

Of fear and fright: Reminiscences from the Bangladesh Sundarbans in Colonel Ershad's time

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As an anthropologist, I seldom had occasion to be afraid in the field. It is here that my experience of the Bangladesh Sundarbans, in the early eighties, stand out: At that time and place, fear was a constant and fundamental element of existence for people around me. I shall describe a situation where violence and deprivation – mainly due to what might be described as the 'political situation' – the balance of power and violence combined with famine for the deprived every spring – produced a permanent and very real sense of insecurity. This existential condition did not exclude moments of fright, where particular elements by which that fear was constituted suddenly combined, threatening to realize the object of fear – death or destruction.

I distinguish, then, fear from fright: they are not the same. Also, I believe, we must distinguish the frights that result from otherwise enjoyable and voluntarily chosen activities such as a dangerous sport (not to speak of the 'pseudo-frights' of a horror movie), from those that stand forth as involuntary crisis moments of living with fear –as described here but also, perhaps, those associated with dangerous occupations and ways of life, such as underground mining or deep-water fishing, to name only these. Fright of the latter kind is peculiarly characterized by being, so to speak, the sudden realization of what we already knew only too well.

When ghosts are married in Tulunadu

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In Tulunadu those who meet a violent death fighting for a just cause, may become bhutas. Here, death is a kind of apotheosis where those who fought against injustice become divine figures after death, receiving a cult in a shrine. Quite different is the story of those who simply found a violent death and could not even get married. They return as pretas and their kin, who suffer from their absence, but fear them and try to appease them by all available means. The paradox, as we shall see from different preta stories, is that, when pretas manifest themselves their unwanted presence is frightening, while their very absence is experienced as grief. This creates a kind of double bind, which they try to resolve by celebrating the marriage of ghosts, to enable their siblings to marry. This marriage induces the families of bride and bridegroom to join in their grief, while trying to appease the young ghosts who torment them. This ritual, often held secretly, was documented by a photographer from the fisherman caste who had himself experienced similar fear when his brother-

in-law, still a bachelor, committed suicide. While taking photos of the mourners dressed for the marriage, the photographer felt that members of both families were unable to contain their sorrow. My paper reflects on the fear he experienced, wondering if the ritual could really appease the kin. The photos of the ghost marriage strike us because they represent an impossible situation, viewed by the photographer (and the anthropologist) as a ritual which does not really attain its goal.

How to cope with fright and fear among Hindus in Mauritius

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In the Hindu traditions you will find fear (bhay) and fright (dar) everywhere and these are in many ways center of daily practices as well as mythologies, worldviews and life-views. In this paper I will with Hindus in Mauritius as an example try to argue that fear and fright are not the same but can be understood as two different but interrelated categories.

On the one hand you will find fear for the evil eye, for spirits, demons, restless souls and also Black magic (this might be inspired by the African Creoles) - all these examples can be understood as external factors that can have a negative affect on a person, the household or a society as such. Luckily they can also be prevented. For instances by holy threads, amulets, mantras, yantras, talismans and by protecting deities as Hanuman, Bhairava or Kali but mostly if the dharmic rules, the right ritual conduct, different purity precepts, and what is done in relation to astrology are followed.

In that way I find a fright for not living up to what can be understood as ortopraxis because right conduct can be seen as the main sources for protecting against the frightening malevolence external powers.

In other words: the main argument in this paper is, that the fearing external powers can be prevented interfering by following right ritual and ethical conduct. There for you find a fright for not living up to what is expected being a Hindu. This though is clearly under negotiation in the Mauritian context – a country that in many ways has undergone great changes within the last 10-15 years. I will show how right conduct has been rationalized and concentrated to a few festivals.

Conversion as the domestication of fear – an Example of Mahima Dharma in Eastern India

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The paper argues that conversion and spread of Mahima Dharma, a new ascetic religion in coastal Hindu peasant and tribal hinterland Odisha, is related to dynamics of the domestication of fear from traditional non-empirical entities and especially the local goddesses.

The rise of an ascetic ethic is seen here – in Max Webers' terms – as social change and rationalisation process. In the last decades, proselytizing ascetics spread the new religion among the indigenous population of eastern India, where the percentage of the new Mahima Dharma converts is now assessed to be about ten percent of the local population. However, in a tribal context professional ascetics are rare, appearing once a year to initiate new devotees. The new teachings have become ever more popular due to the vocal rituals of ecstatic female shamans, who are the local ritual specialists of the new religion.

A twofold character of the religion could be depicted: male ascetics represented the institutionalization and centralization processes of the religion, mostly marked by the importance of the scripture. In tribal context the ecstatic vocal rituals of female shamans expressed the autonomy of the local oral culture. The analysis of the oral material of the shamans' poetic songs portrayed the autonomy and creativity of oral cultures, which through vocal expressions cope with a changing world. While taming the local powers of the local goddesses and spirits through ascetic practices, I showed how conceptual transformations can be mapped over time and how asceticism played a part in transforming theology from a local goddess to a more universal conceptualization of deity, called sunya. Through my extensive field work I was able to show transformations in the structure of religion and ritual practice, finding that transformations occur more rapidly when literacy increases as well as the availability of written material in general. I thus could follow the process of an accelerating transformation of religious practice towards a more 'canonized doctrine'. I also could discern cultural continuities in a cultural codex of orality where religious rituals and ecstatic scéances serve as a form of communicating a traditional cosmological order.

Who is scarier: 'the frightening' in Mongolian demonology

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My report looks upon perceptions of 'the frightening' in Mongolian contemporary demonology. It touches beliefs concerning the both sides – what is supposed to be frightening for humans and what is supposed to be frightening for spirits and demons. Mutual 'frightening' can be regarded as an important part of the communication with the supernatural. Within the report I'll try to show what is believed to be frightful for people from the side of the supernatural world and what forms of representation these fears can have. In Mongolian tradition fright has its faces belonging to different

supernatural beings, special conditions and situations which are abundant in everyday life. On the other hand, there is a large number of possibilities, presented in narratives and apotropaic magic, to scare demonic creatures as well.

My research is based on both oral and written resources. The oral tradition is represented by a number of interviews collected during my fieldwork in Mongolia (2007-2016). The written sources include collections of ghost stories written down by cultural bearers; special publications devoted to encounters with ghosts and demons, ghost stories in Mongolian newspapers and journals; the Internet (special sites, blogs and web-based communities devoted to the supernatural and collections of this type of ghost tales).

How to make sense of supernatural encounters? Notes on Assamese demonology

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Assamese Demonology (1905), a book by scholar and writer Benudhar Rajkhowa (1872–1955) offers a survey of spirits in Assamese folk religion. In 1973 the folklore research department of Gauhati University published its second edition with a preface by professor Praphulladatta Goswami who associates spirits with “unsophisticated rural mind” and with a world of ideas, which is “almost past and never to come back”. He discusses spirits within psychological framework as expressions of fears. As we know now, modernisation as a worldwide process has changed societies but it has not put an end to beliefs in spirits, demons and magic, and the related practices – that once seemed too irrational to survive the scientific and technological progress. We need to look for new ways, how to study and interpret these beliefs as persistent elements of culture.

Whereas in early 20th century Rajkhowa presented a systematic classification of spirits, the Assamese demonology today appears as a far less harmonious set of ideas, narratives, behaviour rules and memories. The paper reflects upon some personal experience stories about demonic entities such as *birās* and *bhūts*, and magic. Demonic encounters in Assam cannot be explained away as mere narrative motifs because of their real psychological and physical consequences. However, it seems simplistic to discuss narratives of supernatural encounters merely as verbal reflections of “real” events and overlook their functional, social and poetic dimensions. Belief narratives affiliate single life episodes to broader fields of meaning, to shared genres and tie them to the tradition-bound world of knowledge. They evoke a myriad of associations with other narratives, memories, behaviour patterns and values. The more we know about the social and cultural environment of stories, the more meaningful they become. The paper offers a contextual interpretation of a few belief narratives about demonic encounters from contemporary Assam.

Belief and Fear: a Study on the Natural Challenges of Majuli Island

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Majuli is an island in the state of Assam (India), mid-stream of the river Brahmaputra. The island is bounded by the river Subansiri (tributary of the Brahmaputra) on the North West, the Kherkatia Suti (a spill channel of the Brahmaputra) in the north east and the main Brahmaputra river on the south and the south west. Tributaries usually bring flashy floods with heavy load of clayey sediments. The island has very steep slopes, shallow braided shifting channels and sandy riverbank. Majuli used to be the largest river island in Asia, but the Brahmaputra has eaten more than half of it over the last 100 years. With land disappearing, there is progressive loss of the traditional means of livelihood of its people, leading to their displacement. Inhabitants are suffering badly in consequence of severe bank erosion which has caused serious damage to the residential blocks, crop fields, grazing land, open areas and to *sattras* – the monastery-like *Neo-Vaishnava* institutions that have a long history on the island. During the frightening time of the erosion, inhabitants offer their prayers to the Brahmaputra river to stop rapid destruction. Sometimes mass prayer takes place when erosion increases to a high level. As an isolated river island Majuli is a peaceful and non-polluted place. However, it is always a question for some people whether development should take place in Majuli like in other places? In this paper my aim is to discuss the concerns and anxieties of the inhabitants of the island and the ways, how they cope with these challenges. Their problems of being isolated from the mainland area and the recent situations on development issues will also be analyzed.

“Fear Death by Water”: Possession and Place within the Khasi Perspective

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Inhabiting the Khasi Hills within the Meghalaya State in Northeastern India, the Khasis are an ethnic community caught between continuity and change which is greatly offset through the urban–rural divide. The traditional institutions of the matriliney, political administration and indigenous belief at present exist in context with new Christianities, the Indian governmental machinery and the heavy westernisation which was introduced with the colonial masters.

Within the highly transformational framework of processes existing in contemporary Khasi society, I may point to the idea of cultural sustainability where folklore and belief survive cultural transitions and persist, albeit in new expressive forms. In this presentation, I

make an attempt to utilise the case study of the Khasi belief in the non human entities who reside in water and water bodies, in order to examine the relationship between possession, place and fear in the site specific contexts of my field areas of study in the Khasi Hills.

Puri, or water entities, are mostly feminine who seduce men into madness, possession and death. Across the Khasi Hills, there are many variations of this entity and dependent on the area of origin, their function and nature varies.

Drawing on five years of fieldwork, this presentation aims at presenting three case studies which are expressive of the fear of water, the social context of the community and the tragic consequences of transgressing the boundaries between the enchanted liminality of the water body and the human reality. Healing of persons affected by *puri*, has now been taken over by Catholic priests who are themselves “possessed” divinely by the spirit of God during healing. Fear, as the operative emotion, presents the Khasi unwillingness to engage with the non human water realm and elucidates upon constructions of the demonic other, in the person of the *puri um*.

The supernatural landscape and the fear of upsetting the deities in North Sikkim

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The Indian state of Sikkim, situated in the North-eastern Himalayan belt, is thought to be distinct from ‘Mainland’ India in terms of culture, ethnicity and religion. The majority of its population are Nepalese Hindu and the Lepcha and Bhutia communities, who follow a syncretized mixture of nature-worshipping and Buddhism. My ethnographic focus here is on the Bhutia (*Ihopo*) community.

Despite manifold social changes, the Bhutia community maintains its close-connected patron-client relationship with *dzhib-dag* (*Protective deities and Guardian deities as well as the owner of the land and household*). These *dzhib-dag*’s role in the life of the people are manifold including the believed causes behind misfortunes, prosperity, health and sickness, marriages, good-bad harvests, and so on. The *Ihopo* (Bhutia) village of Tingchim is one among many others in Sikkim where when a person falls sick it is immediately assumed that the person is punished for offending these *dzhib-dag*. These deities reside in the streams, lake, rocks, trees, plants, flowers, fruits, water source, rice fields, cardamom fields, attics and any other surrounding where villagers interact for their daily needs with the natural environment. My prime focus will be on the vernacular etiologies and the cause-effect of the deities into the field of diseases and sickness.

First I sketch a geography of these different deities, according to the households and other places they are believed to reside. Here I will also briefly discuss their roles in the everyday lives and practices of the Tingchim villagers. In the second section, I focus on the fear villagers have about upsetting these guardian deities and the consequences that may follow from angering a deity. I will illustrate this with the help of belief narratives and case studies I aim to collect during my fieldwork in Feb-march. The third section, finally, focuses on the ways and rituals in which deities can be propitiated by the villagers and the relationship of patronage be brought back into balance.

An ontology of fear among the indigenous communities of Himalayas

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This paper proposes a reflection on the theme of fear among some indigenous cultures of the Himalayas. 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) that 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 shamanic religion shared in this area.

Growing up with ghosts. Healing rituals for a new adolescence.

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In the North Indian region of Garhwal, many young girls between the age of puberty and marriage are nowadays “subjects requiring healing”. Considered to be victims of harmful possession by ghosts, these girls must undergo healing rituals which can be likened to exorcisms. While taking account of recent changes affecting adolescence in India, this talk draws on and discusses anthropological theories of female possession and healing rituals to highlight how exorcisms of girls in Garhwal constitute, first and foremost, ways of producing gendered subjects and bodies.

“A very naughty place!” - Frightening visions of Assam and the Kāmākhya Temple.

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Reports about the threatening magic skills of Assamese women were often heard during fieldwork. Assamese women would trap the stranger man, transform him into a goat and turn him back into a man at night. Unable (or unwilling) to leave, the man would become the sex-toy of his mistress. Fear is the emotion many Hindus used to feel (and still feel) about remote and obscure Assam, the dangerous land of weird tantric practices. However, the Kāmākhya Temple of Guwahati is considered by many Hindus to be the major of the 51 *pīṭhas* (seats) of the Goddess. The Temple enshrines what is considered to be the *yonī* (vulva) of Goddess Satī and is thus strongly connected to feminine sexuality. The Kāmākhya Temple appears in many vernacular genres as the ultimate source of occult power, for those who are prepared to cope with such an awe-inspiring energy.

Though apparently contrasting, these two sets of discourses are not inconsistent with each other. They are both congruent with the danger/power association, typical of Tantrism. Because they awaken tremendous divine powers through the use of impure substances and practices (including extra-marital sex), tantric rituals are hazardous for the one who embark in this venture.

Through Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances, this paper aims to detect common themes in the ample oral/written literature on the Kāmākhya Temple and Assam, by connecting it to concepts recurrent in Hinduism, such as *śakti* (feminine creative/destructive divine power). Based on extensive fieldwork, this paper combines the analysis of the diverse interpretations people give of this ancient shrine with the study of emotions and the study of vernacular genres.

Blood, Stress, and Fears: Polycystic Ovary Syndrome and Metamedical Commentary on Globalizing India

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Abstract: In India, menstruation is important to indigenous frameworks of health, which deem regularity in bodily cycles to be signs of well-being. These frameworks situate the body as responsive to its environment, such that environmental disturbances affect the body negatively and afflicted bodies contribute to degeneration in the physical, social, and political environments. In the struggle to establish referential worlds in the midst of fast-paced change, which India has been experiencing since the beginning of economic liberalization in 1991, menstruation is therefore an obvious focus. In this paper, I explore public discourses about PCOS and examine the concerns regarding

sociocultural, environmental, and political–economic changes after economic liberalization that these discourses index. Such discourses provide insights for the political ecology of health in the midst of globalization and a critique of patterns of living and relationships between the body and its environment that are seen as characteristically modern.

Frightening pictures? Notes on death and its photographability in India

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Photographs of the dead, especially private photos of family members who passed away, were once upon a time, in late 19th and early 20th century a flourishing genre in Europe and America alike, but nowadays their presence often leads to a sense of awkwardness or of feeling uncomfortable. They are often seen as scary, frightening or spooky and are at times outright tabooed and hidden rather than displayed publicly. At the same time we are more than ever surrounded by photos of corpses – photographs from war fields around the world are transmitted in an ever increasing speed though the dead are often de-individualised by their pixelating faces in order to avoid hurting sentiments or preserving the dignity of victims.

Taking these photographic traditions in our culture as a loose backdrop the paper looks at post-mortem photography in eastern India, especially in Odisha, which is contrasted with a similar tradition in Varanasi – a city commonly associated with death among Hindus. While corpses are photographed in both contexts there are also significant regional differences and ambivalences surrounding the visibility of death. The paper asks who takes such photos when, how, why and for whom? It is argued that one encounters a complex situation in India in which post-mortem photographs are taken and circulate – arguably more frequently than ever -, but may also stand in conflict with other notions of such as privacy and fright.