and ancestors have been shifting over the last decade. Several significant forces have been at work; among them we might identify Hinduisation, marketisation, mediatisation, and education. The results of the operation of these forces include shifts in the devs and matas who are regularly invoked, alterations to the status and persona of the traditional ritual functionary (badvo), the alteration of the conduct and utilisation of vernacular healing practices, the introduction of literacy into what had been non-literate vernacular rituals, the commodification of the vernacular, and last but not least heritigisation of the vernacular, which threatens to formalise what had been rather fluid traditions. The paper will conclude with reflections on the best ways to theorise the processes that are occurring.
Nepalese folklore concentrating on the feminine figure of the Kichkannî is a composite and complex belief system that shares some elements with other fantastic beings widespread more broadly in Central and South Asia, especially in the Himalayan foothills. The Kichkannî – with her homologues the chuđel/chudail, the pichal peri (Northern Indian regions and Pakistan), the jakhāi/mukāi (Punjab province in Pakistan) or the navalāi (Mumbai) – is a wrathful ghost of a young woman who died during pregnancy or on the day of childbirth. She appears in the form of a pretty girl in a white sāri with her feet twisted backwards (cf. Thompson 1955–1958 Motif-Index: E422.1.6.1; F401.9. Spirit with feet turned the wrong way) in order to seduce youths at night and establish a sexual relationship with them (F304. Sexual relations with fairy; F471.2.1. Succubus: female incubus), sucking the blood from their bodies. The folklore about this supernatural ontology, between a feminine spirit of glittering beauty and a fairy blood-sucker, is still very much alive and recently undertook a process of (r)urbanisation in which the Kichkannî and her homologues became ghostly hitchhikers who haunt modern highways (E332.3.3.1. The Vanishing Hitchhiker). We will explore such Himalayan experience-centred narrative heritage in the framework of a neurocognitive anthropological model (developed since Abry 2011; cf. Cathiard & Armand 2014, Armand et al. 2016) that allows a bridging of the gap between folklore studies of the supernatural and cognitive neuroscience. Thus, we will discover that Kichkannî and her succubus-like companions are generated in the disassociated state of the brain identified as sleep paralysis. This perspective will allow us to move the boundaries of classical approaches about such fantastic ontologies by considering that these ‘phantoms’ that haunt human
imaginaries are clearly neurally real phantom-bodies, with their cortical maps, like the phantom-limbs of the amputee, and their neural plasticity for different cultural adaptations.

References:
In Tamil Nadu, as in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, seeing an astrologer is a normal, regular, often mandatory procedure. Among the Tamil specialists of divination, the Vaḷḷuvar astrologers occupy a special place. Though long regarded as an untouchable caste in the local socio-religious hierarchy, they nevertheless have the reputation of being the best astrologers in the region and are consulted by people from all castes. But the Vaḷḷuvar astrologers are not only soothsayers interpreting the language of the stars. Like other religious specialists of low status elsewhere in India, they also intervene at different levels of the treatment of illness and misfortune. Indeed, by prescribing certain types of cure to those who consult them, whom they send to other specialists, Vaḷḷuvar astrologers are nodal points of networks of complex interactions that shape the local therapeutic system. Moreover, they are often among these specialists (physician, priest, mantiravāti, etc.) and frequently take charge of all or part of the treatment they prescribe to their patients.

In words or deeds, during astrological diagnosis or during ceremonial prescriptions, Vaḷḷuvar astrologers evoke and summon different powers supposed to be able to influence the destiny of their consultants. These powers are of different kinds. First are the nine planetary divinities of the Indian astrological system – in Tamil, the navakkiṟakam; then Murukaṉ, son of the Pan Indian ‘great god’ Śiva and the major divine figure of the Tamil Hindus; finally, the Goddess in her local form of village deity. However, these powers do not appear in the same way in words and in acts of the astrologers, and their ability to alter human destinies varies according to certain factors related to the divinatory context as well as to the situation of the consultant.

In this paper, I show how these different powers manifest and interact both in the discourse and in the ritual action of astrologers, in order to reveal the place occupied by the navakkiṟakam – the nine planets of the astrological system – in the invisible hierarchy that structures the local pantheon.
Monsters, Ghosts and Demons in Himalayan Folklore: An Ethnographic Survey

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This paper proposes a reflection on the theme of fear in relation to the sacred and its ontology among some indigenous cultures of the Himalaya. Amazing tales related to mysterious places, monsters, ghosts and wraiths seem to create a local folklore fully conversing with a constant and atavistic need that man has to wonder, to thrill, to perceive that subtle sense of pleasure that fear gives when it is experienced outside of a real situation of danger. Nevertheless, it is understood that these representations constitute a sort of removal in relation to more concrete fears, to real risks. This theory is based primarily on the concept of liminality (and the unknown that it entails), which, even for the Himalayan populations, can be considered exogenous or endogenous. In the first instance, this has to do with periods of change, such as modernity and the relationship with otherness. In the latter, the idea of fear is rooted in the rites of passage, initiation and transformation of the individual. In a perspective of comparative folklore, the paper will highlight some case studies among some Scheduled Tribes of the Indian slopes, with particular reference to the founding myths, cosmic cycles, initiation rituals and peculiar aspects of the religious shamanic tradition shared in this area.
When Stars Turn into Demons: The Practice of Medical Astrology in West Bengal

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One of the common meanings of the word *graha* in Sanskrit is planet, because, according to astrological sources, planets grip or hold people in their power. Thus the influence of the planets resembles possession by *bālagrahās* in the Āyurveda medial tradition. The influence from the planets is invasive, pervasive, and motivated from without. In my presentation I will deal with contemporary astromedical practices of some astrologers in Kolkata by displaying their different approaches and remedies, used today to deal with such planetary possessions. Particular kinds of disease-creating demonic and divine being are said to be powerful on particular lunar days; they then catch men of the wrong behaviour on these days causing the exogenous insanity. Various mental disorders (*unmād*), as influenced by evil spirits, chronic illness, bad health, etc., are regarded as consequences of astrological forces (*adrṣṭa, daiva*) determined by the patient’s horoscope, and as caused by the ripening of the fruits of actions performed in previous incarnations (*karmavipāk*). An important point is that the astrological positions of stars and constellations, treated as specific medical omens, are supposed to be not only of indicative, but also of causative, value. Individuals who are ‘afflicted’ or ‘possessed’ by stars, require medical means (oblations, fasting, prayers, donations, recitations of sacred texts, invocations to the Hindu deity ruling that particular afflicted planet) or expiatory procedures such as *grahaśānti* – ‘pacification of the planet’ – recommended in astrological treatises and often resembling those employed in cases of possession as described in medical sources.
It is well known that a rich variety of spirits, demonic and godly beings appear in Tibet. Probably the best-known category of such beings appear in the Buddhist classification of the so-called ‘eight classes of gods and demons’ (lha srin sde brgyad). However, the beings that fall within this category are listed differently. Some of them are apparently of Indic origin, while some could be autochthonous (such as Dmu, The’u rang, Btsan, etc.). This paper will focus on the little known beings Tö (Gtod), which might be good candidates for indigenous Tibetan beings. The main source of information will be the hitherto unstudied Bon scripture the Tö Collection (Gtod ’bum). These beings are associated with rocks and described as beings that cause earthquakes. Moreover, they probably do not represent pan-Tibetan beliefs but seem to stem from the traditions of the eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau.
In Namchi district in southern Sikkim there is a village named Gumpa Gurpishey, which is home to Nga Dag monastery. To the south of the monastery lies the Kongso lha gang, a place where rituals are carried out, a place steeped in legends about its deity, rGyal po sku Inga. The monastery has historical origins that are accompanied and reinforced by oral narratives that relate the shifting of the deity from Samye Monastery in Tibet in 1982. Further, these deities have a controversial relationship with the historical figure Princess Pende Ongmo and her murder by the 3rd King of Sikkim, Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal. These narratives play a crucial role in shaping present practices, rituals and beliefs in the deity, rGyal po sku Inga (lit. ‘king with five heads’).

During my fieldwork interviews in February and March 2017, my interlocutors were careful about what they told me about Kongso lha gang and denied me permission to make video recordings of the interviews and of the monastery. Painted on the walls of the Kong so lha gang are beautiful but unusual images of human skeletons, of human entrails wrapped around the heads of animals such as a tiger (and lion and some non-human entities), and inside the entrance there are glorious images of deities, which were painted on the outside as well.

I collected narratives that exemplify the ambivalent nature of the relationship that the villagers have with the deity of Kongso lha gang. Villagers propitiate and placate this deity rGyal po sku Inga with emotions associated with fear. As one informant told me, “I offer because I am scared”. Further, my interlocutors also mentioned to me that women in the village believe that the deities of the lha gang protect them, but that if they marry outside Namchi region they always come back: either their husbands die in mysterious circumstances or the couple comes back to settle there permanently.
In this presentation, I discuss the legends of the *rGyal po sku lnga* and the controversy surrounding the place. I attempt to look at how new deities come into being and are projected into the belief worlds of the community and enacted in everyday life.
When the Dead Linger in Our Senses: Sensory Experiences and the Presence of the Dead in Garhwal, Uttarakhand

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Based on ethnographic evidence relating to the region of Garhwal (Uttarakhand), this talk examines the ways in which perceptual and sensory disorders felt by individuals might end up being attributed to the presence and action of the dead. We will show how, within the context where they occur, these disorders open a space in which different voices and positions can express themselves in order to negotiate and attempt to implement different strategies relating to management of the problem. The end result of this negotiation process is neither predetermined nor entirely free. Rather, it is argued that such a process may be considered as a dialogical relation between practices and structures. To understand this process consideration must be given simultaneously to actors’ practices; the social structures in which such possibilities for practices are set, in particular power relationships, incorporated aptitudes, and cultural representations; and situational factors such as contingencies and intersubjectivity.
Exploring Narratives of Spirit-caused Illness within a Contemporary Tibetan Community

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In the Tibetan context, spirits and deities may be involved in health and illness in numerous and often diverse ways. Described in the twelfth-century Tibetan medical text the *rGyud bzhi*, spirits that cause conditions such as madness and memory loss are often referenced in contemporary illness narratives. Spirits and deities are understood to cause illness or misfortune for humans either intentionally or inadvertently, and the resulting problems can range from skin rashes to psychosis. Treatments for such afflictions may include herbal medical preparations and monastic and/or tantric ritual practices. However, the increasing spread of western scientific theory and availability of biomedical practice is influencing practitioners’ and patients’ views on the place of spirits, often leading to questions about how these explanatory frameworks might – or might not – fit together in the contemporary world.

This paper, based on ethnographic research conducted in Darjeeling, North East India, explores understandings of spirits and their role in health and illness within a contemporary Tibetan exile community, where traditional perspectives come up against biomedical theories and practices. Here, patients and practitioners may disagree over explanatory frameworks, and individuals may question traditional narratives of causation and treatment. In this context, some patients easily utilise diverse theories and treatment practices in their health-seeking behaviour, whilst for others, such diversities can lead to conflict and/or confusion, with patients and their families unsure of a way forward in terms of management and treatment of illness.
“When you move, the Pixel moves along”. This is an old Danish saying emphasizing that you can move away neither from the Spirits and Demons nor the Deities, they move with you. That is to say, you can’t escape them.

This is more or less also the case among the Mauritian Hindus, who still draw distinctions among themselves depending on their second language (Hindi, Maharathi, Tamil and Telegu), which also indicates some kind of different ethnic and cultural belonging to India. The groups also have different cultural associations and religious organisations as well as temples, but at the same time they have also a common shared belonging to Mauritius and to a specific Mauritian Hinduism with its specific sacred geography of haunted places and temples. As will be shown in this paper, especially places and temples can deal with possession and demons. This paper will focus on two temples, a tantric Kālī temple and a Tamil kōyil dedicated to Tookay, a linguistic transformation of the name Dūrga. While many Mauritian Hindus have a mixed relationship with the Kālī temple, where bloody sacrifices are conducted, they don’t have the same feelings toward the Tookay temple, which abolished blood sacrifices around ten years ago. With these two temples as the pivot this paper will give examples of different ways of dealing with spirits and demons in Mauritius and give examples of how both of the approaches to demons and spirits has evolved on the Island, as has the way to treat or communicate with them.
“God Will Slowly Go away from Here”: Vernacular Beliefs, Nostalgia and the Expanding Pilgrimage to the Kāmākhyā Temple (Assam)

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According to the priests of the Kāmākhyā Temple and their older pilgrims, in the past, many great sādhus (ascetics) visited the Temple in order to embark on arduous meditative practices. My interlocutors affirm that, today, dedicated sādhus can no longer go to the Kāmākhyā Temple because their meditation would be disturbed by the growing number of pilgrims. As a sādhu put it, “God will slowly go away from here”.

Sensing the economic potential of North East India, the Indian Central Government is strongly promoting pilgrimage and tourism to this region, with a special focus on the Kāmākhyā Temple. Pilgrims’ evolving attitudes and expectations not only incite the initiatives of dynamic priests, but also contribute to transforming the landscape of the village that surrounds the Temple: old houses made of mud and wood are replaced by concrete buildings in order to set up guest houses and restaurants.

In contrast, a staunch sādhu needs an isolated place to carry out his demanding practices. His spiritual efforts, in turn, contribute to charging that place with divine power. Thus, if sādhus are no longer able to meditate in the Kāmākhyā Temple, the power of the Goddess will be inevitably diluted. The emotion emerging from the words of pilgrims and priests is nostalgia for something that will, sooner or later, be lost.

Based on extensive fieldwork research, the present paper explores the way in which vernacular beliefs about the ancient Temple of Goddess Kāmākhyā respond to the dramatic expansion of the pilgrimage industry. The ascetic/laic opposition, ubiquitous in the Hindu worldview, will be evoked in order to highlight how subjective perceptions of the pilgrimage to the Kāmākhyā Temple evolve according to the changing political and socio-economic frame.
“The Bones of Our Mother”:
Adivasis, Forests and Coal Mining in India

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In recent years, Adivasis in Chattisgarh’s Surguja district have been actively resisting the encroachment of their lands and forests by coal mining corporations. Such developments have subsumed forest dwellers’ rights to the necessities and profits of power generation and frequently caused major displacement and the loss of land and livelihoods. This presentation examines the appropriation of Adivasi lands, first by colonial rulers in India in the 19th century and then by postcolonial governments, and discusses how a particular community of Adivasis in Surguja recuperated lost and translocated deities to fight the imminent takeover of their land. The presentation analyses their resistance and resilience in an aggressively extractive environment through an active retrieval of a sacred past buried in the forests.
This paper examines how belief narratives venerating the ancestors, *Dao thờ tổ tiên* in Vietnamese society inspire daily activities. There is not sufficient ethnographic material that explores the processes that make belief in the sacred a powerful tool in the constitution of social subjects. During my stay in Hanoi, Vietnam, I was struck by the invocations between this world of the living and ‘the other world’, *gioikhac*, of the dead for divine protection, guidance and blessings inscribed through daily rituals of consecration by Vietnamese of all religious persuasions to their ancestors. They are necessary ablutions, blessings integral to the life cycle of all individuals. Ancestor worship is venerated by all Vietnamese be they Christian or from other communities: it is indispensable to achieve salvation, the Buddhist belief in an afterlife. Ancestor worship is integral to personhood, identity, and social etiquette. The priests at the temple at Hoan Kiem Lake echoed sentiments that often entered conversations here: “without paying obeisance to one’s roots, life had no meaning.” As I heard repeatedly during my work in Hanoi, and also in the Haolong bay area: “It is our ancestors who nourish our worlds, purify our minds and direct our actions; quite simply put it is ‘Vietnamese land’, *at Viet*. The souls, *H’on*, of our ancestors are a living presence who needs to be taken care of, fed and listened to. If we neglect to care for them, malevolent spirits will takeover, demons and ghosts will haunt the land, our bloodlines will be terminated and we will perish.” This paper will discuss these diverse ritual inscriptions as intangible cultural heritage, the corporeality of Vietnamese culture on the moral and ethical fibre of society.
The Conception of the Tree of Si through the Narratives and Rituals of the Muong in Northern Vietnam

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To date the Muong (a minority group of about 1.3 million people in Northern Vietnam) continue to maintain their traditional animist beliefs and shamanic practices. They worship ancestral spirits, various deities as well as spirits of some inanimate objects; their shamans are thought to be able to communicate with other worlds. This paper considers the Muong conception of the tree of Si, which appears to be a sacred and highly honoured natural object among the Muong.

The tree of Si (Ficus benjamina) as it is represented in Muong narratives and rituals should be considered a kind of Tree of Life which gave birth to a number of very important things and creatures in the three-level Universe; it is also considered a receptacle of human souls. The tale narrating the miraculous emergence, unusual growth and subsequent destruction of the tree is performed during the traditional mourning ritual. The aim of this performance is to convey the soul of the deceased to the world of the ancestors. In addition, the Muong believe that the soul is connected with a symbolic Si tree planted in the sky. When Si trees are lush and green people who connect with them are strong and healthy, but when the trees lose their leaves and dry out, people become ill and die. There is a special ritual termed ‘pulling the Si’ (Lễ kéo Si), which is performed to strengthen the vital forces of the elderly, sick or weak people. This ritual seems to be closely akin to ‘soul pulling’ or ‘soul retrieval’ rituals found in some other shamanic traditions.

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Apart from the powerful male gods in Indian religious traditions – such as Vishnu or Shiva – multiple local goddesses exist in India (see Kinsley 1985, Michaels et al. 1994, Fischer et al. 2005). They are called Devī (goddess) or also Mā (mother). It is considered that the devī or mā alone create and destroy the world and the cosmos. She is omnipotent and associated with the idea of shakti, an Indian theory of religious power (see Wadley 1975, Tambs-Lyche 2004). This power concept is of an ambivalent character, a goddess who has a creative and destructive power at the same time. She can kill and she can create. The cults of the goddess are especially powerful and important for believers in rural regions of India. However, within urban sacred places the worship of the goddess also has an important impact on the lives of her believers. Through pilgrimage (see Bakker, Entwistle 1983), for instance, religious mobility and personal devotion removes differences between people from rural or urban contexts.

The paper will discuss popular vernacular goddesses of Odisha and will address their frightening, as well as regenerative, powers.

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Saru Gami Demons and Yama’i no Kami
Deities are Still Out There! Stories of
Monkey Demons and Deadly Disease Deities
in the Japanese Folk Culture Tradition

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The underlying themes of folklore, vernacular beliefs, and rituals, despite their familiarity and popularity, remain so elusive that we can hardly understand what our ancestors may have wished to impart to us by handing them down for future generations. However, no matter how ludicrous and far from the reality of our contemporary lives they seem to be, they were indeed deeply rooted in the striking experiences of unexplainable phenomena that once influenced our ancestors in such a way that they became accepted as a part of their daily lives. Thus, a careful analysis of these elements helps us to better understand what our ancestors verbalised and visualised to iconise their blurry images of reality in the form of both corporeal and incorporeal entities that reside at the centrality of folklore, vernacular beliefs, and rituals.

In line with the above reasoning, this paper analyses the folkloric figures of (1) saru gami (猿神), the monkey demonic deity, and (2) yama’i no kami (疫神), the deadly demonic disease deity, in order to investigate how the pre-modern Japanese people attempted to explain the unknown, inexplicable, and sometimes horrible situations of their daily existences through the fantasised existence of corporeal and incorporeal entities. The presence of saru gami demonstrates the Japanese way of demonising and also deifying unknown perpetrators of crimes against untraceable forever vanishing girls, and the yama’i no kami similarly act as unexplainable causes of deadly, incurable disease in the shape of hōsōshin (疱瘡神), the smallpox deadly disease deity and korori (虎狼狸), cholera demonic creatures. Today, the conceptualisation (i.e., verbalisation, visualisation, and iconisation) of these then-unaccountable phenomena seem far-fetched and rather ludicrous, but these conceptualised demonic deities, feared to be roaming freely and interfering with human habitation, were considered to be serious threats to communities, greatly affecting the daily lives of the inhabitants as part of their present-day reality.
Weathering the Storm: 
Environmental Catastrophes and Divine Wrath in a Bengali Bardic Tradition

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Weather is an important concern for people living in fragile eco-zones where environmental danger can occur at a moment’s notice. It is thus not surprising that many small communities of Hindus coexisting with Muslims and indigenous populations in India share a distinct ‘ecological ethnicity’ that allows them to make collective sense of their existential predicament, regardless of religious orientation, by resorting to the concept of divine intervention, according to which nothing happens by chance alone. In my paper I explore this observation by using a case study from Medinipur District, West Bengal, where a caste of semi-itinerant scroll painters called Patuas reside. The Patuas, also known as Chitrakars, not only paint, they also sing narrative songs about the themes of their paintings. Their repertoires have changed with the progress of time, so that today they sing more and more about contemporary sociological and environmental issues than they do about the traditional ‘mythological’ ones. However, the border between ‘myth’ and ‘history’ is quite permeable, which allows the Patuas to explain the causes of natural disasters by resorting to mythological exegesis, accusing various deities and demons of bringing about calamity. I refer to this phenomenon as ‘divine wrath’, the punishment imposed upon human beings for erring during the current ‘dark age’ in which we live.
The *sku-bla*, ‘soul’ of Tibetan Emperors (7th-9th century CE) and its Subsequent Metamorphosis

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During the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th century CE) an important cult was that of the *kula* (*sku bla*), the ‘soul’ of the Emperor, a deity to which vassals made regular offerings. With the consolidation of Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century and the fragmentation of the Tibetan Empire in the 9th century, the cult of the *kula* disappeared, to be substituted by multiple cults of local deities known as *yülha* (*yul lha*). These cults continue today.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, two parallel historical narratives emerged in Tibet, one extolling the introduction of Buddhism under the Emperors, the other deploring it. The latter narrative emerged from a tradition, known as Bön, that claimed to continue the pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet. In a text containing what is probably the first fully developed version of the Bön historical narrative, which will be presented in this paper, the function *kula* is referred to, but the deity is given a different name, *gurlha* (*mgur lha*). Possible reasons for this change will be discussed, and its wider implications in the context of religious change and re-structuring taken into consideration.
Emancipation of Mortals to Protective Divinities in Mutanchi Narratives: Negotiating Ownership of Tradition, Gender, and Identity Struggle in Sikkim

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During one of my field visits, an interviewee once told me, “The people from the village never begin any function without first offering prayers to Anyu Pandi, it is our tradition.” He said it with such conviction, that I felt intrigued. As the narration progressed, I realised that Anyu Pandi was nobody extraordinary (initially), just a resident of the village, the youngest of eight siblings who was murdered by them as they were envious of her wealth. What she became later was an individual who commanded the reverence of the villagers owing to the feats she supposedly performed despite her horrible end. Anyu Pandi is now their local protector. On examining the entire narrative closely, two ideas emerged. First, the story seemed to relate directly to vernacular traditional practices; secondly, it appeared to function as a social commentary of the time, from addressing the treatment of women in the community to their promotion, following a struggle. Ultimately the story is one of incidents that highlight the idea of divine justice among indigenous people.

There are numerous narratives circulated among the Mutanchis (who are indigenous to Sikkim, India). Phantasmagorical in appearance, they seem to evoke a sense of devotion from the locals/audience. Gauging the functional attributes of these narratives, one can sense the intricacies of indigenous belief systems. In this paper, I plan to discuss some of these parochial narratives, which evince components of vernacular religious practices while continuously evolving as a living tradition. Examining them closely, I hope to elucidate on their functional nuances since they appear instrumental in perpetuating notions of identity, gender, and social struggle.

The paper largely relies on fieldwork data collected since 2013.
Sprinkle, Offer and Pray: Daily Rituals in Mongolian Everyday Life

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In the traditional definitions of ritual in folkloristics, an important group of practices – routine daily rituals – isn’t taken into account. By daily rituals, I mean repetitive everyday actions aimed at communication with characters and objects from the other world, or at protection from them. The main characteristics of these rituals are that they easily lose their semantics or even pragmatics, they are often unemotional, performers cannot explain them, and the rituals do not evoke any self-reflection.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between such rituals and etiquette rules, which are studied by anthropologists in detail. However, it is in my opinion fruitful to analyse them not as part of etiquette or as daily routine only, but as a special type of ritual practice. It seems important to analyse the way performers understand and interpret identical or similar actions in daily routine, on the one hand, and on the other, when these actions are included in non-everyday rituals. By placing daily ritual actions in the context with other rituals (and counterposing them) we will be able to see the relations between the understanding of an action, its semiotic status, its pragmatics, and the type of ritual.

In the report, I will analyse such actions as sprinkling milk or alcohol over the fire and to the Big Dipper (Долоон Бурхан), food offerings to the fire spirit (Галын эзэн), ritual perambulation, prayers, etc., in the context of everyday life and in special rituals. Becoming part of extended ritual complexes these asemantic actions start to be understood and interpreted in a new and completely different way.

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Previously, Jhare, a specialised form of ritual in the Northern Khasi Hills, seemed to have been part of vernacular community practice until the coming of Christianity to Ri Bhoi in the late 19th century. In contemporary Ri Bhoi, Jhare has diminished into an esoteric practice, known only to a few practitioners. Christianity has further pushed this practice to the edges of social acceptance through the active processes of demonisation and, consequently, marginalisation. However, within the peripheries of belief, acceptance and othering processes, Jhare continues to command a powerful position. In this context, the demonisation of Jhare means that it is feared, and its practitioners (Jha) are reputed and attributed to be powerful.

Multiple divinities are the source of control and authority in Jhare. One of the most important of them is Klingmekar. In one origin account of Klingmekar, she is the originator of the ritual. In another, she eats human foetuses from the womb. My interlocutors from the villages in Ri Bhoi orally describe Klingmekar as three women with a single name, described as having red eyes and who, at night, can separate her head and send it to other places to do her will. She is mainly an ambivalent entity to those who can ‘command’ her. In Jhare, she is the most dangerous goddess and eats people while they are still alive.

Among the Karbi, Klengmekar are three women known by a single name. Klengmekar belongs to the goddess category and is narrated to have aided the Karbi people during the painful process of migration. In Karbi oral history, Klengmekar inhabits a hill named Inglongmekar, near Barsorong village, where still today an annual festival commemorates their (Klengmekar’s) significance in Karbi belief.

This presentation will attempt to look at region-specific manifestations of Klingmekar/Klengmekar within Jhare and among Karbi. I will try to as-
certain how knowledge of her existence is reduced to the frames of ritual and selective knowledge. Believed to consume humans in both the Karbi and Khasi tradition, Klengmekar/Klingmekar continues to exist in the narrated and lived experiences of these communities. Among the Khasi, within the context of Christianity, although the processes of demonisation have enabled the preservation of Jhare by ascribing it the role of the ‘demonic other’, knowledge of this indigenous goddess is contained within the secret, magical repertoire of the *Jha*. Among the Karbi who inhabit the mainland Karbi Anglong, knowledge of Klengmekar is rare. This leads me to the hypothesis that perhaps she has never been popularly known. And knowledge of her propitiation and worship is localised in certain border villages of the Khasi Hills. This paper will draw on primary fieldwork carried out over the course of the last seven years.
Spirits of the Earth (*Tudi shen*) in Everyday Life of Modern Macau (China)

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*Tudi shen* 土地神 (God of the Earth) or *Tudi gong* 土地公 (Lord of the Earth) is a Chinese deity, patron of an area, who protects and provides well-being to the inhabitants of a certain territory (town, village, district, street, house). Information about worshipping him can be found in the texts of Tang period (624) and his cult flourished later during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Today he is not so popular in Modern mainland China, although he still plays a significant role in the everyday life of common people of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. During our expedition to Macau (November 2016) we collected a lot of material about different places of worship (district temples, street shrines, houses and temples of other gods), ways of worship, and other protective spirits whose figures or altars are usually built with the altar of *Tudi shen* or whose sculptures or tables are put on the altar of *Tudi shen*. According to Chinese traditional belief a good and lucky life is impossible without prosperity and wealth. It is the reason why the God of prosperity (Cai shen) is so popular everywhere in China, and one the functions of the *Tudi shen* is also to provide the people of the place with money. This function is reflected in the name ‘*Tudi shen of the entrance‘ (*Menkou Tudi shen*), who is also called the God of wealth (*Menkou Tudi caishen*). Although Macau is a small region, there are certain differences between *Tudi shen* worship in different parts.
“The Mighty Old Man Who Never Existed”:
Motif of a Ritual, Interrupted by
Supernatural Creatures in the Folktales and
Legends of the Buryats and Mongols

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The presentation will be based mainly on Mongolian and Buryat texts, as well as on Russian translations of the tale-type Lö (MMT) 198 Die Helden-
taten des Alten, der nie existierte [‘The exploits of an old man, who never existed’] (Lörincz 1979: 111). It includes a description of the lawsuit between an old man and the Chief of Gods, won by the old man. This story can be compared with the cult of the demon tal hun (‘half-of-a-man’), who is often scourged for his improper behaviour (he is harmful to people) by real humans. The cult existed locally in the Gobi desert and was described by Vladimir Kazakevitch’s (1896–1937) report to the Mongolian Scientific Committee in 1924 (Nosov 2014: 216–217). The presentation will proclaim that local daemons and general deities of the Mongolian-speaking world were all obeying laws and life rules, similar to the way ordinary people had to.

References:
In many societies, birth and death rituals are intertwined. However, while death rituals are broadly dealt with in anthropological literature (e.g. Hertz 1960, Bloch and Parry 1982), the rituals connected with birth have been documented scarcely. In Highland Odisha, birth and death is accompanied by complex rituals. Based on fieldwork from numerous years in the Highlands of Odisha and accompanying the pregnancy and delivery of several women, the paper describes the negotiations between the worlds of gods and humans for the gift of a human life.

Birth rituals aim to establish the newborn as a member of society. In the course of life, a person attains full personhood through various wedding (biba) rituals. The final ritual for the deceased is called the ‘last wedding’ (ses biba). After death, rituals are carried out to obtain another incarnation in society. A short glimpse at ritual objects used at birth and ritual objects used after death demonstrates ideas of the ritual cycle: one of the first ritual objects a new born comes in contact with is a winnowing fan. It is filled with uncooked rice on which the child is placed, after which the child is offered from the threshold of the house to the community and finally given ritually to its mother, who officially accepts her motherhood. One of the last rituals for a dead person is the placing of a winnowing fan by a cross cousin, filled with cooked rice, at the crossroads of the cremation ground outside the village. The paper analyses social relations between men and gods concentrating on ideas of kinship connected to birth and death.
In the western half of the Indian state of Uttarakhand, the Hindus of the Himalayan region of Garhwal worship a class of distinctive, semi-divine being called *devtas*. Characterised by a set of properties that parallel pan-Hindu conceptions of deity, the Garhwali *devtas* nevertheless stand apart from the other localised forms of transhuman in India, in part because they are often, but not consistently, identified as the elevated spirits of historical personages. The quasi-euhemerist origins of the *devta* is probably the characteristic least elaborated in the scholarly literature on Garhwal as well as the feature least clearly articulated in the theological discourse of Garhwalis themselves. *Devtas* are often described as the post-mortem forms of previously human figures – in living, oral, or mythical memory – who, by virtue of heroic deeds while living or by virtue of their having been ritually propitiated and diverted from the path to troublesome ghost (*bhūt/pret*), become *devtas*. Some figures called and treated as *devtas* are also known in Puranic mythology; others are described as creatures who once participated in *samsāra* but have since been elevated beyond it. Their unstable ontology renders them fit for a range of rhetorical and sociopolitical roles, from protectors and avengers of the underclass (Sax 2009), to partisan actors in local administrative affairs (Jassal 2016), to heritagised agents of alternative modernities (Polit 2010), to overseers of the juridical (Malik 2016). Based on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2016 in Garhwal, this paper will analyse the ambivalent ontological status of the *devta* that secures its intimate relationship to the lives and experiences of the living on the one hand while availing it of a divine agency that enables its worldly intercessions on the other. This ontological instability authorises a range of sociopolitical functions and renders the *devta* not a pre-modern holdover but a malleable device for negotiating the modern in Garhwal.
References:
Burying Gold, Digging the Past:
The Ma Bufang Regime and Contemporary Tibetan-Hui Ethnic Tension in Amdo (PRC)

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This paper will explore the conflation of local memories and the elaboration of contemporary ethnic tensions in Hualong Hui Autonomous County in Amdo (Qinghai province, PRC) between Hui Muslims and Tibetans from the standpoint of a Tibetan ritual.

The administrative centre of Hualong is located in a fertile plain where relatively wealthy Hui Muslims are dedicated to agriculture and small business, whereas semi-nomadic Tibetans are dispersed in the surrounding mountainous barren area, exposed to the disastrous floods of a tributary of the Yellow River. This spatial distribution reproduces an ethnic divide that was established last century during the traumatic rule (1938-1949) of the Hui Muslim military governor Ma Bufang.

Fear of the roaming souls of his soldiers, who died during a flood after having extracted gold from the local mountain caves, became inscribed in the local Tibetan landscape. In 2014 floods and hailstorms in the area awoke anxiety that the *sa bdag* (spirits of the land), depredated of their precious resources, were taking revenge on Tibetans who failed to adequately protect them from the Hui Muslim raids. Therefore, a *ngakpa* (ritual expert) from the local Nyingma monastery performed a geomantic analysis that revealed the need to re-empower the land by burying gold. Such ritual practice is widespread in the Tibetan cultural milieu although it traditionally displays certain patterns that in this case were completely overturned.

Based on this case study, the paper aims to analyse the entanglement of the contemporary dynamics of social change and ethnic tension in the region of Amdo and the cultural strategies of dealing with the surviving fear of an uncomfortable past.
The Deities’ Uprising and the Invisible God: Shamanism and Christianity among the Chepang (Nepal)

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The paper aims to discuss the Chepang perception of the dramatic increase in Christian proselytism and how this is believed to affect not only the community, but also cosmic balance itself.

The figure of Jesus Christ, a god that Chepang shamans (pande) are unable to see during their ecstatic journeys, and the dissemination of a foreign religion based on written texts, are challenging the human as well as other-than-human spheres.

Christian missionaries became particularly active in Nepal, offering relief and humanitarian aid to communities affected by the earthquakes that hit the country in 2015. According to pandes’ witnesses, because of the numerous conversions local deities and demons living in the three cosmic zones feel betrayed and abandoned, and together with the angry ghosts of people who died during the earthquake are now particularly dangerous to the Chepang community and the same existence of the human world.

In shamans’ narratives visibility and invisibility, oral tradition and written text, local and global dimensions, safety and danger are juxtaposed, revealing a battle for power and recognition at a divine as well as a human level.
Korean indigenous beliefs have often been unsuitably categorised as ‘primitive’ or ‘folk’ religion. According to the theoretical model for the study of religions that was developed in the European context in Korea we find a strong tendency to classify different religious practices under the heading shamanism. However, Korean indigenous beliefs are the expression of vernacular religion, which refers to the individualised, spontaneously created religious systems existing outside the institutionalised and official religions. It is difficult to observe the on-going process of interference of vernacular religion in contemporary Korea, but it becomes much easier to spot the process in the Protestant church, which is therefore one of the preferred fields of research on Korean shamanism.

In this paper I want to suggest a new way to observe the process from a different angle. The deification process of political characters like Park Junghee and Park Geunhye displays in fact some typical attributes of Korean shamanism as a vernacular religion, such as; 1) the admiration of extreme excitement and charisma, 2) the concern with preserving appropriate relations with the gods, 3) transmission of tradition, and 4) endowing deified characters with individualised, personalised and artificial dispositions.
Dasara, often seen as the most important ritual of kingship in India, has received a fair share of scholarly attention, while Cheitra Parba, a significant spring festival in Odisha with arguably equally crucial links between deities, rulers and communities, has received less interest. The paper, based on long-term field research in the region, looks at this complex ritual cycle in the former princely state of Bonai. Here the Goddess Basuli leaves her temple for nine consecutive nights to take a bath in the River Brahmani before being worshipped, for example through the Patua dance, which can be interpreted as a symbolic human sacrifice, and being entertained especially with mask dances (Chhou), considered an Adivasi tradition, all of this taking place in front of the palace. Culminating with Pana Sankranti when the Raja publicly sits on his throne, Cheitra Parba, it is argued, forms an intrinsic part of a local sacrificial polity that connects a range of communities, especially Kansari, Hansi, etc., with the Raja and deities. While sharing many ritual elements with Dasara, it nevertheless differs in terms of connecting other communities and deities with the ruler and thus supplements the local Dasara tradition.
Assailing the Demon’s Fortress:  
Hierarchy and Opposition in  
Bon Rope Divination

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Despite the growing number of specialist studies on the subject of Tibetan divination practices, a variety of divinatory techniques, including divination by ropes, rice, salt, and fingernails, as well as the interpretation of dreams and forms of Tibetan physiognomy remain almost entirely unknown to Western academic literature. Building upon research recently conducted at the International Consortium for the Humanities (IKGF), in this paper, I will address the largely unstudied mythology and funicular terminology of ju thig, a form of rope divination unique to the Tibetan Bon tradition. The majority of my remarks will be drawn from two sources: (1) a corpus of divination texts known as the Zhang zhung ju thig, which would probably have been assembled in the mid- to late 19th century at g.Yung drung gling, a Central Tibetan Bon monastery; and (2) a commentary on ju thig written by the 19th century intersectarian scholar ‘Jam mgon mi pham rgya mtsho.

Leaving aside the potential historical value of these sources, Bon rope divination manuscripts are valuable for one particular reason. That is that the Zhang zhung ju thig serves as a kind of root-text for divination and astrology in the Bon tradition, containing exegeses of a number of cosmogenic themes, myths, regional deities, and obscure ritual practices that permeate throughout a great deal of both Bon and broader intersectarian ritual literature. The fact that ju thig has not previously been the subject of philological or historical bibliographic scrutiny forms a considerable lacuna in our understanding of divination practices, as well as our ability to construct credible aparatus critici in the literary sub-genera of Tibetan divination.
Deities and Demons on Mongolian Roads

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My report looks upon beliefs and practices connected with a road space in contemporary Mongolia. Often roads are recognised as a special space, full of unexpected happenings and dangers for human beings in different cultures.

In my report I’ll introduce a number of popular beliefs connected with a road space in Mongolia, reflected both in narratives and ritual practices, as well as the main characters (deities, spirits and demons) and topics involved in Mongolian road mythology.

Among them, deities supporting people when travelling, nature spirits gathering for meetings and kindly hosting a tired traveller for a night, demonic lights which tease people from a distance but can never be caught, demonic hitchhikers, wild demonesses stealing lonely travellers from the road, and so on. I will also introduce contemporary ritual practices performed with the propose of protecting a person leaving for a trip, or neutralising demonic influence and bringing good luck on the journey, as well as examining proscribed or forbidden behaviour while travelling.

Apart from presenting some examples from living Mongolian tradition I will discuss a few models which my interviewees use (explicitly or implicitly) to explain this special perception of roads as ‘ways of spirits’, ‘demonic roads’, ‘restless places’, and others.

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The village of Melemchi lies in the upper north of Helambu Valley (Nepal), just before the high passes crossing into the Langtang region. Here, the Hyolmo people cultivate the land and herd *zomo*. The area is of special significance for the inhabitants of the valley, since it hosts several sacred places related to the Buddhist saint and demon-tamer Padmasambhava. Peculiar geomorphic rock formations are believed to be the result of his battles with indigenous deities reluctant to embrace Buddhism. These stories are part of the rich repertoire of local folklore, shared by *lamas* and *bombo* (shamans) religious specialists. In addition, the surrounding forests and ridges are said to be inhabited by a host of non-human entities, collectively known as the *ri mi* (people of the wilderness). The aim of this paper is to give an overview of these entities, related folklore and stories allegedly regarding their interaction with the local people. All the data presented here were collected during fieldwork in 2014–2015, just before the earthquake that devastated this area and neighbouring regions, including the Kathmandu Valley.
The Power to Confront Demons in the Context of Naxi Culture: The Role of the Dongba and his Paraphernalia

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The Naxi are a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group today counting a population of approximately 350,000, most of whom inhabit a well-defined region extending along the border between north eastern Yunnan and south western Sichuan provinces (P.R.C.). They have a complex system of traditional religious practices, including shamanic rituals, mainly performed by a ritual specialist called the dongba. He is the only one in the community who is able to write and read the ritual manuscripts chanted during the ceremonies – compiled in the only pictographic script still in use today; the dongba is also the one who has the power and the authority to confront demons.

The aim of the proposed paper is to offer a description of the role of the dongba within the Naxi community, with particular reference to his ability to deal with illness and healing. In order to do that, I will consider ‘illness’ in terms of a cultural category built by the Naxi, showing how Naxi illness does not reside only in the physical body but also in the social and cosmological relationships which are interwoven in the body. I will then analyse the paraphernalia the dongba makes use of while performing rituals and their origin according to the ritual manuscript “The Disciples of the Dongba searching for the Divine Power”. I will finally take into account those evil entities that more often appear in the ritual manuscripts as aetiological agents, illustrating the relevant pictographs and their basic features.
Epistemological Uncertainty and Narrative Variation: On Supernatural Encounters in Assam

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There is a remarkable difference between formalised belief systems on the one hand (both in religious and scholarly discourses) and beliefs as they appear in the plenitude of vernacular expressions. Whereas in booklore mythic and legendry realities tend to take fixed or even reified forms, live vernacular traditions are open to creativity and variation. The latter also means controversies and discrepancies in (re)producing knowledge even though the intention of the tradition participants could be to tell the truth in each single case. The supernatural (Assamese alokik) appears as a realm of debates, discussions and deliberations where the boundaries between the known and the unknown remain vague.

The paper discusses some cases of traditional storytelling that address supernatural experiences and their vernacular interpretations in 21st-century Assam. In several cases people have described mysterious auditory and visual phenomena that give evidence of the supernatural powers. For example, they see lights in the dark jungle or hear scary, even ominous sounds of drumming at night in shrines where no human devotees are present. In other cases people share traditional narratives about supernatural encounters with demonic creatures biras or bhūts, whereas the venue, time and names of the participants in the event can vary.

The world of the supernatural that is evoked through the variation of the legendry is controversial and unfinalised. It can be interpreted as an ontologically ambiguous and liminal state between factuality and fiction, between existence and non-existence. However, this realm of epistemological uncertainty, doubt and suspense is disturbingly real as it includes social and tangible worlds and often needs ritual precautions to control it.
The Life and Death of Spirit Objects: Nenets Reindeer Herders’ Relations with the *Khekhe* in Arctic Russia

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The paper explores how Nenets reindeer herders use their sacred objects known as *khekhe* and interpret the objects’ life cycle. Every Nenets nomadic family in Arctic Russia has some *khekhe*, which are seen as part-persons being tightly linked to their spirit masters and forming extended personhood networks. The figures, which are often anthropomorphic and are usually inherited to the next generation, have a beginning and an end in time, as humans do. The sacra originates from a sacred site (*khekhe ya*), from a shaman (*tadibe*) or they are found in unusual places or circumstances. They are fed with blood and vodka during sacrificial reindeer slaughter. Sometimes a *khekhe* that is no longer needed (for example there is no one to inherit it) is returned to the sacred site or burnt. Whether they cease to exist or leave for another mode of existence when destroyed is widely discussed. Other times they are sold or left behind. These particular choices may cause considerable anxiety among Nenets and are a source of the stories about the loss of reindeer or the death of the keepers of *khekhe*. When strangers such as missionaries, travellers, party activists, archaeologists, ethnographers or others have been involved in the removal of the sacra, the issue of responsibility becomes particularly acute.
Xiahe Tibetan Autonomous County is located in Gansu Province in northwestern China. It is a cultural and religious melting pot that intersects with Tibetan culture from the south, Muslim culture from the west, Han culture from the east and Mongolian culture from the north. This paper investigates multi-religious beliefs in Xiahe county through fieldwork in the Taoist Guandi Temple and the January Buddha Butter Sculpture Assembly. Chinese Guandi beliefs often function as blossoming wealth and fortune, hence the temple has become an intersection where three religions interact. Han people practise their Taoist beliefs here. Muslims who are doing businesses also worship at this temple in secret. Tibetans burn aromatic plants (iconic worshiping rite in Tibetan Buddhism) here and practise some Taoist rituals. During the January Buddha Butter Sculpture Assembly, Tibetans and Han people all gather together at night and wait for a couple of hours in line to visit and worship the butter sculptures. Corresponding to specific segments of the line, people alternately switch their behavioural and mental states from sanguine carnival to tranquil devotion. Using the theory of the rite of passage, the bipolar emotional states of people in the Assembly (secular/sanguine carnival – divine/tranquil devotion) explicitly reveal the philosophy of life and integration of the Xiahe people. Moreover, in order to easily explore local people’s religious lives, I categorise the people of the modern Xiahe/Labrang region into five groups: Han, Hui (Muslims), urban Tibetans, farming Tibetans, and nomad Tibetans based on the classification of Robert B. Erkvall, an early 20th century missionary.
Notes
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