

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

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## Abstract

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

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

## Introduction

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

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

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the regional versions, manifestations and articulations of this belief.<sup>1</sup> However, the primary formal feature of possessions of this nature (i.e. by water non-humans) is their connection with water and water bodies. The water spirit in the Khyntiam / Khyrim Khasi language<sup>2</sup> is called *puri*. *Puri* are usually female entities who ensnare men (*ngat puri* meaning “to be caught or ensnared by a *puri*”), although women also get possessed. In the administrative district of East Khasi Hills, *puri* are mostly considered to be feminine entities. They possess great beauty, have long black hair, and seduce men who like to go fishing. Possession by *puri* manifests as socially supported, “peculiar” behaviour. For instance, a man who has been seduced by *puri* frequents the body of water at odd times, like midnight, talking unintelligibly, until he might finally drown. In Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Northern Khasi Hills, *puri* are narrated differently, their functions pointing towards their ambivalent status in the community.

This article will present variations of *puri* possession<sup>3</sup> that have been collected from various regions of the Khasi Hills where the phenomenon of human encounters with water non-humans became a focus topic for my interlocutors. I attempt to look at narratives about possession as genre-based resources<sup>4</sup> that dialogically reference articulations about the human and non-human belief worlds of the Khasi community. Fear as a responsive mechanism underlines the human / non-human relationship and that with the natural world. My research is based on primary fieldwork data carried out over the course of the last seven years. As a Khasi native, my position represents an emic perspective. I present here four narratives – one description and three case studies – that express *puri* possession and folklore about it. These were told to me by Khasi persons from three different administrative districts of the Khasi hills. The variations among the texts will be interpreted in order to show the social, religious and cultural frameworks and how changes within the society are reflected through the genre peculiarities within the different texts. Narrated experiences of *puri* possession, with the language / verbal expressions used as a primary resource, help to communicate and actualise the results of the narrative performance. Such experiences are formulated in order to succeed in communicating specific goals, such as the enforcement of fear of

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

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

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

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

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

But before I present and discuss the narratives on *puri* possessions, I would like to reflect upon how genre, as a resource or an orienting framework, interacts relationally with other genres. Thus, how is belief expressed experientially? In the present context, how do individuals use language to express and emphasise their perspectives and how do these expressed genres illustrate relationality with the non-human world? This dialogic relationship between human and non-humans enables the communication of multiple meanings conveyed by narratives of the supernatural in the Khasi cultural context. Originating from literary theory, genre in folkloristics has come to denominate classificatory ways of looking at texts. Ulla Savolainen and Frog talk of genres as a “term for approaching categories of cultural expression realised in ‘texts’” (Frog / Savolainen 2016: 47). These “texts” include traditional genres such as legend, myth and memorate<sup>6</sup> and expand to include micro-genres, the smallest unit, in which cognitive processes organise the form a narrative takes upon articulation. This then represents an organising principle by which genre has now become a function within a system of references where “texts” respond and interact dialogically with other “texts”. In folklore texts, genres are hierarchically organised, with some genres assuming more significance than others. For example, the legend told as true has more influence than the folktale with its higher “entertainment” value. The communicative aspect of genre views it as “an orienting framework for the production and interpretation of discourse” (Bauman 1999: 84). The narratives / beliefs<sup>7</sup> of water spirit possession which I analyse in this article are first person accounts, genre resources which have great authority to shape social behaviour and influence responses to non-human others.

## The water spirits in Khasi religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Water spirit possession as presented in three oral narratives

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

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

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

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

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

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

ML: How did he feel?

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

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

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

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

18 “She” here refers to the water spirit.

25 December 2015, Christmas Day, the Bishop went to pray for him. Meideng's son physically assaulted the Bishop. The family then commissioned a mass. Meideng related to me that when the demoniac<sup>19</sup> heard his name being called during the service, he became violent and began telling the family that the water spirit was calling to him. Meideng recalled the sense of helplessness and hopelessness she experienced. One time he kept saying to his mother that he wanted to go to the bathroom, because where there is water there is the *puri*. Another time, Meideng narrated that the *ksuid* said to her son: "Wherever you go, they observe you, they don't allow you to come to me. Let's go to the toilet, we will express our love [there]". He went to the toilet, and there was a loud metallic clang. They rushed to him and found him there unconscious. The toilet was broken. They took him to the hospital; he was bleeding and unconscious. He would always ask: "Mother, do you see her? She is standing there and calling me, do you see her?"

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

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

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

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

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

ML: But why not traditional ritual performers?

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

James Steward was 19 when he died in 2002.

19 A person possessed by an evil spirit.

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

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

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

## Case Study<sup>21</sup> II (East Khasi Hills) – Riti and her family

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On 13 November 2015, I phoned a Khasi friend who had come across a small pamphlet in the Khasi language, entitled *Haba Thoh Shun Ki Blei* (“When One is Marked by the Gods”) and knowing my interest in Khasi folklore, had informed me of this. It turned out that the author, a woman named Sincerity Phanbuh, was a resident of a neighbouring locality. I sent my friend a list of questions and requested him to meet with Sincerity. She agreed to let me use her story for the purposes of my research. The following excerpt from the interview has been transcribed and translated as a result of the recording that was made during this conversation between my Khasi friend (Q) and Kong<sup>24</sup> Sincerity.

SP: My name is Sincerity Phanbuh and I live in Mawlai Nongpdeng. This incident happened in my life. And about this incident I have written in the book I named *Haba Thoh Shun Ki Blei*. This is not something that is imagined or a *puriskam*, a tale told by the elders that I am telling you. But this happening is true. [...] What I can tell you now is only a little of what happened. In this world of ours, I truly tell you there are other entities, deities, who care for us, look after us and hold [to comfort] us. This incident happened to me when I was still young about 19 or 20. As young girls we were very enthusiastic about washing clothes and we were often scolded because we liked to wash clothes more than we liked to study.<sup>25</sup> ... I didn't like to go to wash clothes but I was always drawn, pulled to the River Umshing. So one day I went, maybe I got an illness<sup>26</sup> from that place. [...] So I went to get medical help. We are Christians ... Presbyterian. The medicines did not help and there were many people who said that I should ask for divinations.<sup>27</sup> So I went to a ritual performer, who tried to heal me but it didn't work. At the time we were facing many difficulties, since our father had died and due to financial constraints, I was not able to get the help I needed. At the time we were surviving on our father's pension. My studies were also affected. Time went by and I slowly began to realise that I had something that was different, something that marked me. Then I began to tell this to other people and I began to *kren ramia*.<sup>28</sup> People began to say that I was mad.<sup>29</sup> After that, I began to “heal” people and people began to get well with my healing abilities. I was a healer until I got employment and I could not keep up the two professions and so I gave it up, but even now, if I have to, sometimes, I heal people. I am able to heal people who are afflicted with *bib*,<sup>30</sup> *thlen*,<sup>31</sup>

24 A respectful way of referring to a lady.

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

26 Similar to epilepsy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: Do you still have this ability?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Frames of interpretation: Fear, Christianity, and indigenous narratives

Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, had an urban population of 143,229 in 2011.<sup>41</sup> In the greater framework of Northeast India, Shillong is the centre for education because of the well-known institutions run by missionaries. Therefore, people from other parts of the Northeast travel to Shillong, which results in the population becoming multicultural and more cosmopolitan. The outcome of this conflation of ethnicities results in a sense of uncertainty in the modern, urban environment. Christianity has now almost completely replaced the traditional Khasi religion, but Khasi folk practices have undergone “discursive shifts”.<sup>42</sup> Belief is now expressed not through traditional frames but from Christianised interpretations and worldviews. Such shifts reveal the tendency of members of the Khasi society to maintain the hierarchies within the in-group.

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

41 Census of India, 2011.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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