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A Giant Snake and a Goddess of Wealth:
Experiences of Sorcery and Healing in Northeast India

Par
Émilie Parent

Département d'anthropologie, Faculté des arts et sciences

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Présentée par Émilie Parent

a été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

John Leavitt
Président-rapporteur

Deirdre Meintel
Directrice de recherche

Karine Bates
Membre du jury

Chiara Letizia
Examinatrice externe

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Abstract

In this thesis, I study the practices of witchcraft among the Khasi, a tribal people of northeast India. The Khasi form most of the population of the state of Meghalaya. Following British colonization, they mainly converted to Christianity. However, despite adopting a modern lifestyle and the major socio-cultural changes it has brought, discourse on witchcraft still prevails today. According to the Khasi, witchcraft practices are widespread, and several curses continue to affect the population. In order to fight this scourge, traditional healing is frequently sought by the Khasi. From their point of view, proof of the existence of witchcraft can be found in the physical symptoms experienced by the victims and the mysterious deaths of many people. To better understand reality of witchcraft for the Khasi, I use the theoretical and methodological approach of the ontological shift in anthropology, because it sheds new light on the study of witchcraft. Indeed, throughout the history of anthropology, researchers have sought to make sense of the complex set of practices that is witchcraft. They have explained it as part of the rationality of "primitive" peoples, or as a reaction to social woes. The ontological turn offers a new way of understanding witchcraft and its reality. In this thesis, I draw upon the work of Strathern, Descola, and Viveiros De Castro, among others, to show how witchcraft can be constructed as a reality for both anthropologists and the people they study. I seek to answer several questions: what is witchcraft for the inhabitants of Meghalaya? How do they conceptualize it? How is this conception of witchcraft defined and redefined in a contemporary world? And finally, what should be my position as an anthropologist in regard to witchcraft?

To answer these questions, I first explore the socio-political history of the Khasi, presenting a survey of the significant events in recent regional history, before highlighting the cultural particularities of the group. I then demonstrate how the healing landscape of Meghalaya is varied. I divide these practices according to the religion of the healers: tribal, Hindu, Christian and Muslim, and give an overview of their respective approach to witchcraft. I then focus on the ecosystem of evil in Meghalaya, explaining and detailing the major curses affecting the Khasi and their neighbours. I present the therapeutic quest of a family that had suffered many losses and sought out healers of different faiths and ethnicities. Considering this analysis, I define witchcraft and healing as it appears in the Khasi ontological world and show how they emerge from the construction of personhood among the Khasi, and from the relationship they have with non-human entities. The Khasi build an ontological world where it is possible to be cursed by evil entities and to be healed by gods and goddesses. This reality is constructed and validated by both healers and their patients. For the most part, they share a common understanding of the world and of what is real.

Key words: Khasi, North-East India, witchcraft, healing, ontology, ontological turn, anthropology

Résumé

Dans cette thèse, j'étudie les pratiques de sorcellerie et de guérison chez les Khasi, une communauté tribale du nord-est de l'Inde. Ceux-ci forment la majorité de la population de l'état du Meghalaya. À la suite de la colonisation britannique, ils se sont principalement convertis au Christianisme. Cependant, malgré leur adoption d'un mode de vie ancrée dans la modernité et les changements socioculturels subséquents, les discours sur la sorcellerie prévalent encore aujourd'hui. Selon les Khasi, les pratiques de sorcellerie sont encore très répandues et plusieurs malédictions continuent d'affecter la population. Afin de lutter contre ce fléau, la guérison traditionnelle est fréquemment recherchée. Pour les Khasi, la preuve de l'existence de la sorcellerie se trouve dans les symptômes physiques ressentis par les victimes et par les morts mystérieuses qui se succèdent. Afin de mieux comprendre la réalité de la sorcellerie chez les Khasi, j'utilise l'approche théorique et méthodologique du tournant ontologique en anthropologie. Elle permet de jeter une lumière nouvelle sur l'étude de la sorcellerie. En effet, tout au long de l'histoire de l'anthropologie, les chercheurs ont voulu donner un sens à l'ensemble complexe de croyances et de pratiques qu'est la sorcellerie. Ils l'ont surtout expliqué comme faisant partie de la rationalité des peuples «primitifs», ou en réaction à des bouleversements sociaux. Le tournant ontologique apporte une nouvelle manière de comprendre la sorcellerie et sa réalité. Dans cette thèse, je m'appuie sur les travaux de Strathern, Descola et Viveiros De Castro, entre autres, pour montrer comment la sorcellerie peut être construite comme une réalité pour les anthropologues et les personnes qu'ils étudient. Je cherche à répondre à plusieurs questions : qu'est-ce que la sorcellerie pour les habitants du Meghalaya ? Comment la conceptualisent-ils ? Et quelle devrait être ma position d'anthropologue en matière de sorcellerie ? J'explore d'abord l'histoire sociopolitique des Khasi. Je présente un survol des événements marquants de l'histoire régionale récente, avant de souligner les particularités culturelles du groupe. Je démontre ensuite comment le paysage de guérison de Meghalaya est varié : on y retrouve des guérisseurs de religion tribale, hindoue, chrétienne et musulmane. Je donne un aperçu de leur approche respective de la sorcellerie. Je me concentre ensuite sur l'écosystème du mal à Meghalaya, expliquant et détaillant les principales malédictions affectant les Khasi et leurs voisins. Je présente la quête thérapeutique d'une famille qui a souffert de nombreuses pertes et tragédies et qui a cherché de l'aide auprès de guérisseurs de diverses confessions et ethnicités. À la suite de cette analyse, je définis la sorcellerie et la guérison selon le monde ontologique Khasi. Ces définitions émergent de la construction de la personne chez les Khasi et de la relation qu'ils entretiennent avec des entités non humaines. Dans leur monde ontologique, il est possible d'être maudit par des entités maléfiques et de guérir grâce aux dieux et déesses. Cette réalité est construite et validée à la fois par les guérisseurs et leurs patients. Ils partagent pour la plupart une compréhension commune du monde et du réel.

Mots-clés : Khasi, Inde du Nord-est, sorcellerie, guérison, ontologie, tournant ontologique, anthropologie

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Glossary

Almirah	Anglo-Indian cupboard
Aporia	Greek word denoting an irresolvable situation.
Bah	Respectful term in Khasi for a man
Behdiengkhlam	Jaintia festival
Bih	Khasi curse
Bnoi	Tribal people from Meghalaya
Dawai Khasi	Khasi medicines
Dorbars	Khasi village councils
Durga	Hindu god
Garmocha	Assamese scarf
Gua	A Buli witch that will eat the liver of other villagers
Hima	Khasi state
Hima Durbar	Highest legislative and judicial body of the Hima
Hynniewtrep	People of seven huts. Mythological name for the Khasi.
Iawbei	Primeval ancestress
Ïing	Domestic groups. Also means house.
Jainsem	Khasi women traditional dress
Jaintia	Tribal people from Meghalaya
Jingbam	Khasi snacks
Jhum	Slash-and-burn or system of cultivation
Ka Blei Synhsar	Khasi goddess
Ka Hok	Righteous way of the Khasi
Kali	Hindu goddess

Ka Kma Karai:	Daughter of the god U Mawlong Siem
Ka Pahsyntiew	Ancestress of the Syiem of Khyrim
Ka Niam Tip Briew Niam Tip Blei	Religion of Knowing Man, Knowing God
Ka Rngiew	A kind of spiritual aura
Ka Shat Pylleng	Divination by breaking eggs on a wooden plank
Ka Shwar	Khasi female deity
Khatduh	Youngest daughter in Khasi families
Khynriam	Another name for the Khasi
Kñi	Khasi uncle
Kong	Respectful term in Khasi for a woman
Kong shop	Khasi canteen selling snacks and tea
Kpoh	Matrilineal lineages. Also means womb.
Krishna	Hindu god
Ksan Rngiew	Healing ritual
Ksing Thlien	Music instrument playing during the feeding of *U Thlien*
Ksuid	Generic term for a malevolent entity
Kurs	Clans among the Khasi
Kynthah Nar	Singeing of the hair by the Syiem
Lyngdoh	Khasi traditional priest
Lyngngam	Tribal people from Meghalaya
Mait Tyrut	Ritual to chase away the evil plaguing people
Mala beads	Red Hindu prayer beads
Menshohnoh	Murderers hired by nongshohnoh

Mullahs	Traditional Khasi stools
Niam Tynrai Khasi	Original religion of the Khasi
Niangsohpet	Culturally understood as a childhood diarrheal disorder.
Nongai dawai kynbat	Khasi herbalist
Nongri thlen	Families who owe allegiance to *U Thlien*
Nongshohnoh	Families who owe allegiance to *U Thlien*
Nongkñia	Khasi ritual specialist
Pey	Dead people who remain indefinitely in a liminal state
Pnar	Another name for the Jaintia
Rangbah dong	Village council of executives
Rangbah shnong	Headman
Ri kythei	Private land administered through the village councils
Ri raid	Communal land
Rig Veda	Collection of Hindu sacred texts
Sadhus	Hindu religious men
Salwar Kameez	Indian dress comprising pants, tunic and scarf.
Seng Khasi	Organization dedicated to protect and promote the traditions of the Khasi
Suidnia	First maternal uncle
Syiem	Khasi king
Syiem Sad	Queen of the Khasi
Synteng	Another name for the Jaintia
Tang Jait	Ritual to give a non-Khasi a Khasi surname
Taro	Khasi curse
Tikka	A red dot wore on the forehead by married Hindu woman
U Blei Nongthaw	God the creator
U Blei	Supreme God
Um Syiem	Water of the Syiem, used to heal victims of *U Thlien*
U Thlien	Evil deity of the Khasi mythology, that takes the shape of a snake
Um Thlien	A variation of the curse of *U Thlien*, linked to water
War	Tribal people from Meghalaya

To my family, for everything

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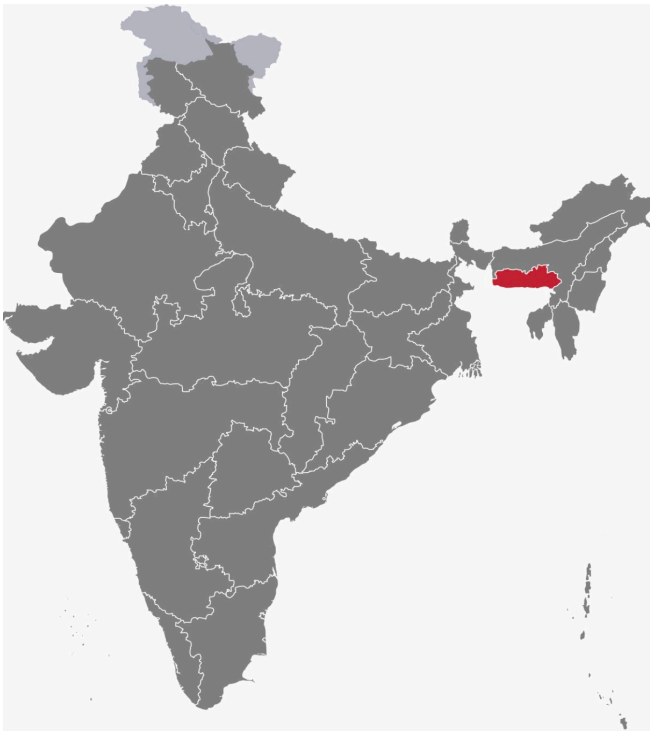
Introduction: Bear Grylls and the Dangers of Nature

If Bear Grylls were to come to our jungle, he would die.

At first, we laughed at the funny comment made by the healer. She referred to the famous explorer, braving the wild to teach survival skills to TV audiences. We had been speaking of witchcraft for a few hours, and her humour lightened the mood. However, while driving back to town, my interpreter started to reflect more on her joke. According to him, she had stated a true and simple fact: the jungles in Meghalaya are perilous. They are full of physical and spiritual dangers. These risks come not only from the animals and malarial mosquitoes, but also from spirits and deities roaming the wilderness. These supernatural beings can harm humans for committing transgression against the natural world. Despite these dangers, the indigenous people of the region are proud of the magnificence of their land. With a mountainous setting, pine-clad hills, abundant streams, rivers and lakes, the state of Meghalaya is a land of beauty and mystery.



Map 1: Meghalaya (red rectangular on the map) is situated at the eastern corner of India

This beauty may have been preserved in part due to the remoteness of the state. It stands in a little-known corner of India, commonly referred to as the Northeast. Despite these remote settings, the people of Meghalaya are navigating modernity successfully. When I first arrived in the region in 2016, I was impressed by the balance between traditional culture and globalization. Shillong is a cosmopolitan city, with inhabitants coming from many corners of India and even the world. It counts a good number of global fast-food chains, such as Pizza Hut and Domino's. People speak English fluently. They watch more Hollywood than Bollywood movies. Despite this enthusiasm for globalization, traditional indigenous culture is still thriving. Spiritual healing is widely practiced and acknowledged as a legitimate way of dealing with health issues. My first objective when I arrived in Meghalaya was to study these practices among the Khasi, the main indigenous group in the state. The Khasi form one of the largest communities in North-East India, numbering about 1.2 million. They are referred to as a "Scheduled Tribe" (ST) by the Indian constitution. "Tribal" is a colonial description that often carries derogatory connotations of uncivilized or primitive people. However, people in the Northeast themselves identify as tribals. This status entitles them to claim certain benefits, such as reserved places in universities, reserved government jobs and special funds allocated for "tribal development programs." About eight percent of the Indian population belongs to the ST category, which today includes almost eighty million people (Karlsson, 2001).

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Khasi have mostly converted to Christianity. However, a minority of Khasi still follow the indigenous religion known as *Niam Tynrai Khasi* ("original religion"). Both groups continue to seek and practice traditional healing, my first object of inquiry. I had planned to interview healers about their practice and to observe rituals conducted for different clients. I hired a local assistant who proved vital for the field research. He acted as a language and cultural interpreter, as well as a friend and driver. By virtue of his knowledge of traditional healing in the region, he provided an easy entry into the field. My assistant was able to quickly contact healers to start the long fieldwork period. After a few weeks, we already had a long list of people to meet. However, during the first week of research, an event changed the focus of the study. My assistant had selected one healer to interview, and we went to meet her. She lived in a mansion in the countryside. We were received in a beautiful living room decorated with teak furniture and Christian icons. During the conversation with the healer, her maids and daughters-in-law brought

us tea and omelettes. The healer did not agree to be recorded, so I had to rely on the immediate translation of my interpreter and to his excellent memory. We asked the healer questions about her practices and life events. Since she spoke only Khasi and was not recorded, the following day my interpreter explained to me in detail what had been said during the interview. We were seating down in the NGO office I was providing support to. The room was lined with bookshelves. The rest of space was almost taken over by a gigantesque round table. I was scribbling notes and he was remembering the interview out loud. At some point, he casually said: " She also talked about how she fights the worshippers with love." I looked up and stared at him with some confusion. I asked: "Which worshippers? Worshippers of what?". He explained: "Well, in Meghalaya, we have clans that worship the devil. She fights them with her rituals."

He proceeded to tell me all about the curse of *U Thlien*. According to what he shared with me that day, certain Khasi families are leading secret crime syndicates in Meghalaya. They are worshipping a devilish snake and feeding him[1] human blood to receive wealth in return. These clans hire bounty hunters to kill their victims and take their blood. If they are not able to murder someone, they can also rob the person of a piece of clothing, hair, or nail clipping. This bounty is then given to the snake in the middle of the night. The creature drinks the blood and then gives a sacred blessing to the family that will ensure wealth and prosperity. If they were not murdered, victims will become ill and slowly die as the snake drinks their blood night after night.

I knew at once that I had found the subject of my research. In the following months, we proceeded to ask healers not only about their life and practice, but also about *U Thlien*. Further investigation revealed a coherent story that was shared among most of my informants. Even people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds shared the tales about the existence of these murderous clans and the bloodthirsty snake. As I was confronted with this narrative, I was forced to ask myself: what is real in this narrative? Is there a possibility for a Western anthropologist to ever approach this reality without judgment? As I progressed in my fieldwork, I was confronted with the existence of many other curses, originating mostly from the Khasi ontological world. The mass conversion to Christianity at the start of the 20th century has had little impact on the prevalence of curses and the use of spiritual means to treat them. In the city of Shillong and in the countryside

[1] Even though *U Thlien* is described as a snake, I will use the pronoun *him* when referring to the deity.

one can find many of curses affecting people and numerous healers able to cure them. In this thesis, I will show how most curses relate to selfishness, jealousy, and wealth.

A Healing System to Fight Witchcraft

Anthropologists have long been fascinated with healing. The study of this concept dates back to the very inception of the discipline, with the list of people who studied healing systems including Frazer, Tyler, Boas, Turner, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, Kluckhohn, Douglas, Van Gennep, Bateson, etc. (Miller, 1994). Despite more than a century of anthropological investigation on healing, its definition is still murky and depends on the subdiscipline and the theoretical affiliation of the researcher. However, anthropologists in general agree that healing goes far beyond that simply curing physical symptoms. According to Kirmayer (2004), healing involves a basic logic of transformation from sickness to wellness that is enacted through culturally salient metaphorical actions (p. 34). Healing is a process of change during which an individual moves from a state of perceived illness, loss, or alienation to a state of perceived well-being or health. Whereas curing implies a physical closure, healing is not limited to biological relief of disease (Miller, 1994). Practices of healing include the use of medicines; methods of getting things out of the body by emetics, cathartics, purgatives, bloodletting, or surgery; manipulations of the body; diagnostic or divinatory practices that establish the nature of the affliction in terms of its causes and consequences or some other classificatory scheme; and the use of rituals and ceremonies (Kirmayer, 2004).

Healing and witchcraft are closely intertwined and form a coherent system in Meghalaya. In this structure, there are visible actors (patients and healers) and an invisible one (the sorcerer). Since sorcerers stay mostly hidden, healers are one of the most knowledgeable groups about witchcraft in Meghalaya. Among the Khasi, both humans and supernatural agents can cause harm through curses and black magic. Healers are tasked with identifying the root of the problem and with helping their clients remove the curses. Healers are then important since their art consists in making these curses visible and curable. To counteract the alleged actions coming from the invisible, one has to acquire secret knowledge (itself issued from the invisible) and use that knowledge to reveal (make visible) what is unseen, to expose what has been so far concealed (Palmeirim, 2010). Healing and witchcraft, good and evil, creates and answers to each other. If witchcraft hurts people

from a secretive, invisible place, healing is all about shining a light on these hidden acts. Healers and their patients identify easily which curse has been cast. This Khasi ecosystem has jumped the ethnic and religious lines and has been adopted by minorities in Meghalaya.

Since I focus on the knowledge of healers about curses, some aspects of this thesis could have been studied within a medical anthropology framework. Medical anthropology is the study of health, disease, illness and healing across the range of human societies (Grønseth, 2006). Both medical anthropology and the anthropology of religion have adopted similar concepts, such as the difference between illness and diseases. Illness refers to culturally specific perceptions and experiences of a health problem. It also refers to how the sick person and the members of the family or wider social network perceive, live with, and respond to symptoms and disability (Kleinman, 1988). Diseases refer to a biological health problem that is objective and universal, such as bacterial or viral infection, a broken arm, etc. (Csordas & Kleinman, 1996). Disease is: "…what the practitioner [the healer] creates in the recasting of illness in terms of theories of disorder" (Kleinman, 1988, p. 5). It is clear then that anthropology of religion and medical anthropology both explain healing and illness through the framework of culture. Both subjects recognize that the illness experience can be culturally shaped (Kleinman, 1988). Young (1982) identified the three options anthropologists have for responding to sickness: (a) conceptual systems originally intended for describing and analyzing other phenomenological domains (such as ritual behaviour), (b) methodologies and conceptualizations borrowed from empiricist medical sociology, or (c) an evolving conceptual system centred on the social and experiential particularities of sickness and healing. Contemporary medical anthropology emerged from the third way of apprehending healing and does not ignore the impact of sociability on health (p. 261).

I argue that one of the differences between the two sub-disciplines is the approach to efficiency and the ontological explanation for the diseases. For medical anthropologists, the question remains: why are these practices effective on patients (Waldram, 2000) ? For anthropologists using religion and spirituality as an explanatory framework, the question of the efficiency of traditional healing has little meaning. Traditional healing has long been considered as a practice reserved for remote tribal people. It has been defined as an amalgamation of knowledge, skill, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or

not, used for therapeutic, restorative, prevention, diagnosis and maintenance of physical and mental health (World Health Organization, 2013).

In anthropology, traditional healing has often been characterized as symbolic. Non-western medical systems are often seen as culturally constructed, subjective, and primarily symbolic. They are counterposed against a universal, acultural, and empirical biomedicine (Waldram, 2000). Symbolic healing has been described as a type of healing which synthesizes mind and body through the use of myth and symbol (Miller, 1994). The concept was first spearheaded by Turner. He focused on rituals to explain their efficiency. He saw symbolic curing among the Ndembu of Sudan as acting not on the patients but on society. The sickness of the patient became a sign of rottenness of the social sphere. The patient could not get better until all the tensions in the group had been brought to light and exposed to ritual treatment (Turner, 1967). Restructuring of social relations seems to be one of many patterns in ritual healing (Dow, 1986). Traditional healing, however, implies more than rituals. It can also include acts as diverse as body manipulations, massages, surgery, and laying on of the hands (Moerman, 1979). It is clearly misleading to conceptualize traditional healing as only symbolic and to attribute its efficiency to a manipulation of different physical and conceptual objects. By stepping into the ontological world of the Khasi, I will demonstrate how real physical and emotional healing can happen through traditional healing.

The concept of tradition itself is confusing. For Clifford (2004), the dominant model of thought on the notion of tradition in the West associates it with the immobile world, rooted in the past, and present only outside present-day Europe and North America (p.152). This vision of tradition was seriously tested by the end of the colonial era, when many so-called backward, traditional, or underdeveloped societies, made strong claims to historical agency and to a distinctive modern destiny. The notion of tradition has also been associated with the idea of pure cultures, as compared with those transformed by modernity. Syncretism is a concept that has been widely used to describe the mixing of two different conceptual worlds. Anti-syncretism is frequently bound up with the construction of “authenticity”, which is in turn often linked to notions of “purity” (Stewart et al., 1994). The notion of syncretism is thus closely linked to that of identity boundaries. It opposes the concepts of tradition and modernity. However, tradition is also a socially constructed concept that exists in the collective imagination. As Handler and Linnekin (1984) put it in their query: "…does

tradition refer to a core of inherited culture traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object, or must tradition be understood as a wholly symbolic construction ?" (p. 273).

The concept of syncretism has been overused to describe contemporary indigenous religions, transformed by the experience of colonialism. Under the sociopolitical pressures of foreign powers, meanings and rituals have changed. This has affected religion and, by extension, healing systems. Sometimes biomedicine has completely or partly replaced the local curing system. In these cases, biomedicine has come to represent the progression toward modernity. Yet, among the Khasi, I have discovered that biomedicine and traditional healing are still equally valid. They answer different needs, according to the cause of the sickness. Since the Khasi often seek healing in situations that do not require physiological treatment, I will work on deconstructing this notion according to their ontological framework. I will show how it is possible to go beyond syncretism as an explanation for understanding the different healing pathways chosen by people. Healing quests are becoming more and more juxtaposed, associating belief regimes with heterogeneous therapeutic paradigms (Denizeau, 2011.). Despite the differences between ethnic and religious backgrounds, in the cosmopolitan city of Shillong: " … locally shared ideas about illness create a common ground for patients and practitioners to understand each other " (Kleinman, 1988, p. 5). Every day, the Khasi redefine their own healing quest. Medical anthropology will be useful in this work to understand how different explanatory models are used to describe the same sickness (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009).

Indian and Khasi Traditional Healing

Despite my misgivings about addressing traditional healing through the prism of syncretism, the concept has prevailed in descriptions of religion in India. The country represents in many ways both a model of religious diversity and an example of the problems brought by the same diversity (Ray & Roy, 2008). Religious and caste identity in India may be a colonial legacy. Some recent scholarship on South Asian religion has re-examined the categories of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian and suggested that they are neither fixed nor foundational elements of South Asian senses of self and community (Bellamy, 2011). The rise of fundamentalism in recent years in India has

obliterated this deep-rooted syncretism in the subcontinent culture (Burman, 1996). Still today, however, different religious groups share the same spaces, and regional ethos and cultural traits cut across religions and sectarian differences (Das, 2006). In India, a high proportion of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain communities engage sacred specialists from other communities than their own (Das, 2003). This demonstrates that spiritual healing is highly valued in India. Each religious community developed its own approach and practices to healing. Despite this, there is a country-wide clientelist attitude typical of religious manifestations (Pugh, 1983). Most of these traditions focus on more than physiological aspects of healing. When visiting healers, people seek solutions for all types of issues in their lives. Misfortune and diseases are often attributed to phenomena situated in the spiritual world. The multiple possible origins of afflictions often generate a complex chain of enquiry (Headley, 2007).

The healing landscape in Meghalaya reflects this Indian diversity. Tribal groups each have their own spiritual beliefs and health system. Joshi (2008) clearly demonstrates how, among the converted Naga of Nagaland, the therapeutic path to healing a possessed patient includes both Christian (visiting a priest, going to church) and traditional approaches (tribal exorcism). Among the Khasi, people also often express doubts about the real nature of their symptoms. Symbolic healing, or spiritual healing, forms an important continuum with traditional culture even among rapid sociopolitical changes. These traditions are helping people fight spiritual illnesses. Realizing this led me to investigate why people continue to visit both traditional healers and biomedical clinics and hospitals. I will show how these two curing systems respond to different needs and are not mutually exclusive.

Healing practices among the Khasi show the same complex chains of explanation as in mainland India. Despite conversion to Christianity and the implementation of a biomedical system, traditional healing is still widely sought to cure physical and psychological diseases. Furthermore, some Khasi never converted to Christianity and continue with their original religion and healing practices. The traditional healing system has been kept alive through the centuries by the non-converted Khasi and the need for healing expressed by Christian Khasi. Recently, herbal traditional healing has also been recognized as an important component of Khasi culture. The estimated use of tribal (traditional) medicine across rural households in Meghalaya is 79.1%. It is used for both

minor ailments and major diseases. People choose either biomedicine or tribal medicine as their first choice, and if unsatisfied with the response to therapy of their first choice, would try the other (Albert et al., 2015). Tribal healing also includes traditional spiritual healing. Traditional faith healers rely on intervention from divine supernatural force for initiating the healing process. These forces are often the ones also causing illness. Among the non-converted Khasi, the root of disease is sometimes the intrusion of spirits, both malevolent and benevolent. Good health is restored only by reconciliation with the spirit. In fact, Khasi traditional religion is a religion of restoring health and fortune. This is achieved once the spirit is recognized, and adequate sacrifices are made to honour it (Chetia & Kithan, 2020). Healers often communicate with and appease the disturbing spirits on behalf of the clients. Illness also occurs due to the breaking of some rules by the victim and as a result of witchcraft, sorcery or black magic (Chetia & Kithan, 2020, p. 624). Herbal medicines and faith healing respond to a practical need for the restoration of spiritual and physical well-being. They are tools to fight evil and misfortune. In Meghalaya, evil and healing create an ecosystem of evil in which neither could exist without the other. Spiritual healing goes hand in hand with spiritual diseases.

I will show in this thesis how the path to healing is not straight forward in Meghalaya. People tend to go on a diversified healing quest to solve their health or relational issues. In this quest, they mix a variety of spiritual paths. In some cases, both the curse sent to them, and the therapeutic method chosen to heal it does not belong in their own cultural world of origin. For example, during a fieldwork trip, I met a Nepali woman who was visiting the Khasi king. She feared her son had been cursed by *U Thlien*. In this case and in others, witchcraft is then detached from individuals' own religion. As a Nepali, the woman was probably a Hindu.

The Rationality of Witchcraft

Anthropology as a discipline was born in a world dominated by empires. Explorers, merchants, and missionaries reported about strange people in far way places. This led to the emergence of social theories explaining the differences between human groups. According to 19th-century western evolutionists, human groups followed a set path, going from a primitive state to a highly developed and industrialized mindset. Despite the implied racism behind these views, many of

these theorists saw themselves as progressive thinkers. They did not see non-Western peoples as "fallen" or "immoral," but insisted instead on the mental unity of mankind and replaced "primitive peoples" within the scale of human 'progress (Candea, 2017). The colonial period western states such as Britain and France were seen as having reached the peak of civilization. Obviously, magic and witchcraft had no place in such a rational world.

This focus on the irrationality of magic, however, ignored the complexity of the explanatory models proposed by witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard, in his classic study of witchcraft and sorcery among the Azande of Sudan, was the first to point out how these models made sense for the people studied by anthropologists. Evans-Pritchard distinguished between *witchcraft* and *sorcery* by their technique. He defined witchcraft as the innate, inherited ability to cause misfortune or death. For the Azande, witchcraft involved unconscious psychic powers emanating from a black swelling, located near the liver. By contrast, they referred to sorcery as the performance of rituals and spells, with the conscious intent of causing harm (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). I will also show how rituals conducted to heal the victims require intercession and even divination. Intercessory prayers are said to respond to the needs of other individuals at a distance. These prayers to the divine are supported by mediatory minor gods or human protectors (alive or dead), believed to have special powers, whose mediation ensures that the prayer will be efficacious (Hamman, 2020). Among the Khasi, healers perform intercession with gods and spirits to seek their help in healing the patient. As for divination, it involves non-trance approaches using horoscopes, palms, fortune sticks, dice, and cards. It constitutes an indigenous system of counseling that helps clients to deal with the consciously expressed dilemmas of everyday life (Pugh, 1991). *U Thlien* is closer to Evans-Pritchard's definition of sorcery; i.e., rituals, spells, and manipulation of substances, such as herbs, with the conscious intent of causing harm (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). *Taro* is nearer to what he defined as witchcraft (non-intentional harm caused to someone). *Taro* can be transmitted unintentionally when someone has some ambiguous thoughts about another individual. These thoughts can be positive (for example, love) or negative (jealousy). The victim of *Taro* will act as if possessed or mentally insane.

Taro is also closely related to the evil eye narrative, which is common around the world. However, studies of witchcraft in India are relatively few, despite the prevalence of the phenomenon in the

subcontinent. Across the country, witches are commonly said to use their power to attack the fertility of humans, their domestic animals, or crops. They are also said to fly through the night, to engage in cannibalism and incestuous acts, to assume animal form or have animal companions. Witchcraft is sometimes considered as one of the main causes of sickness and death (Joshi, 2006). Generally, witchcraft studies in India are conducted in tribal societies. Among these groups, the intervention of spirits causes illness and brings misfortunes (Chophy, 2020). Since witchcraft is considered as one of the main causes of sickness and death, the treatment for such diseases is carried out accordingly (Joshi, 2006). Suspecting victims of a curse will need to visit a practitioner able to remove the problem. For example, in Rajasthan, a supernatural agent is said to be responsible for causing a person to become sick. A healer may invoke sorcery or evil spirits to account for illness or misfortune (Dwyer, 2003). These healers will then be requested to heal the patient, remove the curse, and identify the culprit. Benevolent spirits and gods may be asked to remove the curse. Healers sometimes play an ambiguous role. Since they are considered experts at manipulating invisible energies, it is often assumed that they can also cause harm. A healer may become a sorcerer when requested to do evil by clients (Chattopadhyay, 1992).

Spiritual diseases are not always caused by ill-intentioned humans. In Tamil Nadu the word *pey* usually characterizes the spirits of people who remain indefinitely in a liminal state (limbo) because they met an "untimely" death, which prevented their transit into the hereafter. Stranded in this world, their limbo-like time on earth after death remains dominated by an unrelenting yearning to fulfill their frustrated desires for sexual intimacy. They stalk and "catch" the living (Nabokov, 1997). Among the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh, everything found in the forests and rivers is owned by certain deities or spirits. All incidents, either natural or unnatural, are believed to be the work of unseen powers. The Galos also believe that human suffering and misfortunes are the reflection of the wrath of certain deities (Doye, 2015).

Most of the witchcraft studies in India suggest that it stems from property disputes, land alienation and closed community politics (Chophy, 2020). Spiritual diseases may also be specific to vulnerable segments of the population: studies focusing on spirit possession in India have tended to view this phenomenon as being connected with gender oppression, socio-economic inferiority, and the inability of lower status people to express their grievances openly (Dwyer, 2003). The

suspected perpetrators of witchcraft are mainly women (many elderly or widowed) and the majority of accusers are closely related to the accused (Macdonald, 2015). Among the Oraons, most of the female witches are reported to be old women or childless women (Joshi, 2006). Khasi witchcraft departs from what is the case for other tribal settings in India regarding gender and inequality issues. First, the perpetrators can be male or female. The accusers are more concerned with identifying the clans responsible than with the gender of the person seen as the cause of the problem. Second, the accusations do not follow the general Indian pattern. Upper-class and wealthy people are the focus of accusations in Meghalaya. Among the Khasi, the accusation tends to come from people with lesser means than the accused. For example, when he is satiated with human blood, *U Thlien* gives wealth and good fortune in return to his human keepers.

Finding the Rational in the Irrational: Fieldwork

The healers, the patients, and the intellectuals who participated in this research were the vital elements linking the invisible witchcraft practices to the lived experience of victims. Since the subject of *U Thlien*, curses and black magic is a dangerous topic in Meghalaya, I took the liberty to change the names of the patients in the stories presented in this thesis. I did not change the names of most of the healers, since their names and methods are well known. More than fifty interviews were conducted in urban settings and in the countryside. I interviewed healers, patients, politicians, writers and researchers. Observing healing rituals proved to be more difficult. At first, I sought to interact with patients and follow them around as they went to seek healing. I realized quickly that the Khasi were secretive regarding their personal life and they would not open easily about their problems. People I knew well were reluctant to have me and my interpreter assisting at their requested healing rituals. I was then facing two problems: the privacy needed by the Khasi who were visiting healers and the absence of the sorcerer. Sorcery is something hidden. It is felt, heard of, but it is never seen. As (Palmeirim, 2010) observes, sorcery is untruthfulness and concealment: "No sorcerer will willingly agree to his or her guilt; no one will ever say : " I'm a sorcerer " (p. 522). In order to observe healing rituals and investigate the lived experience of curses, I needed to find a strategy that would respect the privacy of Khasi families. Meeting sorcerers for interviews was nearly impossible. There were rumours about known healers practicing witchcraft and about families who worshipped *U Thlien*, but these were taboo subjects and sorcerers remained firmly hidden in the shadows. As I went forward with fieldwork, two strategies emerged. First, I

tagged along with one specific family constantly falling victim of curses and witchcraft. Its members were happy for me to follow them during their visits to healers. When they were not seeking healing, I visited healers to cure my own spiritual and physical ailments or those of my assistant.

In the first part of fieldwork, I followed one specific family as the members were searching for physical and spiritual healing. Proximity to the object of study is part of the quest of the anthropologist. However, it also brings up questions about anthropologist-subject relationship and the feelings that may interfere with the research process. This family had seen a lot of hardships since the parents married many decades before. A curse was set upon them when the father was a young child. It kept haunting the family members. Diseases, deaths, and misfortune have affected them for more than forty years. My involvement in their quest for started during the first month of my fieldwork. This family decided to consult a healer I had already met. Over a period of six weeks, we visited this practitioner at least fifteen times to remove the family curse through various prolonged rituals. According to the worldview of the healer, Kong Ro, physical ailments do not have a physiological cause. They are the results of spiritual and relational problems. For instance, someone could get sick and die after disturbing the natural elements in the forest. On one of our visits, Kong Ro told the story of a man who picked up fruits in the jungle to eat them and to bring some home. A few days after, the man's arm started to decompose. He went to the doctors, who could not cure him. He was told he was going to die. When he came to Kong Ro, his arm was reduced to a bone without flesh. The healer was able to cure him, and he recovered. According to Kong Ro, he had committed a sin against nature and paid the price: he was cursed by the spirits protecting the jungle. In this case the healing technique centred on removing curses from patients. The healer commonly uses direct and non-direct healing to remove curses. At the direct level, she often gives liquid medicines. The patients must drink the medicine at specific times during the day. At the indirect level, she also orchestrates elaborate rituals during which she works on the spiritual causes of ailments and diseases.

As the family was seeking answers, the rituals conducted by different healers were often emotional and full of pain. The services of many healers were requested. One day, Fatima, a Christian faith healer, came for a praying session at the family's house. She asked everyone to pray using healing

verses from the Bible and proceeded to bless each family member. She reached one sister who had lived through a personal tragedy two years before and had not completely recovered. The sister started to sob and sob. Then one of the young girls in the family collapsed on the flour and started to cry as well. It was disturbing to witness so much pain and suffering. At other times, I was also asked to join the family or their friends for funerals. These were quite distressful events. Even the quieter rituals when no one cried were full of the shadow of the curse affecting my adoptive family around.

During a few months, we visited many healers. The family finally asked for an intercession from a Seng Khasi (a traditional Khasi organization) healer so that all the dramas and the pain would ease. It seemed to put a stop to the misery: the family got some respite from misfortune. I needed to find new ways to continue my observations of the work of healers. I was still confronted to the same problem: despite my efforts, nobody was comfortable in letting us follow them in the healing room of various healers. I took the decision to put myself forward and experiment through my own body. I had a good reason to do this: after a really good start, the research seemed to stall. People were not keeping their appointments. I had some difficulty finding new sites for research. I did what everybody does in Meghalaya when life goes sour: I visited healers. I was struggling to understand the complex world of healing among the different people of Meghalaya. The body is not the main playing field for traditional healing; most of it must take place in the spiritual or religious world to be effective, even if the symptoms are physical or of a social nature. As a researcher and as a participant, I needed to integrate this new reality into my own body. There were also some limits that could not be crossed. Bodies with different subjectivities will react differently to the request of the rituals. For example, the Khasi can be affected by a vast array of witchcraft practices and curses. They can also be cured by rituals meant to heal specific curses. Foreign bodies cannot be affected by some of the local curses. For example, despite seeking healing from many healers, it was never mentioned that I could have been affected by *U Thlien*. In fact, in numerous instances, it was shared with me that only Khasi could be affected by the curse. The snake would not drink the blood of a foreigner. The traditional healers performing rituals for my sake usually pointed out what I could call universal reasons for my problems. It almost always revolved around jealousy. One healer, however, pointed out that sins committed by my forefathers might have led to the issues I was facing. He also encouraged me to get married as

soon as possible and to have children! These traditional healers had to find a reason I would deem acceptable, considering I was a foreign researcher and they mostly dealt with local people. Their clients represent a vast array of religion and ethnic backgrounds. These clients are, however, locally rooted, some for many generations. This diversity of backgrounds was also found among the healers themselves. Five Hindu healers from the Shillong area played an important part in this research by accepting to be interviewed and by conducting rituals for my sake.

One of them was not only a healer but also a taekwondo teacher with his own training school. I first visited him for an interview. He is a member of the Karbi tribe, who resides in Assam around the city of Diphu. This healer, however, has been living in Shillong for many years. At the time of my visits, he was living in the Nongmynsong neighbourhood, a maze of small pedestrian alleys and of concrete houses hiding behind cement walls. The habitation of the healer consists of two buildings: one for the taekwondo school and one for the healing practice. The ritual was short since the healer was in a hurry. He was leaving for the closing ceremony of a taekwondo tournament. Since he had little time, he still prayed on some rice for the research and then put it in a newspaper for me to carry home. According to his instructions, I had to eat a bit of the raw rice each time I was going out for research work. He also said that a certain girl was jealous of me, and her jealousy was affecting the project. After the short ritual, the research seemed to take off; I had an amazing two or three weeks of fieldwork.

After these few weeks, I faced another period of downtime. I felt I needed another ritual. I went to a Nepali Hindu healer, well-known to my assistant. G.R.S. Powdell was born in the Bhoi region in the countryside and started healing at the age of thirteen. After his apprenticeship, Powdell moved to Shillong. While working full-time, he opened a night clinic in his house, located in the back of his house. The waiting room is the backyard. His healing office is a Hindu shrine, with the statues and icons of Hindu gods. There was barely space for the three of us in the small room of the clinic. My assistant and I were seated on *mullahs*, traditional Khasi stools, while the healer sat at a table in front of the shrine. Powdell asked me to touch the rice he kept in a small bowl. He asked my name, title and date of birth and wrote it on a small piece of paper. Then he prayed on the rice and on a string of red beads (*mala* beads), asking the gods for the reason behind the slowdown of my research. After consulting the deities, he explained that the project was slowing

down because some people were jealous of my success. The healer then prayed again with the beads, and put them on my forehead, then on each side of me. He added that I had been a little bit lazy with the work. To remove the curse, I had to come back to his clinic the next day. However, in the meantime, he gave me two packets. I was to put one of them first in my wallet and then under my pillow that night. He gave me another one with rice in it: I needed to eat to it for supper. He asked us to bring some items the next day: water bottles, flowers, and candles, and to remember my dreams.

The next day, he followed basically the same steps. He wrote my name on a piece of paper. This time, however, he questioned me about by dreams of the previous night. I explained that I had dreamed I was camping on a bridge, but with no tent. The healer confirmed that my dream meant someone was jealous of me. He took the flowers resting on his shrine, put them in the water, and splash me with the water. He then handed me a medicine, wrapped in a black tissue and a small plastic envelope, and instructed me to keep it in my wallet from now on. He blessed the water and the rice I had brought, and told me to eat some of the rice, a little bit each time I went out for work. I was also told to drink some of water each day for three days before throwing it out. The rest of the items used for the ritual had to be discarded in the nearest river. I threw away my beliefs about environmental issues in India at the same time.

As I have shown, water, rice and sometimes eggs were elements central to many rituals conducted during my fieldwork. Khasi traditional healers may also use local symbols, such as betel nuts and betel leaves. I spent time with a healer named Bah Shabong, a converted Khasi that still practices traditional healing. One of the healing sessions with Bah Shabong was conducted at the golf club of Shillong, beneath a tree. This healer had been leading rituals there for over 40 years. During the ritual, he used rice, eggs, betel nuts and betel leaves to interceded on my behalf with the gods. At the end of his prayers, he gave me some crude rice to eat followed by a sip of water that he asked the gods to bless. I had to eat the rice and then I throw the rest outside my house the day after. He also encouraged me to drink the water, since it was now sacred. Such rituals contradict what we are taught in the West. We are trained to believe in only what our physical senses are telling us: what we see, hear, smell and taste are real. We are accustomed to learning about the

world primarily through our sense of sight (Classen, 1999). We are also taught that we should not drink unfiltered water in a developing country.

In order to explore this thin line between rationality and irrationality, I used the theoretical framework proposed by the ontological turn in anthropology. Since the 1960s, social scientists have argued that long-standing Western assumptions about the nature of subjects, objects, and the boundary between the two have had disastrous consequences on the environment and the relationship of the West with the rest of the world (Alberti et al., 2011). Anthropology slowly appeared as a colonial effort that could access the worlds of others, but not vice versa. It was making authoritative claims about "others" and their lives for insights and academic status (Neale & Vincent, 2017). These preoccupations eventually led to a theoretical shift in the early 1990s that changed how many anthropologists defined the frontiers between things and persons, the individual and society, as well as nature and culture. Anthropology no longer spoke with automatic authority for others (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). For all these reasons, I found that the ontological approach was the only viable way to study witchcraft in a postcolonial world. The realization that the ontological approach was the ideal way to study witchcraft among the Khasi came to me after I returned from fieldwork. During my year in India, my reality was constantly challenged. As I was perusing my data, I started to reflect on how all aspects of witchcraft, such as curses and evil spirits, had been real for the people I interacted with. Healing was sometimes considered false, as healers were requalified according to their results and in what was said in gossip. Healers were sometimes considered to be quacks, but witchcraft was always real.

I argue that the experience of living in Shillong shapes a different reality, one in which curses are thrown almost casually and family feuds are resolved through sorcery. In the case of the Khasi, the knowledge on witchcraft is passed down through shared narratives. The narrative is told, placed in a setting (a village nearby, the neighbours), and is never referred as a piece of fiction. *It lives.* It adapts over time (for example, the mainlanders now playing the part of the contract killers). This common knowledge is built through hearing narratives, which are quite consistent from one time to another. Ethnicity and religion have little influence since people from different backgrounds have adopted the Khasi curses as a framework to understand evil and misfortune. Furthermore, I

suggest that the experience of growing up in Shillong forges ties with these curses. Some informants, not born in Shillong, were more hesitant to discuss the topic.

I felt that adopting previous anthropological approaches to witchcraft would not do justice to my informants. It is not to say that these approaches did not shed interesting light on witchcraft. Since Malinowski, there has been a long but concrete evolution of theories surrounding the manipulation of evil energy. Until recently, however, it was mainly analyzed as either the expression of social woes, rapid social transformation or as a way of maintaining control among smaller groups, i.e., reduced to something else that is considered "real". Whereas the ontological approach takes it as real. The ontological approach suggests instead that it is possible to understand witchcraft in the own terms of the people practicing it and healing from its effects. Two writers in particular, Kapferer (1997) and Bubandt (2017), worked on redefining the anthropological approach of witchcraft. Kapferer's angle of approach was to focus on the social and personal healing brought by rituals to heal witchcraft, while Bubandt focussed on the deconstructive aspects of witchcraft and the uncertainty it brought about the world. Bubandt also questioned his own place in such a system during fieldwork. His quest to understand how to position himself within this system mirrored mine. Hearing strange noises in the dark above his roof, he started to question his previous dismissal of the witchcraft stories of the people around him. So how does the anthropologist build his own explanation for witchcraft? At first, it is certainly not through hearing the stories about it, since we are trained to not believe in the supernatural. Even if the story is repeated, it does not make it easier to believe. However, is it possible there are other ways of hearing? What do the Shillong people hear when the story of *U Thlien* is shared with them? Is it the same thing that I hear when someone tells me about the *U Thlien* narrative? We hear the same words, but our senses and our life experiences are telling us totally different narratives.

The *U Thlien* narrative can be told in two ways; as a story, recounting the details of what is done to collect the blood from the victims and how the clans worship the snake. When my assistant first mentioned the bloodthirsty snake, I was fascinated, and set out to investigate further. I was obviously not thinking that this story was real, and even less than it would be real for the Khasi educated middle-class that I was gravitating around. Then the people interviewed started to share with me first or second-hand testimonies about the curse:

- Andrew, a retired teacher, and writer, used to hear strange music coming out from the house of his neighbour. A lot of people would visit this house late into the night. A strange music and a bell could be heard. The teacher asked me not to reveal his name, or else it could become dangerous for him.

- A retired school administrator shared that some of her relatives had been killed by worshippers of *U Thlien*. The bodies were found in a car in a riverbed, and the police concluded that they had an accident. According to the informant, this was all dissimulation and her relatives had been sacrificed to *U Thlien*.

- A woman in her forties recalled the days as a teenager when she was a victim of *U Thlien* and was apathetic and losing weight. Her mother took to a healer, and she was cured.

According to the Khasi, both types of narratives are true and proof enough that *U Thlien* is real and a part of the evil landscape in Meghalaya. Even when I was listening to the testimonies firsthand, I tried to find some justification. The traditional anthropological explanation of witchcraft as a catharsis for social changes and social inequalities could work in Meghalaya. The great disparity of wealth within Khasi society did not emerge before the end of the 20th century. This could explain why most people accused of being *U Thlien* worshippers are wealthy. This easy explanation does not dwell, however, on why people believe in *U Thlien* in urban settings, where a secular and Western-oriented approach to myths could easily be adopted.

At first, when I heard about *U Thlien*, my reflections were those of a researcher in a foreign setting. I was attracted to the supernatural in general and decided to focus on healing since the subject showed great promises in Shillong. When does the anthropologist start to hear the real story? When does it become a fact of life, a common threat, and a warning not to go walking alone in the countryside and in the jungle at night? When do we really start let go of our doubts to understand *U Thlien* as the Khasi do? In an unsettling way, as a Westerner one may need the testimony of another Western person. During my time in the field, I went to visit a remote village called Mawhet. It is only 30 km away from a city, but the road is so bad it takes three hours to reach the village. Once there, the village is attractive. There is one main road lined with pretty houses. Some of these are in concrete, but most are traditional Khasi houses in bamboo. During my stay, I met with Sister Helen in a convent. Sister Helen is a Spanish nun who has resided in Meghalaya for

decades. She lived in Shillong for a while, then was sent to Mawhet to run the hospital managed by the nuns. When I asked her about *U Thlien*, she shared with me the following story:

> One of the sisters went with the ambulance to town. There was a really sick guy who needed to go to the hospital. On the way, this guy asked the ambulance to stop, and he confessed to the sister that he was a *menshohnoh* (a worshipper of *U Thlien*) and that he had killed people!

This confession made her believe in *U Thlien*. This led me to wonder: What are the limits of believing? Why are our perceptions of reality so different? Despite having the same level of education and middle-class background, but in two different countries, why would my assistant forever believe in witchcraft, curses and spiritual healing whereas it would be difficult for me to enter this world? Why would the Spanish nun, a Catholic, believe in Khasi curses? In the course of this thesis, I will be using the ontological approach to answer this question. First, however, I need to understand witchcraft as the Khasi do. What is witchcraft for the people of Meghalaya? How do they conceptualize it? Despite using the same word in English, does it mean the same thing for a Khasi and non-Khasi? Second, how does this conception of witchcraft is defined and redefined in a contemporary world? And finally, what should be my position as an anthropologist regarding witchcraft?

The Chapters

Understanding anthropology of witchcraft and healing today starts by analysis the evolution of anthropological theories regarding these topics. The founders of anthropology analyzed the spiritual beliefs of people they studied with enthusiasm. Since it was widely present among a vast array of ontological worlds, witchcraft was also of a great interest and became integrated in the study of religion. **Chapter 1** will serve to illustrate how the understanding of witchcraft evolved from the 19th century to the 21st century. I will show how it was first seen as a characteristic of a primitive mindset. In the postcolonial world, it was explained as an expression of the anxieties linked to rapid social and economic changes. This analytical framework for witchcraft is still popular but has been challenged by anthropologists favouring an ontological approach, as well as by other approaches influenced by phenomenology. The ontological turn searches for a new way to understand witchcraft and its reality. I will focus on the work of Descola and Viveiros De Castro,

among others, to illustrate how witchcraft can be constructed as a reality for both the anthropologists and the people they study. In **Chapter 2**, I will introduce the readers to traditional Khasi religion. Khasi spirituality focuses on the family: rituals are mainly performed by the youngest daughter and the maternal uncles. House goddesses and gods are worshipped at home. Despite mass conversion to Christianity in the last centuries, these traditions are being kept alive. Ten per cent of the Khasi are still followers of the traditional religion. Some ethnic organizations, such as the Seng Khasi, promote traditions and rituals through schooling and yearly events such as dances and animal sacrifices. They also promote traditional healing practices. However, the healing landscape in Meghalaya is richly varied, comprising practices from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. In **Chapter 3**, I will present the main healing practices in Meghalaya. I divided these practices according to the religion of the healers. I then categorized these healing streams as such: tribal healing, Hindu healing, Christian faith healing and Muslim healing. I also provide an overview of the approach to witchcraft from each of these categories of healer. In **Chapter 4**, I will present the main witchcraft practices in Meghalaya. I have identified three important curses that are frequently recognized by their symptoms by healers, victims and their entourage. *U Thlien*, *Taro* and *Bih* seem rampant in Meghalaya. Many other curses were also identified by my informants, and they vary according to region and ethnic group. The way to treat curses depends on the religion and ethnic background of the healer and will be explained further in the chapter. In **Chapter 5**, I will delve deeper in the therapeutic quest of one Khasi family. This family was searching for answers after suffering from many heartbreaking losses and tragedies. While seeking healing, they visited several healers of different faiths and ethnic background. In **Chapter 6**, I will use my theoretical framework and fieldwork material to show how the Khasi construct their reality of witchcraft. In the conclusion to the thesis, I will try the answer the following question: how can anthropologists better understand witchcraft through an ontological approach?

Chapter 1. Cultural and Historical Background

A Visit to the King

One day in April 2016, I set out with my interpreter to visit the King (or the *Syiem*) of the Khasi[2]. We were looking forward to this outing because it was a chance to escape to the countryside for a few hours. Thinking about visiting the palace of the King had fired up my imagination. My interpreter had explained that the King lived in Smits, a place I came to know well after visiting a healer in this locality many times. My interpreter picked me up from my apartment. We drove first through the congested streets of Shillong. At first, the traffic was dense, as usual. We had to make our way through the narrow streets of diverse neighbourhoods. After a while, the streets became large boulevards with three stories high concrete buildings on each side, full of shops and restaurants. Gradually even these buildings disappeared and were replaced by the gentle hills of the countryside south of Shillong. Smits is a smaller locality than Shillong, but it is still chaotic. The market, the bus stand and the taxis take up a lot of the space. It was busy as we passed through in route to the manor where the king and queen live. Children and animals were playing in the wide dusty sides of the road with grassy hills just beyond. Finally, we passed under a row of giant trees that cast a welcoming shade on the visitors. We arrived in front of a compound protected by an opened gate, parked the car and continued by foot. The courtyard was large enough to contain thousands of people, but the palace grounds were almost deserted. There were two main buildings on the property: a contemporary Assamese house and a traditional Khasi house. My interpreter explained how the Syiem organize ritual dancing in front of the traditional house. We waited for some time, taking pictures, when an older man came to greet us. He identified himself as the King's brother-in-law and invited us to assist to healing sessions that were taking place in the compound. We followed him to a simple shed covered by a thin roof to protect people from the sun and with a bench for those needing rest. The healer was standing under the tin roof waiting for patients. The practitioner that day was the king's nephew, Habapan. He had some helpers with him, and his father showed us how it works. Habapan is the deputy Syiem. It is an administrative and political job: among other things, he is charged with keeping peace between villages. His uncle

[2] The origin of the Khasi Syiem shows that initially there were three large Syiemships (Kingships) which later increased over time with large and small Syiemships (Kharumnuid, 2018).

is the present Syiem. He stopped studying to help his uncle after his younger uncle, the deputy Syiem, passed away. Since he has an important role as a maternal uncle, he will have to teach the healing arts to his nephew. Nieces will learn from their mothers, and the nephews from their uncle. He explains:

> But my sister she'll have to follow my mother's footsteps, since my mother she's the priestess, no? So, she has to follow her footsteps like which deals only in the household, performing everything which is especially in Nongkrem dance. Which is inside the house only, the things which are taking place (the rituals of the house). (…) She has a daughter now, she has finished her graduation and she did her Bed. She has been taught and also like me is learning step by step, so and she'll have to teach to her daughters.

Photo 1: Healing ritual to fight the curse of U Thlien, performed by the King

The queen of the Khasi is called the *Syiem Sad* (Syiem, 2010). She is still considered a highly spiritual and very powerful figure. In the past, she was also seen as the only one able to fight *U*

Thlien: the power of healing the victims of the snake would reside only with her (Syiem 2010). This power has been partly taken away from her, as many healers from both genders and different faiths now claim to be able to heal *U Thlien*. It has also been used by other members of the royal family, including the king. Furthermore, there seems to be some restriction on the Syiem Sad's power. As Habapan explained, his mother only deals with rituals taking place inside the house. She does not perform animal sacrifices, as only males who are authorized by their clan or by indigenous religious communities are allowed to do so (Syiem 2010).

As we were watching, the Deputy king was whispering a short prayer while burning a strand of hair from each patient. After the ritual, the patient would go the window at the front of the shed to receive a bag of blessed rice and a bottle of water, also blessed. As I was observing the rituals, I spoke to a middle-age woman who was quite fluent in English. She had been cured from the curse of *U Thlien* before. She then had to come back when she felt sick again. I also spoke with a woman who was visiting the clinic with her daughter. The girl had been sick for three or four years and they had been back three times already, seeking healing. Another girl was diagnosed with OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) just before her exams and her mother thinks it may be the curse of *U Thlien* affecting her. From these conversations and from my observations, it was clear that the patients transcend socio-economic barriers: rich, poor, educated, or unschooled. They consult with the king for various ailments such as palpitation, headache, colic pain, fatigue, *U Thlien*, *Taro*, etc. People also undergo treatment for *Ka Rngiew* (that is, to strengthen the inner spirit existent in every individual) (Diengdoh, 2015). This day of fieldwork helped shape my understanding of contemporary Khasi society. Through my observations and conversations with the healers and their clients, I came to understand how the structures of the traditional Khasi society are still vibrantly alive. I will show how this is the case in what follows.

Overview of Khasi History

The conventional view about the origin of the Khasi is that they are a people of Austric origin who migrated from Southeast Asia. They speak a Mon-Khmer/Mon-Annam linked language (Lyngdoh, 2016b). They may have migrated to the hills from Southeast Asia some millennia ago (Gassah & Lyngdoh, 2002). Khasi is a generic term for various subgroups: *Khynriam* (or Khasi), *Pnar* (Jaintia

or Synteng), *Bnoi, War* and the *Lyngngam* (Pakyntein, 2000). They are ethnically different from most people in India. Furthermore, they mostly practice Christianity, brought by the British colonizers. The Khasi were little known to the outside world until 1765, when the East India Company obtained the governance of the province of Bengal, which included the states of Bengal, *Bih*ar, Orissa and Assam (Mathur, 1979). After the annexation of Assam by the British in 1826, the entire region was brought either under direct or indirect administration of the British (Syiemlieh, 2013). At first, the British had no interest in extending their political and administrative control over the hill areas, except to maintain stability. However, the tribes were accustomed to raiding the plains villages, now within British territory (Allen, 1993). This threatened the interests of the new government. The British also wanted to establish direct communications between Sylhet and the Brahmaputra Valley through the Khasi hills and to develop health stations for their personnel in the hills (Lahiri, 1975; Snaitang, 1993). Negotiation took place with the Khasi chiefs to build the road between Sylhet and Guwahati. The British won the confidence of U Tirot Singh, the Syiem of Nongkhlaw, and he used his influence to convince the other chiefs to allow the building of the road (Mathur, 1979). However, in 1829, Khasi workers killed some officers. A rumour was apparently circulating to the effect that the British were planning to subjugate the Khasi (Mathur, 1979). The Anglo-Khasi War (1824-1833) was fought between U Tirot Singh and his allies against the British (Snaitang, 1993).The rebellion was crushed and Tirot Singh was captured. He died in prison in Dacca in 1836 (Mathur, 1979). The British rulers annexed the Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Hills in 1835 and Garo Hills in 1872-73. With the conquest of the Khasi Hills, Shillong was made the capital of British Assam in 1864 (Haokip, 2014). In 1866, the British transferred the administrative headquarters of Assam from Cherrapunji to Shillong (Mathur, 1979). The British Government recognized the 25 Khasi states and categorized them as either semi-independent or dependent (Haokip, 2014).

Khasi society was politically organized, had strong leadership, practiced agriculture and had a successful iron industry. Despite the loss of power by the Syiem, the political structure of the Khasi did not go through a massive change during colonization. The chiefs still kept their judiciary powers, except in the case of murder and accidental death (Mathur, 1979). In 1873, the Inner Line Act was passed. Tribal communities living in the hills could no longer cross into the plains of Assam. Similarly, non-tribal missionaries, explorers, travelers, etc., had to ask for a written

permission to go beyond the famous imaginary line (Sinha, 2009). When Bengal was partitioned in October 1905, Meghalaya became a part of the new province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam'. However, when the partition was reversed in 1912, Meghalaya became part of the province of Assam ("State at a glance," 2009). After the independence of India, Assam was divided into several separate states, to accede to the different nationalist demands in the region. Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1970 and became a full-fledged state in 1972 (A. Lyngdoh, 2017). Haokip (2013) summarized the events that led to the formation of Meghalaya:

> In 1969, the Indira Gandhi government intended to fulfil the long-standing demands of the hill tribes by providing them an autonomous state within the state of Assam covering all the autonomous districts of Assam, i.e., the Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong), North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) and Lushai Hills districts. However, the tribes in North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills were not enthusiastic about the movement and preferred to remain within Assam. The Mizos of Lushai Hills district wanted to have a separate state and launched their own movement. The Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 provided Meghalaya, which comprises the United Khasi–Jaintia Hills district and the Garo Hills district, with an autonomous state that came into effect on 2 April 1970. Subsequently it became a full-fledged state of India on 21 January 1972, with the passing of the North eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 (p. 86).

Khasi Family Structures

During this visit to Smits, I was able to further exchange with the Deputy Syiem and his helpers on the social structure of the Khasi. It became clear that the real healing power resides with the queen: spiritual powers are passed down from the female line. The Khasi are matrilineal and their kinship system is based on clans, in which members trace their origin from a common ancestress (Seng Khasi, 1969). Clans are not only a matter of social structure but are also intertwined with traditional religion. A Khasi must know and be true to his *Kur* (from the mother's kin) and his *Kha* (from the father's kin) (Lyngdoh, 2002). The structure of these clans is based on matrilineal descent groups: women are the owners of the clan's name and of their family's property. Clans (*kurs*) are divided into several matrilineal lineages called *kpoh* (womb). Each *kpoh* is further subdivided into a number of domestic groups called *ïing* (house) (Khyriemmujat, 2013). The family line is traced through women and children adopt the mother's surname. Property and wealth are inherited by the youngest daughter (Roy, 2018). According to the Khasi, the mother who nurtures the child during its gestation should have rights over him or her. The father provides

stature and form, while the mother contributes flesh and blood to the child (Nongbri, 1988). The children take the clan's name of the mother, and it is through her that they are recognized as Khasi. If the mother is non-Khasi, a new clan name is given to her off-springs, by the relatives of the father (Pakyntein, 2000). Men cannot pass down the clan name to their descendants, since they marry out of the group and become attached to their wives' households (Leonetti et al., 2007). Although the youngest daughter of the family, the *Khatduh*, inherits the ancestral house and property, the other sisters are also given a share of the inheritance (Seng Khasi, 1969). The *Khatduh* is responsible towards all members of her family. She resides with her parents and looks after them in their old age. She also houses and looks after her disabled or widowed brothers and sisters and their children. She raises the orphans of her deceased sisters (Pakyntein, 2000). For all these reasons, the Khasi society is considered to be a matrilineal society, in which one traces lineage and descent through the mother (Banerjee, 2015).

Some have argued that the Khasi are matrilineal but not matriarchal. For example, there are no women in the traditional local governing bodies. In the modern political system, a few women have won seats in an election. Traditionally women's opinions may be sought, but the final decisions are made by the males (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010). It is however recognized that women have an important role in economic and family matters. They are allowed to own land and property, are active in business or work as professionals (Leonetti et al., 2007). However, maternal uncles were traditionally the most important members of Khasi society. Although descent is traced through the mother, the maternal uncle was considered the head of the family. He was also the caretaker of the members of the clan and the main negotiator in the marriages of his sisters' children. He was the manager of lineage property. As the main spokesman for the lineage in village assemblies, he performed family rites (Khyriemmujat, 2013).

The processes of urbanization and Christianization have weakened the traditional roles of the kñi (Bareh, 1985; Mawrie, 2013), as the ultimate male authority and the custodian of family religion. Furthermore, a growing number of migrants from patriarchal societies of neighbouring plains, as well as media, modernity and education have been playing a role in bringing about changes to the close-knit egalitarian Khasi society (Mukhim, 2014; Nongbri, 1988; Pakyntein, 2000). This has greatly affected healing and religious traditions, since families still practicing Khasi religion

sometimes struggle to find an uncle to perform rituals. Male family members who have converted to Christianity no longer know the rituals. In response to this threat to traditions, the *kñi*'s power has largely been outsourced to healing and religious professionals.

Economy and Political Organization

Before British colonization, the economy was primarily agricultural. The fields and forests provided food and fuel to the villages. Mines were owned by whole communities (War, 1991). Agriculture was based on the slash-and-burn or *jhum* system of cultivation (Mawphlang, 2012). Commerce was another important economic activity of the Khasi-Jaintia people. They traded honey, beeswax, ivory, lime, oranges, betel nut, iron, and coarse cotton. In return they received rice, dried fish, salt, spices, cotton, silk and copper from Assam and Bengal. They also manufactured iron implements (Mawphlang, 2012). The iron and limestone industries were crushed at the beginning of colonization, as the British flooded the market with cheaper iron tools from the metropole. Most of the Khasi iron shops closed (Kupar, 2016). Today, the Khasi in the countryside follow subsistence horticulture on the hillsides and paddy cultivation on the valley floors, with the addition of cash crops (e.g., ginger, broomstick, betel nut, and pineapple) and small commercial enterprises (Leonetti et al., 2007). More than 83% of the population still depends on agriculture for its livelihood (Chyne et al., 2017). The pattern of operational holdings in Meghalaya is characterized by the predominance of small and marginal farmers, who operate 82.57% of the total cropped area (Departement of agriculture, 2005). In cities, however, people follow a westernized lifestyle and work in offices or stores or as business owners.

Prior to the British conquest, the Khasi had a well-established political organization. The tribe lived in villages comprising different clans (War, 1991). A *Lyngdoh* (a priest) or a *Basan* (an elder) was elected to lead a village council (Laloo, 2014). The *Syiem*, or king, was at the top of the traditional Khasi administration of each kingdom. He was assisted by other officials of the *Hima* (state), for the running of the administration (Gassah, 2002). Kings were appointed following a process of selection by the ruling families. Fifteen native states with Syiemship were originally formed in the Khasi hills (Datta, 1996). There was no common centralized political structure in Meghalaya and *Hima*, or chieftainships, were under the rule of various *Syiem* (Mawphlang, 2012). The role of the *Hima Durbar* as the supreme authority of each state was to maintain law and order.

It was the highest legislative, judicial and executive body and also acted as a supreme court (Snaitang, 1993). Still today, at the village level, Khasi men choose their own headman (*rangbah shnong*) and his council of executives (*rangbah dong*) to look after judicial and administrative affairs. The local councils (*dorbars*) are accountable to the *Syiem* (Oosterhoff et al., 2015). In order to become a chief, one needs to belong to the ruling *Syiem* clan and to be a male (Laloo, 2014). Despite their high social status, in the traditional system, Khasi women were not allowed to participate in administrative, legislative, judicial and political activities (Jyrwa, 1984; Pakyntein, 2000).

Khasi Traditional Religion

Khasi traditional religion has quite often been qualified as animistic. The Khasi worshipped forest and river deities. The importance of women was reflected in the worship of female clan goddesses. Before the advent of British colonialism, the entire Khasi community followed the traditional indigenous religion, known as *Ka Niam Tip Briew Niam Tip Blei*, the "Religion of Knowing Man, Knowing God " (Mawrie, 1981). It could be categorized as animistic in anthropological terms: many gods were worshipped. Amongst these, *U Blei Nongthaw*, the Creator, and *Ka Blei Synhsar*, his female counterpart, were protective deities of the state, family, and the people. They co-existed with nature, and spirits of the ancestor (Mathur, 1979). However, some scholars have argued that the Khasi traditional religion was monotheist, since worshipping focused on a single god whose sex changed according to context. This is why even today among the Khasi God is sometimes known as *U Blei* (masculine), and other times as *Ka Blei* (feminine) (Syiem, 2010). However, we cannot deny that even amongst Christian Khasi, God reigns over a world where there are plenty of other deities and spirits. They, however, cannot be considered equivalent to the one God, the Creator. He is everywhere and omniscient (Mawrie, 1981). Another significant component of the Khasi religious worldview is the clan, around which social order in the community is preserved (Lyngdoh, 2018). Khasi religion is family and clan oriented. Originally, it did not expand beyond the confines of close familial observance. *Ka Niam* emphasized the sanctity of the clan and inter-clan relationships which are the basis of social cohesion (A. Lyngdoh, 2017). Some of these elements can still be found both in converted and non-converted households. It is worth noting here that in Meghalaya, 70.3% of the population now practices Christianity ("State at a glance,"

2009), and the traditional religion is still followed by at least 10% of the population (Khyriemmujat, 2013).

The main representative of the Khasi religion is the king (the *Syiem*). Despite cultural and political changes, the *Syiem* family still holds real and honorary power in the Khasi community. The *Syiem* is also the honorary chief of the state while his mother or his eldest sister is the custodian of traditional religion (Mathur, 1979). Traditionally, the chief was believed to have supernatural powers, including those of healing. Subject suffering from illness would go to the *Syiem* who would drive away demons through prayer and the burning of the victim's hair (Snaitang, 1993). The Khasi had a code of conduct, orally transmitted. These rules helped the community to maintain mutual relationships with the entire Khasi cosmology. For example, to know man and to know God implied the fulfilment of responsibilities that humans have towards *U Blei, Ka Blei, Ki Blei*. According to Nongbri (2006), the Khasi consider themselves to be the custodians of the natural world. This role does not confer on them superior claims over nature, but rather imposes a responsibility upon them to ensure distributive justice and equality of access to all human and non-human users (pp. 12-13). Elaborate rituals are carried out in many parts of the Khasi and Jaintia hills to worship the deities who reside in sacred sites (Nongbri, 2006). These sites have a great importance in clan history, as the common ancestor may have reincarnated as a river and still possess a great influence. In this case, he or she will be elevated to the position of a god or goddess. Each god has his own name, and manifests himself by possessing mediums in order to interact with the human world (Miller, 1994). For example, the Shillong god is believed to be the progenitor of *Ka Pahsyntiew*, the ancestress of the Syiem of Khyrim. Every year the *Syiem* of Khyrim offers animal sacrifices to the Shillong god during the *Pomblang* festival (Nongbri, 2006).

Ancestors worship also plays an important part in Khasi religion and sacrifices are offered to clan founders (Mathur, 1979). The soul of the individual who has lived honestly and righteously ascends to the House of God (*Dwar U Blei*) and is united with the souls of the ancestral mother (*Iawbei*) and the first maternal uncle (*Suidnia*) of the clan as well as those of other members residing there (Khyriemmujat, 2013). For the soul to be at peace, however, specific rituals are needed. According to one informant, there are specific rituals to be held after an unnatural death in the household:

> There has been an unnatural death in my family which was in the past, long time ago, where my sister's husband passed away. Because of that, in the past, my parents, my mom especially, believed that because the death was not natural, the soul must be resting in peace and the soul must go without haunting the family or future generations. To ensure that his soul is resting, there is a performance that is done in my family.

These rituals follow the principles of Khasi religion, according to which God will only allow humans to meet him in His house after their death if they have led a righteous life. According to the Khasi creation myth, this deal was struck with God after he created humans. Khasi would be the descendants of the *Hynniewtrep* (people of the seven huts). God distributed humans among 17 huts in heaven. The residents of the huts frequently climbed down a ladder resting on the peak named *Sohpetbneng* in Meghalaya (Roy, 2018). They enjoyed the freedom to travel between Earth and Sky. However, seven of these families eventually expressed the wish to stay on Earth. God granted their request and gave them three commands to follow in order to re-enter Heaven after their earthly term (Syiemlieh, 2013). In another version of this creation myth, they would descend to earth every morning by a golden ladder for cultivation and return in the evening before nightfall. One day, however, the inhabitants of seven of the huts failed to return in time and the ladder was removed before the onset of darkness (Khyriemmujat, 2013). They pleaded with God, but they were not allowed to return. A rooster was sent to mediate between God and the people. This animal became the traditional mediator between the Khasi and Heaven. The Khasi made a deal with God. They could enter His house only after their death, provided they had conducted themselves in a righteous way (*ka hok*) on earth. The other essential condition was that after their death, all rites should have been properly performed by their relatives (Khyriemmujat, 2013). This explains why ancestors are still today held in very high respect and worshiped by their descendants (Jyrwa, 1984). Improper worship or abandonment of the practice by converted families may lead to bad luck and even death, since the ancestors may take revenge on the renegades. Changing the clan's name without the permission of its goddess can also bring decades of misfortune.

Since the Khasi cannot converse directly with God, there are various mediators between the humans and the divine. Communication with the Supreme Being, in the religion of the Khasi, takes the form of a legal argument, carried out with respect and reverence. These communications will usually open with a petition to the precious and loving nature of the Supreme Being (Lyngdoh,

2016b). The great Khasi commandment is to behave righteously during life on earth (Mawrie, 2014). This ensures entry into the House of God. When a person dies, the Khasi say: *Go and chew kwai in the House of God*. If the deceased has failed to live as a righteous person, his soul roams around the universe as an evil spirit. The same may happen if, at the time of cremation, his or her kin do not seek forgiveness from God on their behalf (Khyriemmujat, 2013). According to Mawrie (1981) and Khyriemmujat (2013), some of the important prescriptions for earning righteousness are:

- *Tip Briew, Tip Blei*: (Know man, know god). A man can "know God" if he "knows" his fellow living beings since God manifests himself through his creations. All human beings, as the creations of God, are equal in the eyes of God. Therefore "Knowing his fellow;
- *Tiphok-Tipsot*: Know what is right and just.
- *Tipkur-Tipkha*: Know and respect your kinsmen.
- *Tip burom-Tip akor*: Know the etiquette of life.

According to the Khasi, there are three things that human beings possess in their lifetime: the body, the soul, and *Ka Rngiew* (a kind of spiritual aura). *Ka Rngiew* is defined as man's capacity to bring rational considerations to bear upon his understanding of his own situation. Even after the death of the body, the *Rngiew* still exists. According to Mawrie (1981):

> When man has lost this capacity (Ka Rngiew), he has lost the very being of his life. It is said that "ka Rngiew" of a man has fled to the devils or to other evil powers, and the real cause of it is that man has gone astray from God, and so God must have forsaken him. No other power in this world can restore to man his lost ka Rngiew, except his own sincere endeavour towards peace with God (p. 25).

Sacred Groves and Deities

There are large number of sacred groves in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Many are larger than a hundred hectares, but some are as small as an acre, with many more "undiscovered" sacred forests. Religious custom forbids damage or removal of anything, even a leaf or a stone, from a sacred grove (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010). Sacred groves represent the space through which indigenous community people communicate with the Almighty, by performing rituals. Each sacred grove has specific taboo, social customs, and rituals (Lyngdoh, 2020). Forest deities reside in the various sacred groves (Ormsby, 2013). Since deities and spirits are living on these groves, hunting, foraging or felling of trees in these forests are strictly prohibited (Nongbri, 2006). It is also

prohibited to defile the grove by not behaving appropriately, e.g., smoking, drinking alcohol, going on a date, littering, or going to the toilet (Ormsby, 2013). It is believed that the spirit could kill the offender (Khyriemmujat, 2013). Since each of these groves have its own guardian spirits, any disrupting activities may offend them and incur their wrath (Khyriemmujat, 2013). These groves are linked with the traditional "Khasi" faith or religion and were established as a kind of bond between man and God (Kharkongor & Tiwari, 2016). Rituals for traditional religion were performed at sacred groves every year. Some ceremonies involved animal sacrifice for the forest deity. With conversion to Christianity, several rituals are no longer performed (Ormsby, 2013). Changes began to appear in indigenous forest use and management practices during colonization (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Missionaries saw the local beliefs in the sanctity of the sacred grooves as a silly superstition and felt that no harm would happen to the Khasi if they disregarded sanctions (Syiemlieh, 2013). However, the sense of sacredness surrounding the groves is still strong. These are still protected areas, guarded by designated caretakers. Other than the sacred groves, certain mountains, hills, and rivers are also sacred since deities and spirits inhabit them. Sacrifices and some other rites are performed as a sign of gratitude to those spirits and deities who are looking after the natural wealth and protect them from evil (Khyriemmujat, 2013). One Seng Khasi member explained:

> All these are creations of God, but whatever it is, God is the Almighty. We don't go and worship them, we don't go and worship those spirits, we worship God, but at the same time we address them off and on, requesting them, reminding them: you have always been our guardians, we will always look for you for protection.

Despite the advent of Christianity, many traditional Khasi rituals are still practiced in Meghalaya, in urban settings or in the countryside. Originally, there was no priestly occupation in Khasi society. The maternal uncle and the youngest daughter acted as the family religious performers of rituals. There were sometimes assisted by the community priest (from the Lyngdoh clan) (Pakyntein, 2000). The eldest adult male in the matrilineage performed family rituals. He was supposed to know all the rites and religious practices. This knowledge was transmitted down generations from mother's brother to a sister's son in the lineage (Khyriemmujat, 2013). However, in contemporary Meghalaya, collective rituals are organized and attract people from across the state. These rituals tend to be extraordinary events, with thousands of attendees. They are meant to show the strength of traditional culture and maintain the cohesion among followers of original

Khasi religion. Women are supposed to participate three times consecutively in these annual dances. They have to be virgins, and so cannot be already married. An important part of this festival is the ritual of *pomblang*, or the decapitation of goats offered by the subjects to the Syiem of Khyrim. Offerings are made to the ancestors of the ruling clan ("State at a glance," 2009). Another festival is the *Ka Behdiengkhlam* of the Jaintia (Mawphlang, 2012). According to Kharmawphlang (2012), there are also rituals involving the worshipping of rice. In one of these rituals, the spirit of the paddy fields is persuaded to come out of the wilderness. Rice grows in the wild in Meghalaya, and samples of this rice are selected for consecration. The rice is symbolically carried in a basket to the sacred grove.

Photo 2: Khasi monoliths, used to mark graves or to commemorate special events.

The original Khasi believe in one supreme God. However, the world is inhabited by a variety of supernatural beings. Under this all-powerful god there are thousands of smaller entities[3], from fairies to house goddesses. They exist independently from this superior god, not only in jungles and rivers but also in urban settlements. Furthermore, there are human souls haunting living

[3] A supernatural being, such as a god or a ghost.

individuals and settlements. They are considered malevolent and cause misfortune. Some of these restless spirits have committed a mortal sin in life. Some are the souls of those whose funeral rites were not fulfilled. They are shy and they seek to avoid human company. Finally, there are the spirits of people who have died violently. They afflict any person who has the misfortune to meet them. They inhabit rivers, dales, caves, and other special geographical sites. A few of these spirits have been elevated to the status of deity as a result of people's fear (Lyngdoh, 2012; Mawrie, 2000).

Conversion to Christianity

Christianity had a major impact on the populations of Meghalaya. One of the first British commissioners, Francis Jenkins, invited and even paid missionaries to establish themselves in this part of the empire (Downs, 1983). Following this invitation, there were some isolated attempts at conversion to Christianity in the Khasi Hills in the early 1800s. Conversions were made at the level of the individuals and not at the clan level (Khyriemmujat, 2013). In 1838 the Baptist Serampore Mission had to abandon its work due to lack of funds (Jyrwa, 1998). However, the arrival of Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionaries brought major changes to the region (Mawphlang, 2012). Education and evangelization activities started anew. The non-Christian Khasi, however, strived to maintain their distinct cultural identity. Although Roman Catholic missionaries toured the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam as early as 1626, the Catholics started their work in Khasi Jaintia Hills only in 1890. They established a small school in Shillong, followed by a convent and an orphanage in a large mission compound. The missionaries faced an unexpected setback came with the great 1897 earthquake[4] (Jyrwa, 1984).

Education was used as a conversion tool during colonial times (Khyriemmujat, 2013). The government justified its contribution to mission schools by their educational purpose. It was also cheaper, since the government did not have to pay the full cost, the rest being provided by religious authorities (Downs, 1983). Missionaries of tribal origin would persuade a non-Christian village to

[4] The 1897 Assam earthquake is considered to be one of the greatest earthquakes in history. It was felt as far west as Nagpur in Central India and caused severe damage in a radius of 500 km. Extensive building damages were reported in Calcutta, 470 km from the epicentre (Jain, 2016). There are fears that the next earthquake is just around the corner and may cause huge damage in Shillong, where most buildings are now in concrete and several stories high.

have a school. A Christian schoolmaster would then be sent on site. Besides his normal educational duties, he would evangelize the local population. Whenever a Christian community came into existence, the schoolmaster became its first pastor (Downs, 1983). Christian missionaries created the Khasi script, for the double purposes of educating school children and propagating Christianity (Bareh, 1989). Mission schools, however, were not always popular because of the "Romanization" of the alphabet and the exclusion of instruction in Bengali, used in Cherrapunjee at the time (Mawphlang, 2012; Ray, 1983). Furthermore, Christian converts had to face opposition from non-convert, keen on maintaining the traditional Khasi tribal culture (Mathur, 1979). Despite this opposition, the number of students who attended these mission schools gradually increased (Mawphlang, 2012). By 1866 there were 60 churches and 65 schools (Syiemlieh, 2013). The Roman Catholics, who followed the Welsh mission in 1890, became their main competitors. The former controlled the institutions of higher studies while the latter controlled most primary education (Mathur, 1979). This strong link between education and Christianity in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is still visible today as the most prestigious schools are run by religious communities. In the countryside, Catholic priests and nuns often offers the only educational opportunity.

The first converts faced important dilemmas. They were banned from participating in traditional religious sacrifices, harvest feasts, dances, cremation, ancestor worship, etc. They began to abandon these practices. In their place, missionaries substituted Christian rituals: sacraments, baptism, thanksgiving services and other practices (Mawphlang, 2012). Conversions of the males in the family caused problems since they were the guardians of the religious rituals (Khyriemmujat, 2013). Among them were several converts belonging to the families of the *Syiem*. Several gave up Syiemship (chieftainship) in order to become or remain Christian (Syiemlieh, 2013). The Church put severe restrictions on the converted males for rendering ritual service to their matrilineage (Khyriemmujat, 2013). Non-converted members of the family were left with nobody to perform them (Shangpliang, 2008). Conversions led to tensions in the Khasi society itself, since the missionaries discouraged traditional beliefs, such as the belief that illness, and misfortunes arise out of the transgression of man's duties which cause a divide between God and man; such transgressions were remedied through sacrifice and rituals (Syiemlieh, 2013). Still today, according to non-converted Khasi, the growing rate of conversion to Christianity is a cultural threat to indigenous culture. However, nuns and priests of indigenous descent see similarities between

the different life cycle rituals of the Khasi, such as initiation ritual and name-giving ceremony, and those of the Catholic Church, such as confirmation and baptism. Father Festus debunked the traditional Khasi notion that Christians copied their rituals:

> Christianity comes just hardly hundred years ago and this one is thousands of years, so they cannot copy what we are having, in fact when we came, when they came to evangelize us, we understood better what this traditional religion was. We understood in the sense that, okay, this one explains it better and here we saw things clearly in the Catholic Church, you know, not in the Presbyterian, not in other churches with regards to their practices. They believe in the Trinity, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit but in their own names.

According to Festus, in the Jaintia Hills, it is the Hindus who came first and spoiled the traditional culture, not the Christian Fathers and Sisters. In addition to Christianity, the Jaintia have incorporated elements of Hinduism into their religious practices. Due to their frequent interactions with the Bengali kingdoms, the former Jaintia kings followed the Hindu religion, which local Jaintia people then adopted (M. Lyngdoh, 2017).

The Birth of Seng Khasi: Resistance

Early in the 20th century, Khasi intellectuals launched a counterattack on Christianity in order to preserve their cultural heritage. The movement originally found expression in a literary revolution under the initiative and leadership of the Khasi intelligentsia (Jyrwa, 1984). Jeebon Roy, the father of Khasi contemporary culture, initiated it by textualizing Khasi oral religious and cultural traditions. He set up the first Khasi Press in 1896 and started a Khasi traditional High School in 1876 in Shillong (Syiemlieh, 2013). By 1899, Jeebon Roy founded the "Seng Khasi," a socio-cultural organization dedicated to protect, preserve and promote the customs and traditions of the Khasi (Syiemlieh, 2013). Its aim was to safeguard the doctrine of truth and the essence of Khasi culture (Mathur, 1979). The Seng Khasi also made a great contribution to Khasi literature. Some of their first books are read in schools and colleges even today (Jyrwa, 1984). The organization is still active today and maintains close links with the Khasi royalty. The current aim of the organization is to unite all Khasi who are not converted to any official religion and to create amongst them the consciousness of their culture and religion (Kharbangar, 2006). A member of the Seng Khasi cultural organization explains:

> When we're dealing with our religions and customs, traditions, we the Khasi, we don't have a temple, we don't have a church. Our church is at home. There is no temple. Mother, father and uncle they have the temple at home. This is Seng Khasi, it is not a church. We assemble, to say it's the teachings of the residents. It's like institutions, its institutions that when we find God we find at home, mother, father, and uncle, and all the children just sitting together.

They are also striving to save traditional healing by establishing clinics in towns and the countryside with fixed hours and a rotating staff of healers. As I will demonstrate further in the thesis, one of the tasks of the traditional healer is to mend family relationships. The Khasi seek out healers who will diagnose the cause of the illness, which may be located in the patient, the ancestors or in the community. Some of the illnesses will be diagnosed to have a physical cause and the healer will use herbal treatments. The patient may even be referred to a modern doctor. But at times the illness is attributed to spells cast by evil spirits (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010).

A family will often use divination to find the cause of misfortunes or discord. A traditional healer reads the signs in grains of rice. If he cannot find answers in those, he will move to egg breaking and even chicken sacrifice. Once they have found the cause of the family's misfortune, the healers perform a sacrifice in order to get rid of the affliction (Mawrie, 1981). To encourage people to practice an organized religion, the Seng Khasi sponsors colourful dance festivals. In earlier times, the Khasi religion was clan and family oriented, but now, on Sundays, non-converted Khasi go to the Seng Khasi Hall to pray (Lyngdoh, 2016b).

Ethnic and Religious Interrelations

Meghalaya's present population composition is the outcome of immigration that took place at different historical moments (Datta, 1996). The population of Shillong is mainly Christian, Hindu and Muslim, but there are also small numbers of Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists. Presbyterians and Catholics are among the main Christian denominations (Mathur, 1979). Commercial and marital contacts between the Khasi and plain people brought them in contact with Islam around the 17th century when Muslims began visiting the region. Many settled in the hills and adopted Khasi customs (Bareh, 1985). Jaintia chefs appointed Hindu and Muslim officials. Some states had Hindu subjects in the plains, where their jurisdiction extended. However, these contacts did not lead to major cultural changes and the Khasi continued to practice their traditional religion (Snaitang,

1993). The colonial period brought many changes, such as the mass conversion to Christianity mentioned above. Immigration to the Khasi hills during that time remained limited. It was mainly restricted to the plains of Assam. Meghalaya remained either unattractive or out of bounds because of its geographical emplacement (Sengupta & Purkayastha, 2016). In the post-Independence period, a flow of immigrants started to trickle in the newly formed state of Meghalaya, from neighbouring Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, and Nepal and to some extent from China and Pakistan (Maharatna, 2013). This led to the state being ravaged by periodic ethnic conflicts between indigenous tribals and non-tribal settler communities (Haokip, 2014). Soon after the creation of the state in 1972, tensions exploded between the indigenous communities and the migrants mainly over the issue of economic opportunities. With the introduction of State policies to protect native communities, the tensions subsided in the 2000s (Singha & Nayak, 2015).

The post-independence period has also witnessed several separatist conflicts groups in the Northeast of India. The predominantly tribal region has been the site of rapid proliferation of political mobilizations for separate statehood (Gaikwad, 2015). This had led to many armed conflicts in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and Tripura. The transformation of these conflicts into insurgencies, coincide with a view of their respective histories in which the Indian State is a "colonial power" (Das, 2013). Despite their many differences, Northeast India's militant groups have all been formed around demands for sovereign nationhood, independence, or autonomous homelands (Kolås, 2017). Many of the northeastern ethnic communities have never seen themselves as part of the Indian culture and civilization (Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2008). The differences with mainland India are sometimes irreconcilable. The containment of armed struggles by the Indian state does not help in the peace process (Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2008). The Indian Army has been given extraordinary powers in counter-insurgency operations in the region, most notably through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 (AFSPA). The military is a powerful presence in the Northeast (McDuie-Ra, 2008). Meghalaya saw the rise of an insurgency with the formation of the *Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council* (HALC) which had the participation of all the three major tribes of the state—Khasi, Jaintia and Garos—and they shared a common goal of fighting the "outsiders". Armed struggle has continued for a separate Khasiland and a separate Garoland (Rahman, 2017).

Since Independence, this region has witness the arrival of Bangladeshi, Nepalese along with the arrival of migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and *Bih*ar (Bijukumar, 2013). Ethnic riots between indigenous tribals such as the Khasi and the migrant non-tribal communities, including the Nepali, shook the state in 1979, 1987 and 1992 (Haokip, 2014). Ethnic tensions between the tribes (indigenous groups) and non-tribes (migrants) have now slowly shifted towards other indigenous tribal groups in the 2000s. This ultimately has led to the demand for creation of separate States, both by the Khasi and the Garos (Singha & Nayak, 2015). The causes of such estrangements range from minor incidents to policies adopted by the three major communities of the state, and which are, in most cases, subsequently upheld by the state government to protect their economic interests, identity and land (Haokip, 2014). The most apparent points of conflicts are mainly between those of different ethnic backgrounds. For example, between Indians from the mainland and Khasi. However, there is also a deep line of division between converted Khasi and Jaintia and those who have not converted. Father Festus, a Jaintia, has faced rejection from non-converted tribe members:

> There are things that they don't want the Church doing. Because now they see that we are putting dances, traditional dances, traditional dresses, traditional music, traditional songs inside the church. They said: you are stealing them away from us and so these are only ours. You are no longer pure Pnar, so you have to ask permission from us when you use them.

Despite these tensions, marriages across the ethnic lines are common. The matrilineal social structure means the children born of these unions will be considered Khasi. For cases where people need a new matrilineal name (in the case of a woman from outside Meghalaya marrying a Khasi man), traditional solutions already exist. An elder brother of an informant married a non-Khasi woman. He strongly believed in the matrilineal system of descent, but his wife was not Khasi. She could not give her surname to the children, but through the ritual of *Tang Jait*, she got a new surname. In the case of this family, it was the second generation where one of the parents was not Khasi. The father was a Muslim from Bangladesh. He welcomed the Khasi culture and religion and never stopped the mother from doing any of the cultural practices. Their children received the traditional Khasi baptism and the father participated very openly:

> It was always considered very auspicious by my mom and my dad that there was a chicken sacrifice in the name of the child, with all the rice, grains, the secret water, and all the offerings. That is one aspect which is there over the years.

Conclusion

Both internal and international influx have played a significant part in shaping the distinct patterns of population growth and other important demographic characteristics in Meghalaya (Maharatna, 2013). The Khasi often construct their identity in relation to larger, more global paradigms, where their unique history within the region and their matrilineal tribal culture are seen closer to Western, progressive values (Gaikwad, 2015). They often make a distinction between themselves and migrants from other parts of India, based on these values. The social organization of the Khasi tribe is rare in India and its ancestral features are still striving today despite globalization and socioeconomic changes. It is still a matrilineal society, divided by clans, where inheritance is passed down from the mother to the daughter. Before colonization, it was an agricultural society, mostly illiterate but recognized for its skills in iron making. The political structure of the Khasi, centred around the village councils and the higher authority of the king, was highly developed. This may explain the resilience of the Khasi and their capacity to culturally survive colonization. Meghalaya has, however, not been totally spared from tribal struggle following Indian Independence. Some armed groups are still active in the state, and communal agitation still erupts from time to time. However, healing places are providing a safe space where people from different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds congregate in a peaceful way.

Shillong is the capital of the region and is recognized as a centre for education and medical treatment. People flock there from neighbouring states to be treated in the city's posh public hospitals. The free hospitals in Shillong are clean and well maintained. Biomedicine, however, is pretty much useless when confronted with cultural and traditional illnesses. Since the state of Meghalaya is ridden with such ailments, it is not surprising that traditional healers are so popular. In a recent survey, the estimated reported usage of tribal medicine across rural households in Meghalaya was 79.1%, with 13.5% reporting frequent use and 65.6% reporting that they sometimes used it. Tribal medicine was believed to be efficacious by 87.5% (Albert et al., 2015).

However, these practices are also quite popular in multicultural Shillong. Even though each major group is clearly defined by ethnic and religious lines in daily life, when it comes to healing boundaries are porous. Since each tribal group in Meghalaya possess its own traditions, the healing

landscape is rich and diverse. In urban Meghalaya, it comprises not only Khasi traditional healing and biomedicine, but also other tribal healing practices (Garo and Jaintia), as well as Muslim, Hindu, and Christian traditions. Seeking healing in Shillong implies an intimate common domestic knowledge of the causes and symptoms of ailments. According to Sister Agatha, if a person gets sick, the traditional Khasi will go to the traditional healer. Christians go to the charismatic priest, or to the laic faith healers. Witchcraft practices have also a way of crossing ethnic lines. Despite being central to the traditional culture of the tribe, it is also observed in other communities. The secret ritual for worshipping the snake includes actors who are not Khasi.

Chapter 2. The Reality of Witchcraft and the Ontological Turn

Introduction

Magic, witchcraft, and sorcery have a special place in anthropology. Classical fieldworkers saw primitive societies' beliefs in magic and sorcery as highly fascinating. Many major works used such beliefs to develop anthropological theories of religion that were later applied to other sub-fields. However, the rationality behind such beliefs was questioned by anthropologists from the onset of the discipline in the 19th century. The foundation of modern science is based on the notion that reality can be measured, a tendency that has led many anthropologists to question or deny the reality of spirits, ancestors, and other spiritual phenomena (Bartelt, 2006). It does not mean however, that doubts were never expressed. The very history of anthropology may be described as an enduring crisis concerning the ideas of what constitutes reason and rationality (Kapferer, 2003).

Since the first anthropological attempt to explain witchcraft, researchers have struggled with explaining and rationalizing it. Only with the ontological turn, in the last 20 years or so, has there been a real attempt to understand witchcraft as does the Other. To better understand this evolution, I will first take the reader through a historical review of anthropological theory on witchcraft. This will allow me to show how the analysis of magic (including witchcraft and curses) has evolved from a modernist Euro-centred perspective to a post-humanistic approach in the 21st century. It may seem daunting at first to go back to the roots of anthropological theory to understand such a relatively new movement as the ontological turn. However, I deemed this step necessary since witchcraft and magic were important topics in anthropology until the 1970s and many influential anthropologists devoted at least part of their work to these topics.

In the first section of the chapter, I will examine how the notion and perception of witchcraft in anthropology has evolved since the mid-19th century. Various theoretical frameworks have emerged for understanding these concepts. Religion and associated phenomena were often explained as a reflection of social structure and relationships, or as a functional regulator of social equilibrium. Various theories also tried to explain the beliefs around them in terms of their political or normative consequences or in terms of gender relations. More recently, anthropologists such as Geschiere (1997) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1993) have shown how social and cultural

changes can cause an increase in witchcraft accusations. In the second part of this chapter, I will focus on the developing ontological turn in anthropology and its possible application in the study of witchcraft. Ontological anthropology is deeply interested in metaphysical questions: What is real? What is the world? What exists in it? This excursion into the past will show us how this theoretical development brought about a reconceptualization of witchcraft. I will explain the rise of the ontological turn and its diversification, before examining how it has recently been used to propose a new theoretical framework to understand witchcraft and magic. In the third and final section, I will untangle some of the many critics of the ontological turn regarding its theoretical and methodological premises.

Theoretical History of Magic

Distinctions between witchcraft and sorcery were made early in the development of anthropological theories. Evans-Pritchard (1937) defined witchcraft as the innate, inherited ability to cause misfortune or death; and sorcery as the performance of rituals and spells with the conscious intent of causing harm. Both, however, often required divination to be detected. Divination is a way of exploring the unknown in order to elicit answers to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding (Tedlock, 2001). Divination then leads to healing, allowing the practitioner to resolve the issue.

Edward Tylor, a leading evolutionist, studied many aspects of "primitive" culture, including religion. Tylor defined religion as a belief in spiritual beings, who could think, act, and feel like humans. According to Tylor, magic was of one of the most pernicious delusions that ever existed in human societies. It belonged to the lowest stages of civilization and the lower races. Tylor believed that lower civilizations made a mistake by assuming a relationship between certain elements, simply because they appear to be similar (Tylor, 1871). "Primitive" people, being at the lowest stage of intellectual progression, were particularly prone to making such errors (Argyrou, 2015) and to believe in magic.

Evolutionist theories in anthropology were rejected early in the 20th century, both in Europe and in North America. In North America, Franz Boas argued that each culture had to be understood in

its own terms and that it would be scientifically misleading to rank other cultures according to a Western, ethnocentric typology gauging "levels of development" (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2015). For Boas, magic was the religion of primitive peoples, who understood it as the wonderful qualities that exist in objects, animals, men, spirits and deities, and that are superior to the qualities of man (Stocking, 1989). Despite categorizing magic as an irrational belief, Boas laid the groundwork for the full elaboration of cultural relativism by redirecting anthropology away from evolutionary approaches. Societies and cultures could not be ranked on an evolutionary scale. Each had to be seen as offering a satisfying way of life (Brown, 2008).

If North American anthropology was dominated at the time by the Boasians, functionalism was the main theoretical school in French and British anthropological thoughts until the middle of the 20th century. Functionalism worked to explain the "function" of the customs and institutions that are prevalent in human societies for the individual or for the group. Since beliefs in the supernatural were found in all cultures, functionalists saw them as serving personal and/or societal functions. For Durkheim, magic and religion were both made up of beliefs and rites. Like religion, magic had myths and dogmas, even if they were less developed, probably because it had a more utilitarian goal. According to Durkheim (1912), magic also had ceremonies and prayers. In contrast to religion, however, magic did not bind together its adherents. Between the magician and the individuals who consulted him, there were no lasting bonds comparable to that formed by the believers in the same religion. Since magic had no social function, Durkheim argued that it was not part of social organization. He gave the example of the spirits of deceased people summoned by a magician. The individualistic and even egoistic aspects of these spirits not to mention the magician made them asocial, unlike religion. Since there was no social function attached to magic, Durkheim did not pursue it further.

Mauss and Hubert (1950) argued that belief in "magic" was a total fact since it permeated all of social life or not at all. Magic was an illusion, but one that was either completely or partially believed by practitioners and victims. This belief was itself a necessarily societal phenomenon and the precondition for individual "magicians" to exist (Otto & Stausberg, 2014). In their interpretation, however, they did not propose that magic should be considered as real. It had a

social function, but the ethnographer did not need to believe that the magician really possessed special powers, nor that people may suffer from supernatural causes.

The "classical" approach to the beliefs of others in anthropology has been to recognize the reality of the beliefs of their informants, while contriving to ignore or discredit their ontological claims (Baldacchino, 2019). For the functionalists of the early 20th century, magic was still part of the mentality of less evolved societies. In the 1920s, however, the psychological functionalist Bronislaw Malinowski debunked the prevailing assumption that sorcery was a manifestation of primitive irrationality. Instead, he showed how among the Trobrianders of the Western Pacific, sorcery was a pragmatic practice touching many aspects of life (Nabokov, 2000). In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, he described how magic was used in ordinary daily life (garden magic and the making of a canoe were two prime areas of magical expertise). The Trobrianders also turned to magic in situations of emotional stress (Malinowski, 1922). Magic then fulfilled an important psychological function: it ritualized optimism and enhanced human confidence and hope (Argyrou, 2015). As a functionalist, Malinowski understood that magic was a way of responding to psychological needs. Magical activities allowed people to gain relief and confidence, to ensure that everything possible had been done to achieve success and minimize risks (Moro, 2018). African witchcraft was also a central focus of the structural-functional school of British anthropology. Evans-Pritchard (1937) showed how witchcraft formed an "ideational system" amongst the Azande. He argued that from the point of view of the individual, in particular situations, beliefs in witchcraft presented a logical explanation of unfortunate events. He held that the theory of witchcraft did not exclude empirical knowledge about cause and effect, but supplemented theories of natural causation, and answered other questions about misfortunes.

Further works illustrate how the interpretations of witchcraft by the anthropologists may differ from those of the informants. For example, in some ethnographies, sorcery and witchcraft were seen by the researchers as a positive force, such as in the classic work by Kluckhohn among the Navahos. According to the other, community links were being reaffirmed through curing rituals for illnesses related to witchcraft (Kluckhohn, 1944). Hostilities were directed against a few scapegoats rather than against more numerous victims. Accusations of witchcraft did deflect tensions from the maladjusted institutions, so that they could continue to operate. However,

witchcraft among the Navaho was not identified as something positive by informants: it was conceived as unequivocally evil, as destroying life, mainly through mysterious wasting diseases (Nadel, 1953).

Scholars of the Manchester School concentrated on the relationships of those involved, why they came into conflict, what light this shed on societies, and what factors account for an increase or decrease in accusations and practice of sorcery and witchcraft (McKnight, 2017). Witchcraft accusations were perceived as serving as enforcement of moral behaviour for the whole group. Fear of witchcraft could motivate people to be generous and avoid offending others so as not to provoke a witch's envy or anger. Fear of being accused of being a witch could encourage sociability (Gluckman, 1956). They argued that in societies such as the African ones studied by the British anthropologists in the middle of the 20th century, people had to conform to a strict code of behaviour. Failure to do so was a moral fault and was despised; it inspired envy, which leads to witchcraft or sorcery. Excess, in performance or ambition or exercise of authority, was also considered to be a moral fault, and could be ascribed to evil occult power. Witchcraft dealt with inescapable, but unseen, conflicts in social morality (Gluckman, 2014). For example, among the Konkomba of West Africa, accusations of sorcery took place within the major unit of the social structure. Within this unit, open aggression, conflict, and even loud quarrelling was prohibited by rigorous ritual sanctions. Witchcraft discourse was then protecting the integrity of a social system from intolerable and destructive tensions. People could express these tensions in a structured ritualistic setting (Tait, 1954). In some cases, accusations of witchcraft were interpreted as benefitting groups that had grown too large by enabling them to split apart, thus legitimizing what would otherwise be forbidden (Stabell, 2005). Such a high value was placed on kin remaining united and continuing to reside together that a threat ascribed to witchcraft or sorcery was often required to justify separation. Witchcraft beliefs could thus be used to cut off relations, forcing village break-ups and population movements (Wesch, 2006). Anthropologists also argued that, in some societies, witchcraft discourse deflected dangerous allegations away from the most sensitive social relationships, such as those between close male kin. It was thus seen as protecting the integrity of a social system from destructive tensions. Tensions were brought to light by accusations. Ritual specialists, such as the diviners, were frequently asked to find the reasons behind misfortune or ill health. By pointing the finger at some individuals outside the close family

unit, they would then defuse these tensions and safeguard the stability of the societies. The role of the diviner among the Konkomba tribe of Ghana was that of a stabilizing agent. He helped to reassure and, to preserve stability in society, and to assist continuity. In contrast, the solitary sorcerer (who voluntarily cursed people) was the one who sought to break out of the closed circle of traditional morality. He tried to achieve wealth and power for his clients (Tait, 1954). A "witch" is suspected of practicing, either deliberately or unconsciously, socially prohibited forms of magic. "Sorcerers" intentionally take on the role of magical practitioner, engaging in activity labeled by others as magic with ill or evil intent (Moro, 2018).

For Gluckman (1964), however, social tensions could not entirely explain the belief in witchcraft, since these also existed in societies exempt of these beliefs. Witchcraft accusations also reenforced moral behaviour for the whole group. Fear of witchcraft could motivate people to be generous and avoid offending others so as not to provoke a witch's envy or anger. Fear of being accused as a witch could serve to encourage sociability. Witchcraft accusations could also enable people to shift blame for their personal failures onto the hostile mystical actions of others (a scapegoating function) (Krige, 1947). Four central functions of witchcraft accusations have been widely identified by social anthropologists of the 1950s and 1960s in Africa: 1) as a response to anxiety and stress; 2) as providing a means to express social strains and tensions; 3) as a system of social sanctions; 4) as a means to adapt to rapid and disruptive social changes (Beattie, 2004). As Kapferer (2002) pointed out:

> A major orientation pursued by Gluckman, his students and colleagues, and in different ways by many other anthropologists, was the social basis of belief. The factuality of belief (and of culture conceived as an organization of belief) and the commitment of human beings to beliefs (including those relating to magic, witchcraft and sorcery) are properties of social processes (p.8).

The evolutionists thought that magic and witchcraft would become extinct among primitive people as they progressed on the evolution scale. Later, the anthropological study of witchcraft in the late colonial period centred on functionalism and the revelation of conflict. Durkheim, Mauss, Malinowski and Gluckman saw magic as having an important social and psychological function in pre-modern societies. They saw these functions as universal, answering differently to the same needs for social cohesion and psychological reassurance in different societies. Even if

anthropologists agreed that the reasoning of the subjects was wrong, they demonstrated the implacable logic behind their way of thinking. The same field researchers, however, were convinced witchcraft could not be part of an advanced and industrialized world and would vanish from these societies once they became modernized. However, as the 20th century progressed and colonies gained their freedom from their former colonial masters, entering in a process of modernization and then globalization, witchcraft gave no sign of vanishing. In *Modernity and its Malcontents*, the Comaroffs showed that modernity did not erase all the magical forces in the world. On the contrary, it may have helped reconfigure beliefs in magic and witchcraft. The authors question the narrative of modernity itself and demonstrated that witchcraft was not a discourse of a few backward tribes about misfortune, but the expression of an occult economy. In South Africa, this economy is itself an integral feature of present-day capitalism. It is rooted in the vast wealth that passes through most postcolonial societies and into the hands of a few citizens. Its origin is also found in the mysterious market mechanisms leading to unimaginable riches, in the capital amassed by the rapid, often immaterial flow of value across time and space, and into the places where the local meets the global (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). In this context, supernatural discourse articulates fears about the increased uncertainty found in everyday life and the insecurities of the global economy (Dein, 2016). The concept of occult economy also illustrates the desperation of people left out of the promise of prosperity. This feeling of missing out on economic opportunities led to an upsurge in the practice of witchcraft in Africa according to the authors. It also led to violent reactions against those with suspicious wealth (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). Recent studies show that these discourses multiply in contemporary African cities instead of disappearing. Sorcery discourse and practices are then "modern" phenomena that thrive in settings where urbanization, commoditization, democratization and other processes associated with modernity clashes with existing life worlds (Laheij, 2018). Beliefs in the magical have remained central to the ways Africans see contemporary realities. The evolutionary paradigm of earlier theorists is wrong in its assumptions of unilinear progress and development (Dein, 2016). Modernity and witchcraft can go hand in hand. New technological elements, such as airplanes, can be integrated in the curses and black magic process (Geschiere, 1997). Witchcraft practices and beliefs are then rooted both in tradition and in modernity. They are also found in self-identified rational societies. Geschiere focuses his work on the intersection between occult forces and power, and how sorcery discourses are the products of growing inequalities. Wealth is seen as the product

of witchcraft (Geschiere, 1997). Some studies bring out the continuity of witchcraft beliefs in a supposedly rational and modern Europe. In her research on witchcraft in Slovenia at the beginning of the 21st century, Mencej found out that most of her elderly interlocutors still believed in witchcraft, and that it continued to regulate their relationships with their neighbours. However, economic, and social changes that occurred in the 1970s triggered improvement and changes in the communities' social life. This led to a decline of witchcraft since, according to the author, people lost the shared work time when they would exchange stories and rumours about it. Witchcraft-caused disputes, however, were still occurring in the 2010s. Despite the end of the witchcraft craze in Europe somewhere between the 18th and 19th centuries, witchcraft has, according to evidence from newspapers, court archives and ethnological field research, continued to provide a meaningful explanation for many types of misfortune to many people (2017).

People the world over are using the paradigm of witchcraft to explain their experiences of modernity; in particular, why they are poor, dying of AIDS, or losing a world cup soccer match. It provides a framework to understand new inequalities of wealth and political power (Wesch, 2006). Supernatural discourses today represent a distinctive way of articulating fears about the increased uncertainty found in everyday life and the insecurities of the global economy (Moore & Sanders, 2001). In the next section I will look at another approach in anthropology, the ontological perspective, and suggest how it can advance our understanding of witchcraft.

The Ontological Turn

According to Roseberry (1996), anthropology has faced three crises since World War II. The first, starting in the 1950s, attempted to transcend anthropological concentration on" primitive isolates," and studied a range of wider connections with civilizations. A second, from about 1970, perceived and attempted to address several silences in anthropological discourse regarding power, colonialism, capitalism, class, and gender, and that raised a range of political and epistemological questions concerning prevailing modes of analysis. A third, from about 1990, has been concerned with modes of representation (p.6). Anthropology gradually no longer spoke with automatic authority for others (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). As Risjord (2020) remarked:

> The multi-stranded critique focused on the reification of culture. All idealist conceptions treat culture as a system of meaningful units shared by members. The writing culture

> critique cast doubt on the epistemological, metaphysical, and political credentials of the idealist conception of culture (p.591).

One of the consequences of this was a major shift in ethnographic writing, a central to the task of the anthropologists. As Clifford (1986) puts it:

> We begin, not with participant observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts. No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter (p.2).

Ethnographic writing until the representation crisis had however been portrait as an objective experience, as writers were claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience. Personal experiences and relations were recognized as central to the research process, but were restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and "objective" distance (Clifford, 1986). However, many have challenged the notion of ethnography as text.

I make a parallel here between this fundamental work in recent anthropology and the anthropological turn. Despite concentrating mostly on studying ethnographic writing, past and present, and offering critical interpretations of it, *Writing Culture* offers more than a glimpse of the interpretation by the Other, or the subject, in ethnographic accounts. In a sense, by questioning ethnography and its possibilities, the book led to the crystallization of the ontological turn. Fieldworkers and ethnographers finally admitted that the anthropologist is an outsider trying to make sense of what he sees, hears and smells, as exemplified by Abu-Lughod (1993) :

> The outsider self never simply stands outside; he or she always stands in a definite relation with the "other" of the study, not just as a Westerner or even halfie, but as a Frenchman in Algeria during the war of independence, an American in Morocco during the 1967 Arabo-Israeli war, or an Englishwoman in postcolonial India. What we call the outside, or even the partial outside, is always a position within a larger political-historical complex (p.40).

She proposes to shift from the idea of culture to discourse and practise, in order to remove the stain of colonialism, exemplified by the concepts of us and them (Abu-Lughod, 1996). The ontological turn also proposes to reconsider the concept of culture, or to simply abandon it. The major concern of the sceptical discourse on culture is that the concept suggests boundedness, homogeneity, coherence, stability, and structure whereas social reality is characterized by variability,

inconsistencies, conflict, change, and individual agency (Brumann, 1999). This rejection of the concept of culture, central to anthropology, was the object of a heated debate in the 1980s and 1990s. Many critics voiced concern about this new development in anthropology.

Sangren (1988) argued that the boundaries of reflexivity constructed in "postmodernist" discourse have been framed in ultimately misleading and surprisingly unreflective ways that diminish both the legitimacy and the logic of postmodernist claims. Anthropology was finding itself identified with such labels as unconsciously positivistic, naive, and unreflective of its own historical and cultural contingency. He questioned: 1) the validity of the postmodernist self-proclaimed reflexivity; 2) the millennial rhetoric announcing the end of the grand theories in anthropology; 3) the way authority was redefined in postmodernism. The way authority, legitimacy, and power were constructed in texts did not provide an exhaustive model for the ways in which they are constructed in society. According to Spencer (1989), even if serious questions are raised in *Writing Culture*, literary critical theory may prove unhelpful in addressing those questions. In particular, the tendency to read texts with little or no consideration for the social and historical context in which they were written seemed an especially barren approach. He argued that anthropology is as much a practical activity as it is a way of writing. Free (1990) also focused on *Writing Culture*'s preoccupation with texts:

> This divorce of the text from human life, this bracketing and ignoring of the world(s) as mere context, can be seen to take on three forms. First, being no longer a medium of communication, the text becomes merely a product of the author, and any reader is ignored in the discussion of it. Secondly, the world in which it is written is either ignored or conceptualized in an extremely simplistic manner. Thirdly, the world about or of which it is written hardly figures at all, being entirely subservient to the style of the author. Each of these divorces is displayed only by some of the texts under discussion. Nevertheless, when taken together they constitute the central pitfalls of dealing with anthropology as only writing (p. 52).

The intensity of these debates demonstrates the great transformation of the anthropological project during postcolonial times. Anthropologists reflected on the ambiguous game played during the ethnographic process. How much can we pretend to understand about the people with whom we are sharing a sliver of a lifetime? It also reflects an epistemological question about how we create knowledge and how we create meaning in our lives and through our work as social scientists.

Meaning is constructed and always evolving, and power relations have a role to play in the construction of knowledge (Gullion, 2018).

The postmodernist project was central to the emergence of the ontological perspective. In a philosophical sense, ontology means what is, as opposed to epistemology, which refers to our knowledge of what is. No ontology is seen as simply a system of knowledge; it is equally an account of a way of being in the world and a definition through practice of what that world is and how it is constituted (Clammer et al., 2004). The issue of the definition of a person is also central to the ontological project. It questions the reality and the nature of being, and it is changing how various disciplines (anthropology, archeology, education theory, political studies, science, and technology studies, etc.) have approached the notions of agency, change, causality, materiality, and relations (Alberti et al., 2011). Ontology within anthropology refers to the idea that multiple perspectives, worldviews or even worlds exist at the same time and overlap in different ways. Humans can reside within one or more ontologies (or worlds) depending on the intersection of their history, politics, economy, and personal experience (Ramírez, 2017).

Since different people live in separate worlds, human beings, perspectives, ideas and entities are not to be understood as merely culturally or socially different from one another, but also different in their core (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014). This perspective proposes a "multi-realist" reality, in which multiple worlds coexist side by side. This would allow anthropologists to understand otherness without privileging an occidental perspective (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014). All these elements combine to form an account of a way of being in the world and a definition through practice and cognition of what that world is and how it is constituted (Clammer et al., 2004). The ontological approach then questions the ways in which the world exists, since it is not the same for every person on the planet. Its basic ingredients (matter, agency, space, and time) are open to revaluation (Alberti et al., 2011). It also offers the possibility of reframing established concepts in anthropology such as nature and culture. In Holbraad and Pedersen's term, the turn to ontology involves deepening and intensifying three modes of anthropological thought: reflexivity, conceptualization and experimentation (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2018). Ontology refers to a way of being and what members of a culture have to say about it. It is also linked to knowledge and action. The ontological approach is not only dealing with a point of a view. When taken seriously, the discourse of the

participants will reveal another ontology (another world). Since human groups all live in different worlds, composed of different elements, the turn questions human identity and selfhood and the relationship of people to the physical world (Clammer et al., 2004). Ontological approaches reject the idea that human difference can be captured by differences in representation, and this means that they are opposed to both interpretivist and cognitive interpretations (Palecek & Risjord, 2013). They seek to develop a language for writing and speaking about ethnographic experience that unsettles distinctions central to anthropology, so that new theoretical understandings can emerge (Henare et al., 2005). It is also linked to knowledge and action. Ontological approaches turn reject the idea that human difference can be captured by differences in representation, and this means that they are opposed to both the interpretivist and cognitive approaches interpretations (Palecek & Risjord, 2013). Researchers would need to develop a language for writing and speaking about ethnographic experience that unsettles distinctions central to anthropology, so that new theoretical understandings can emerge (Henare et al., 2005).

Multiple Worlds

Philippe Descola has had great influence on the ontological movement. His work on animism and the ontological world of the Amazonian Indians has inspired similar investigation in Northern Asia and elsewhere. Descola has inspired anthropologists, such as Viveiros de Castro and Kohn, to pursue work on relationships between humans and non-humans and to explore the continuity existing between animals and humans (nature and culture), and humans and gods (culture and supernatural) (Costa & Fausto, 2010). Other anthropologists have also had important influence on this current. Rob Wagner, Marilyn Strathern, and Bruno Latour have all been concerned with the reconfiguration of the notion of culture and the politics of anthropological representation. They have shown that the nature/culture distinction underpins the basis of the anthropological project and they have proposed new ways that it might be re-conceptualized. In its criticism of the nature - culture binary, ontological anthropology has proposed to investigate the potential of multispecies ethnography. It has also produced ethnographies of indigenous cosmologies from Amazonia to Melanesia to Mongolia (Bessire & Bond, 2014). For Latour, anthropology has for a long time taken for granted that “other cultures” must be contrasted and eventually confronted with a process of modernization of Western origin. To debunk this myth surrounding the concept of modernity,

Latour pushes for ontological pluralism. His hope is that multiple modes of existence, or ontologies, be recognized and respected. For Latour, notions like “nature” or “culture” do not denote a universal reality but rather a particular way of seeing things, devised by the Moderns (Latour & Porter, 2018) Other civilizations have found different ways of identifying qualities among living things, resulting in other forms of organizing continuity and discontinuity between humans and non-human (Descola, 2014b).

Culture or Multiple Worlds

One of the most contentious aspects of the ontological turn is the redefinition of the concept of culture. Wagner (1975) questioned this fundamental concept in anthropology without rejecting it. In his view, the subjects of anthropological inquiry invent their own culture as much as the anthropologist invents his. When they both come into contact, they reinvent each other’s culture. One of Roy Wagner's consistent positions is that meaning (or culture) does not simply exist as something out there in the world, but that it is elicited and created, something that people do and make (Jorgensen, 2002). People are improvising their way through life, making it up as they go along. Wagner sees a flow of innovation that leverages meaning (Jorgensen, 2002). When people act in the world, they are not simply reproducing culture or structure, they are creating it anew (Handler, 2002). Wagner argues that in the process of conducting fieldwork, the anthropologist will question his own culture. This will help in the metamorphosis of his cultural assumptions (Wagner, 1975).

Ontologically oriented anthropologists have sought to redeem anthropology from its colonial past through the active transformation of anthropological concepts, especially “belief”. By defining ontology as an alternative to culture, they hope to bring forth as many natures as there are cultures (Rival, 2012). Their work is thus a good starting point for re-examining the concept of witchcraft. Before the representation crisis of the discipline, most twentieth century anthropologists did not consider witchcraft to be real. They perceived themselves as modern and saw magic as belonging to a non-modern set of beliefs. Taking witchcraft seriously then requires an overhaul of our ontological point of view and a re-examination of Western societies. As I have shown, Mencej (2018) recorded belief in witchcraft in the European country of Bosnia as late as 2016. In the

1970s, Favret-Saada (2010; 1980) came across a vivid rural witchcraft-based social system in Mayenne, in northwestern France.

The deconstruction of concepts is a key methodological aspect of the ontological turn. Strathern (1990) asks for more experimentation in the definition of concepts and suggest that anthropologists proceed *as if* everything was relationally constructed, to redefine the relationship between subject and object. Strathern affirms that anthropological analysis should depart from, not explain away, the sometimes strange and unsettling concepts we find in the field. She gives the example of relations, which she defines as the conceptual and interpersonal connections/distinctions that sustain social life (Strathern, 2005). At the start of the 20th century, anthropology moved away from the study of the customs of primitive people to studying the relationships between these people. Kinship studies emerged from this shift. Despite this, relations were still modelled on the ethnographer own ontological understanding. Kinship was mainly defined as existing only between humans. However, Strathern gives the example of the Karam people of Papua New Guinea, for whom the cassowaries, a species of bird, had to be treated with respect since they were considered as kin (Strathern, 1995). Because of these ontological differences, Strathern remains wary of using common analytical categories—like "society," "individual," conventional "comparison" and "theory" (Lebner, 2017).

Strathern also sought to explain how the construction of a person and of personhood is different from one ontological world to another. In *The Gender of the Gift*, Strathern (1990) privileged the dividual over the individual to explain personhood in Melanesia. She attempts to find a counterpart to the individual of the individual/society dualism. Under the value of individualism, society is understood as assuming that relations are "between" individuals (Strathern, 1990; Strathern, 2018). Unlike the Western' individual, the "dividual" is always already social: born of others and dependent and interdependent rather than autonomous. From birth, the dividual is embedded in social networks and also subject to the agency of other (Biersack, 1991). Social relations are not just comprised of connections visible between persons, but also all the past and future connections presently invisible within them (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2018). In later work, Strathern backed off from using the relation personhood of the dividual and moved towards the partible person. Unlike the "relational person," the "partible person" is not an amalgam. It could be better understood as a

singular, composite entity derived from multiple relations. This condition of multiple constitution also renders the person partible in particular circumstances, such as conversion (Strathern, 2018). In order to better apprehend the personhood partition, Melanesian ethnography develops its own vocabulary of dissolution. It describes the processes by which the elements that compose persons are dismantled so that the relationships carried by people can be renewed. This may include both the relations created during life and the conjugal relations that created them (Strathern, 2014).

For the external player, such as the anthropologist, social relations are a phenomenon they cannot describe without participating in indigenous formulations (Strathern, 2005). Strathern gives the example of an initiation ritual in a Melanesian village that made some western tourists uncomfortable. The ritual involved some cutting of the bodies of initiates and anger on the part of participants. According to Strathern, where cutting is regarded as destructive, then the social whole must seem mutilated, fragmented. One feels sad for a body losing its limbs. But where cutting is done with the intent of making relationships appear, it displays the internal capacities of persons and the external power of relationships (Strathern, 2005). This is just one example on how social relations can be built and expressed differently across different ontological worlds.

Finding New Methodological Frameworks

Strathern also influenced the development of new analytical methods, such as scaling. In her monograph *Partial Connection* (2005), Strathern argued that anthropologists work through comparison. *Scaling* is a way of switching from one perspective to another, from looking at one aspect of a social phenomenon (for example, a ritual) to analyzing a broader context (the same ritual in three different tribes). Scale switching not only creates a multiplying effect, but also generates information loss. Different types of data may appear to substitute for one another; for example, a generalization about socialization, instead of a description of a puberty rite. This anthropological use of scales happens in two principal ways. The first is quantitative, since it involves switches in size, and corresponds to the ordinary associations of the word “scale” with quantitative considerations and measurement. The second way is qualitative; for example, when comparing different cultures (or different elements within one) from the point of view of one aspect of these cultures, such as economic arrangements (Holbraad, 2009). Complexity emerges from the

process of scaling, since the closer we look, the more details become visible and bring more questions out in the open. Since every scale has the same amount of information, multiplying itself, intellectual conceptualization never seems enough (Strathern, 2005). It becomes even more complex when moving to ontological anthropology, where many perspectives and worlds co-exist. Strathern's work can be useful in the study of witchcraft since it underlines the necessity of redefining concepts according to the ontological world of the people practising it. It will also be useful for understanding the construction of relations between humans and non-humans in Khasi ontology.

I have shown how the proponents of the ontological perspective have proposed that there was not one world composed of multiple cultures, but multiple worlds. They did so by rejecting such fundamental concepts as culture and by using innovative investigating and analytical methods. Their work focused on proposing a new approach to alterity. According to Palecek and Risjord (2013), the ethnographer's responsibility is to capture the way in which the subject (or object) is interpreted by his own community. These interpretations may be very different from the ones in the ethnographer's world (p.16). Alberti et al. (2011) argue that the ontological approach offers a better solution to the problem of alterity than does culture because it gets anthropology out of the problem of having to choose who is right. Since the two sides are talking about different things, then there is no disagreement. For example, stones can both be and not be non-human persons if what counts as a stone in either case is different. Both sides are right, and their point of view is protected (p.902-903). In *Thinking through Things,* Holbraad (2007) focuses on the objects and artifacts themselves as opposed to their meanings, since the division between signifier and signified is misleading and arbitrary. "What objects do," must be described without using the language of belief (Alberti et al., 2011; Henare et al., 2007). In the next section I will look at one of the most important intellectual explorations brought about by the ontological shift: the quest to reinvestigate animism and the relationships between human and no-humans in the indigenous world and beyond.

The New Animists

Animism, one of the earliest concepts in anthropology, has long been explained as a system of beliefs that imputes life or spirit to inert things (Ingold, 2006). The issue for the evolutionists was

to understand how religion had evolved. Accordingly, Tylor developed a theory whereby religion passed through stages, starting from animistic beliefs. Durkheim argued that the primitive made abstract society tangible to himself by a totem and so views his own self as dualistically consisting of body/totemic parts (rather than body/mind in the modernist view). Despite restoring the image of animism as an element of human personhood, Durkheim remained skeptical about the extension of human traits to non-humans, regarding it as erroneous (Bird-David, 1999; Durkheim, 2005). In classical animism, all human individuals share essentially the same kinds of relationships to all nonhuman persons (Sahlins, 2014). According to several authors, this convention is misleading, since animism is not a way of believing about the world. Ingold (2011) prefers it to describe it as: "… a condition of being alive to the world, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux. Animacy is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence " (p.68). New animism was mainly developed by Descola, following his fieldwork in the Amazon in the 1960s. Descola (2005) acknowledged what he saw as the correct elements in how animism was conceptualized before:

> That characteristic is the attribution by humans to nonhumans of interiority identical to their own. This attribution humanizes plants and, above all, animals, since the soul with which it endows them allows them not only to behave in conformity with the social norms and ethical precepts of humans but also to establish communicative relations both with humans and among themselves. This similarity of interiority justifies extending a state of "culture" to non-human, together with all the attributes that this implies, ranging from intersubjectivity to the mastery of techniques and including ritualized conduct and deference to conventions (p. 129).

This characterization is not complete, according to Descola. In his new version of animism, the distinction between the humans and non-humans cannot be based on the souls residing in each being, since they are of the same nature. The difference is in the bodies that each of them possesses. The classical definition of animism focused on the souls of humans and non-humans. In the new version of animism, the individuation of all beings can only be done through the interplay between the bodies and the souls (Descola, 2014a). According to Kohn (2015), for Amazonian animists, all beings are persons, but these beings are differentiated by their bodies. A shaman can become a jaguar by wearing distinct elements of a feline body, such as teeth and fur. A psychic continuity permits movement across different kinds of bodies. Non-humans are also considered as persons,

despite different physical bodies. They can interact with humans and act much as humans do. As Bird-David (1999) explains, the Narayak, a hunter-gatherer group in India, develops relationships with elements of their environment, many of which are considered to be non-human persons. Through rituals and in their daily lives, they talk and joke with these persons and forge a bond with them. Non-human persons have agency and the possibility of acting on their environment. Another Amazonist, Viveiros de Castro, also explains animism as an ontology which postulates the social character of relations between humans and non-humans. In *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,* Viveiros de Castro (2002) observed that there were numerous references in Amazonian ethnography to an indigenous theory whereby the way humans perceive animals and other beings - gods, spirits, the dead, etc. - differs profoundly from the way that these beings see humans and see themselves. All beings, whether human, animal, or spirit, see themselves as human persons. For example, a jaguar will experience himself as drinking manioc beer, living in a thatch house, etc., but he will be seen by other kinds of beings (humans and prey animals) as a predator. Viveiros de Castro called this concept Amerindian perspectivism. Because all creatures possess a human subjectivity, communication is possible despite the manifest existence of physical discontinuities that separate kinds of beings (Kohn, 2007). Perspectivism as exemplified by Viveiros de Castro goes further than animism but proposes the same basic idea: human and nonhuman share a similar type of soul. This similitude implies shared concepts and perspectives. What changes when passing from one species of subject to another is what they see: what jaguars see as "manioc beer" humans see as "blood." Such difference of perspective cannot derive from the soul, since the latter is the common original ground of being (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). The real world of the different species depends on their points of view, since the "world in general" consists of the different species themselves. Because there are no points of view onto things external to things and being, things and beings are the points of view (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). Animals and humans live in two different worlds. There are many natures, each associated with the interpretive world of a particular kind of being. However, there is only one culture—human culture (Kohn, 2007). Different kinds of "bodies" all see and experience their lives through a single "human culture." Culture unifies all beings and bodily "perspectives" differentiate forms from each other (Erazo & Jarrett, 2018).

Perspectivism, as proposed by Viveiros De Castro, is different from animism. A common soul guarantees that each species sees itself as human, sharing in human culture and language, but different bodies ensure that each species sees others differently. The first characteristic is the main principle of animism, and the second is the minimum condition for perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). Descola agrees with Viveiros De Castro that bodies are central to both animism and perspectivism and are linked together by a web of relationships. For the Amerindians, the entire cosmos is animated by a single culture that becomes diversified by all the different ways in which living beings interact and see each other (Descola, 2014a). In animism, humans maintain that nonhumans perceive themselves as humans because, despite their different forms, they all possess similar interiority (souls). To this, perspectivism adds that humans claim that nonhumans see humans not as humans but as nonhumans (animal predators or spirits) (Descola, 2014a). Amerindians are then multi-naturalists: they see the world as composed of a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity. This is in contrast to Western "multiculturalist" cosmology, according to which there is one nature and a plurality of cultures (Viveiros de Castro, 2002).

Perspectivism is not limited to the Amazon forests. In the Canadian far North, many features of the landscape are attributed a personality of their own. Despite differences in language and ethnic affiliations, the same complex of beliefs and rites governs the hunter's relationship with his prey (Ingold, 2004). As in Amazonia, most animals are regarded as persons with a soul, with attributes identical to those of humans (reflexive consciousness, intentionality, an affective life, and respect for ethical principles). The only way in which animals differ from humans is in their appearance. However, this is simply an illusion, since the body shapes they usually adopt is only a disguise designed to fool the Amazonian Indians (Descola, 2014a). Pedersen describes the indigenous societies of North Asia as ranging from former deeply hierarchical empires of the Mongolian grasslands to small egalitarian bands of reindeer-breeding hunters of Northern Siberia. In both societies, animism and totemism elements constitute two governing principles. Totemic classifications make use of empirically observable discontinuities between natural species in order to demarcate social units (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). Animism sees natural beings as enjoying human dispositions and social attributes. The difference between natural species is not used to organize and create a hierarchy in society. Rather, it refers to the elementary categories structuring social life that organize the relations between human beings and natural species (Descola, 2014a).

Whereas animist societies organize the world horizontally (through notions of charismatic leadership, egalitarian ethos, bilateral descent, direct exchange, an orally based shamanist religion, etc.), totemic societies of the south of North Asia organize it vertically (through notions of inherited leadership for example) (Pedersen, 2001). Totemic societies are then highly hierarchical. Ordinary people cannot transcend interspecies barriers to gain the shapes and powers of nonhuman entities. Only certain persons (shamans, spirits) can undergo these metamorphoses and take on the perspective of their fellow entities. Mongolian shamanism produces a horizontal scale within a vertical social universe comprised of humans and nonhuman (Pedersen, 2001). Each being has the potential to transform into every other because all beings contain each other's perspectives immanently (Holbraad & Willerslev, 2007). When two different subjects meet (such as the shaman and the spirit), their shared spiritual quality makes it possible for one of them to identify with the other and adopt the other's perspective. It means adopting the other's complete selfhood (Swancutt, 2007).

Perspectivism is different from Western relativism, in which a single nature is apprehended differently by a variety of cultures. Instead, it is multinaturalist. The world that is dependent on bodily perspective is always different, but this difference is apprehended in the same (human) way by each type of being. This inversion of perspective should, however, not be generalized to all animist systems (Costa & Fausto, 2010). Perspectivism remains limited to certain peoples and certain contexts, even in Amazonia (Descola, 2014a). Many Amazonian peoples recognize as many as five different souls. This complexity show that the binary relationship through which perspectivism has often been discussed is at best only one of its many dimensions (Brightman et al., 2014; Lima, 1999). Rival (2012) compares the ontological approach of the Huaorani, whose vision of life is not limited fertility, but natural abundance. It is in the nature of trees and other plants of the forest to give continuously to humans without asking anything in return. In the Amazonian ontology described by Descola and Viveiros De Castro, the world is a giant cosmic food web. From the point of view of any class of beings all others are either predators or prey (Århem, 2014). Furthermore, (Halbmayer, 2012a) argues that different ontological perspectives are not necessarily entirely incompatible. To a large extent, cosmologies can integrate different ontological positions. He gives the example of the core of Lowland Amerindian cosmologies, which is based on animic [animist] assumptions. However, among Carib-speaking groups, aspects

of analogism[5] are visible, connecting the person, the houses' architecture and the settlements' layout, and the cosmos (p. 105).

What has emerged is a new understanding of the relationships between humans and non-humans. For Descola, animism can now be better understood as a relational ontology including other-than-human persons. The relations and interactions with these non-human persons are maintained through communication, mutual understanding and the possibility of transforming into and becoming the Other (Halbmayer, 2012b). Descola (2014a) argues that a naturalist approach about human ontologies is debatable. Such an approach would propose that what differentiates humans from nonhumans is a reflective consciousness, subjectivity, an ability to signify, and mastery over symbols and the language. The Achuar cosmology, in which humans, plants and animals share similar faculties, behaviour, and moral codes is not covered by such opposition.

Personhood in Animism and Perspectivism

Descola and Viveiros de Castro, among others, propose to extend the anthropological focus to non-human persons (Benadusi et al., 2017). Descola (2014a) also studies the notion of personhood for the Achuar Indians. From the point of view of the Achuar, personhood may be attributed to include all who have a soul: spirits, plants, and animals. Not all beings, however, are created equal: the Achuar cosmology is a hierarchical order, ranking possible levels of communication between humans and non-humans. It is the ability to speak that defines who is a "complete person". The less complete beings are the ones who cannot speak at all. Although the Achuar can speak to these beings, thanks to specific incantations, they do not immediately receive a response, for this can be communicated only through dreams. Those who do not possess souls of their own communicate with no one. Insects, fish, grasses, mosses, and rivers, among other things, remain outside the social sphere and the network of intersubjectivity. The Achuar draw distinctions between the entities by which the world is peopled. They are not based on the differences in their appearance but rather on their capacity to use speech. Since most of the entities of the world are interconnected and governed by sociability, relations between humans and non-human in fact appear to be no

[5] Analogism is a system of difference, in which each being has a uniquely constituted interior and physical existence, such as in naturalism, but with lesser differences (Descola, 2014a).

different from the relations between different human communities. Similarly, the construction of personhood and the study of reality encompasses a large part of Kohn's work. He defines ontology as "the study of 'reality'—one that encompasses but is not limited to humanly constructed worlds" (Kohn, 2015). Kohn's ideal version of an ontological anthropology would be:

- metaphysical, interested in exploring and developing concepts;
- ontological, attentive to the kinds of realities such concepts can amplify;
- poetic, attuned to the unexpected ways we can be made over by those not necessarily human realities;
- humanistic, concerned with how such realities make their ways into historically contingent human moral worlds; and
- political, concerned with how this kind of inquiry can contribute to an ethical practice, which can include and be transformed by the non-human beings in the world, since all life is now in jeopardy (pp. 322-323).

Despite the importance of non-human in his approach, Kohn never leaves humans behind. Ontological anthropology is for the most part post-humanist but that does not mean it sidesteps humans and human concerns altogether (Kohn, 2015).

Influence of the Ontological Turn on Political Anthropology and Methodology

In Descola's animist ontology, the political dimension is absent. Since many indigenous people are confronting dispossession and marginalization, while at the same time remaining subjects of studies by anthropologists, the absence of political in ontology could not be ignored (Benadusi et al., 2017). According to Blaser, a convergence between ontology and indigeneity forms the basis of a political ontology. Different ontological worlds are not sealed off from each other by clear boundaries but rather are connected without becoming one universe (Blaser, 2014; Strathern, 2005). The political ontology framework is built on the "multinaturalist" assumption that there are many kinds of "natures" and worlds. It questions how they come into being (Blaser, 2009). Political ontology is caught between two versions of the ontological perspective: one involves works interested in more-than-human agency and the other concerns ethnographic theory's engagement with radical alterity (Blaser, 2014). Political ontology is then important in contexts where indigenous people are facing uncertainty due to political decisions.

While proposing a new approach to the ontological world of the Amazonian Indians, Viveiros De Castro (2004) also develops new analytical methodologies. According to the author, anthropology has been dominated by concepts that may be foreign to the subjects of its numerous studies. Direct comparability between two concepts does not necessarily signify immediate translatability. A good anthropological translation is one that allows the intention of the original language to be expressed within the new one. It does not mean, however, that the two concepts will be identical. The task of the anthropologist is to make explicit the equivocation implied in imagining that when the jaguar says "manioc beer" he is referring to the same thing as us (i.e., a tasty, nutritious and heady brew). Perspectivism supposes a single meaning and multiple referents (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). For example, many Amerindian terms are translated using notions such as "spirit", "god" or "divinity". Such translations, however, are only approximate. To speak of "spirits" merely allows discussion about South American cosmologies without having to go into too much detail (Praet, 2009).

The ontological turn has influenced ethnographic work among indigenous people, suggesting new ways to understand and analyze animism and human non-human relationships. It has also had an influence in non-indigenous contexts. Kapferer (1997) explores the destructive and constitutive powers of sorcery in Sri Lanka using a phenomenological approach based on practice and rationality. He defines sorcery as the practices used to harness and manipulate energies centred in humans to intervene in the lives of others. Through the description of long and short rituals, as well as by narrating the possession stories of some subjects, Kapferer shows the dynamic aspect of healing rituals in Sri Lanka. He demonstrates how the rite can deconstruct and reconstruct victims' lives. He shows the power of the consciousness of the practitioners and the attendees of the rituals. Sorcery has such potency because human beings have the capacity to direct their consciousness unto the world, to influence it (p. 33). For Kapferer, sorcery and science are both social constructs, psychologically reproduced in the mind of their practitioners. Despite his commitment to dismissing sorcery as an irrational process, Kapferer (2002) leaves room for doubt:

> Sorcery is that imaginal formation of force and power that is to be expected in social circumstances that are disjunctive or in some sense discontinuous. It revolves around its magical capacity to work with the very potencies of difference, differentiation, division, opposition, contradiction and transgression. It gathers the force of such potencies, harnessing them to the purpose of destruction or to conjunction (p. 14).

By rejecting previous functionalists and structuralist interpretations, Kapferer (1997) proposes new theoretical ground for the study of witchcraft. He shows how sorcery articulates cosmological and ontological assumptions among the Sinhalese. Exorcism rituals bind together symbolic and aesthetic processes during which the normal social self is reconstructed after the destruction caused by witchcraft (Kapferer, 1979).

In *The Empty Seashell* (2014), Bubandt also challenges previous assumptions about witchcraft. The first assumption is that people in close-knit communities inhabit cosmologies that are pretty much coherent and subject to consensus. The second is that such people understand the cosmologies they inhabit, and that some of them can explain those to the ethnographer (Keane, 2016). Bubandt conducted fieldwork in Buli, a Christian village on Halmahera, the largest island in the Indonesian province of North Maluku. People in Buli are terrorized by cannibal witches. A person who is possessed by a witch (*gua*) will eat the liver of other villagers. The witch will then use her long tongue to lick the wound and close it without a trace or scar. The victim will wake up later without realizing what has happened, only to fall seriously ill within a few days. Without proper divination and treatment, the victim will die (Bubandt, 2017). The Buli people hoped that Christianity would bring an end to witchcraft. When it did not disappear after the conversion of the population, they hoped modernity was the answer. During the New Era (1966–1998), promises were made by the state to bring modernization to Buli. People believed that witchcraft would then be eradicated. Instead, witchcraft beliefs adapted to modernity. Local state representatives and policemen were praised by the population for acknowledging the existence of witches and their willingness to fight them with guns and power. The Buli people and their leaders hover between doubt and certitude about witchcraft.

For the Buli, witchcraft is not a reassuring model to explain misfortune. It is a destabilizing fact that cannot be explained or understood. Witchcraft is offered as an explanation, but itself remains the object of speculation and conjecture. As Bubandt explains, Buli foundation myths hold that witches existed at the origin of the world, and human witches have inherited these primeval powers, yet all of this is uncertain because witches hide any evidence of it (Schram, 2017). Bubandt rejects the concept of belief in the study of witchcraft and its classification as a subbranch of religious and paranormal studies. He proposes instead that witchcraft studies should emphasize

its grounding in doubt and *aporia*, a Greek word denoting an irresolvable situation. In witchcraft there is restlessness, doubt. It cannot be explained and it cannot be placed within a meaningful order (Bubandt, 2014). The emergence of an anthropology of doubt could change the current analytical paradigm of witchcraft.

In the Khasi world, witchcraft does belong to a system of explanation of misfortune. The history of the Buli, however, closely resembles Khasi history over the 20th century. Late evangelization in the 19th century was followed by mass conversion of indigenous people. The converts rapidly created their own church, where they also became part of the clergy. Despite mass conversion, however, witchcraft traditions remained alive among the Khasi and the Buli. Both have adapted to modernity and neo-liberalization. In the case of the Khasi, the ecosystem of healing and witchcraft has been kept alive and has even incorporated the newcomers from Nepal and mainland India.

Criticism of Ontological Approaches

Despite its attractiveness to anthropologists, the ontological shift has been heavily criticized from the onset. The main arguments concern its theoretical and methodological premises. Vigh and Sausdal (2014) argue that the elements proposed by this approach already exist within the discipline: 1) its insistence on "taking the field seriously,"; 2) its focus on things/materiality, animals, spirits and other non-human forms, and 3) its desire to study people in terms of their own conceptual universe. For many, these all go back to the beginning of anthropology and do not bring anything new to the discipline (p. 52). According to Candea (2017), so many ontological-turn-inspired ethnographies result in remarkably similar arguments that draw on similar philosophical sources. They do not propose radically new arguments, even if the point is to instigate a radical new openness to difference in the world. Others acknowledge its innovative power but feared it may be politically risky. Despite seeing the potential in this movement, Bessire and Bond (2014) fear that the ontological solution of rejecting the nature-culture divide may be dangerous for the discipline. This divide is a powerful ideological tool, orienting decisions about which forms of life must be defended from the ecological crisis. The results of the debate may then determine who, or what, gets to survive. The ontological turn, as they see it, may become detrimental to what really matters right now. It focuses on abstract philosophical problems and difference, as everyone on

this planet (indigenous and not indigenous) faces life and death situations due to climate change, neoliberal economic policies, and globalization. Bessire and Bond also fear that the ontological turn may lead to overgeneralizing the culture-nature divide. It may lead to the homogenization of the multiplicity it claims to decolonize. The different approaches to nature and culture in the indigenous and non-indigenous worlds may be more varied than what those in the ontological current are trying to establish. Their arguments are confusing: are they asking anthropologists to de-generalize or to generalize? Should we consider that all lives on this planet are the same and have the same rights to endure, or should we consider that everyone is different? Then what happens to these rights?

During a famous debate in 2008, it was proposed that ontology was just another word for culture. Carrithers admitted not being able any longer to talk about Culture, with a capital "C". He saw the anthropological project as still prospering, even though it has multiplied into many conceptual languages and research styles. He explains that anthropology is and always be a work in progress, like the *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona (Carrithers, 2010). There are many sub-projects in anthropology, of which "ontology" is only one. In the same debate, Candea (2010) admits that there is a difference between ontology and culture. The study of culture has been cast as merely the study of meaning and interpretation and criticized as a superficial concept, skimming the surface of human complexity. He argues that culture should, however, be restored to its full potential as an anthropological term. It has been and should be as good as ontology at engaging with multiple worlds .

The ontological turn has also been criticized as leading to a theoretical and methodological meltdown. According to Graeber (2015), the ontological approach creates its own universal ontology, which is a form of philosophical idealism. He proposes to combine ontological realism with theoretical relativism, so that the radical alterity of other people can be recognized. Anthropologists would then have to accept that they can never entirely understand the world of the other, but nonetheless allow the concepts that underlie it to "unsettle" their theoretical beliefs (p. 3). As Bowie (2017) puts it, the ontological turn may be a way of avoiding making choices on what is real and what is not. Anthropologists must ask themselves: is something real, or true, or possible, or not? If it challenges one's worldview, in what way does it do this, and how should one

respond to that challenge? This must be explained for the reader in time and space, to avoid being lost forever in abstraction (p. 7). Vigh and Sausda (2014) argue that:

> The theoretical points of departure and analytical guidelines stand as trajectories not fully travelled by its creators or followers, making it difficult to describe their analytical merit and potential (p. 68).

Sivado (2015), argues that the ontological turn will either break down before it is completed, stripping anthropology not only of its explanatory power but also of its interpretative techniques, or that it only amounts to the explication of background assumptions in anthropological fieldwork. Anthropological descriptions will lose significant parts of their informativeness if anthropologists turn exclusively to local ontologies to depict the world. Anthropology would then fail to allow any understanding of the cultural processes (p. 84).

Critics of the ontological turn also question the notion of faith in anthropology. In the opinion of Lurhman (2018), taking the other seriously would involve another radical step: having faith in god, gods or other spiritual entities. Her argument is not that anthropologists should become religious, but that they should take these entities seriously enough to transcend their own lives and work. Even if they are dedicated to understanding the other's universe, ontological anthropologists have not reimagined their own world. In general, very few anthropologists have admitted that their experience in the field led them to imagine the supernatural at home in new ways. If anthropologists took their own uncertainty about what is real seriously, their confrontation with radical otherness would alter their understanding of the possible, their sense of moral purpose, and their capacity to offer hope. In brief, Lurhmann argues that the ontologists' work in the field has not changed them or their perspective of their own universe. For Suhr and Willerslev (2018a; 2018b), the gap between theology and anthropology is narrower than it appears. Attempting to understand how other people inhabit the world, to analyze and write about it in the face of encounters with otherness, makes anthropological thinking similar to religious faith. Anthropological insight cannot be achieved only through a rational discourse. A shift in perspective is sometimes needed to embrace a phenomenon that otherwise would appear to be impossible to grasp. This shift, however, is rarely seen in ethnography. They argue that much anthropological writing is based on the action-oriented agency of humanity. This leaves little space for the divine in anthropological work .

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how anthropologists have tried to make sense of the complex set of beliefs and practices that is witchcraft by accepting it as part of the rationality of either less advanced people or by explaining it away as a reaction to social woes. They have struggled to take their subjects seriously, despite the prevalence of sorcery, magic, and witchcraft among human societies. The question of witchcraft's actual existence has been mainly left open. Instead, most anthropologists have sought to unearth the psychological and social realities underlying witchcraft beliefs, or the cultural meanings associated with them. Witchcraft discourses have been described as extremely malleable. They are about power, inequalities, desires, and privations. Recently, however, ontological approaches have proposed new ways of understanding the mysterious during fieldwork. Here I have shown three central shifts that ontological anthropology has made: rejection of the nature-culture division, the redefinition or rejection of central anthropological concepts, and the rejection of symbolism to explain beliefs or behaviours. The rejection of the binary division between nature and culture is an important step in revaluing the West interaction with the world and its different kinds of beings. Personhood is not limited to humans. For ontological anthropologists, the notion of reality and what constitutes a person are questioned and analyzed in a new light. They propose that for many indigenous cultures, the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, who apprehend reality from distinct points of view.

This in turn changes the way anthropologists write ethnographies and opens a whole new world of possible experimentation. The ethnographies inspired by the ontological perspective bring out the contrasts between indigenous ontologies and modern ontology (Blaser, 2009). Certain cherished concepts in anthropology are also deconstructed. The concept of "culture" as a symbolic or ideational phenomenon, and as an explanatory concept in anthropology (Bessire & Bond, 2014), is rejected by Strathern and others. Materiality and its concepts are also questioned by some of the ontological writers. In their view, there is no need to assume mediating devices, such as conceptual schemes, between the symbol and its meaning because "the object becomes the symbol" (Palecek & Risjord, 2013).

The ontological turn may be a major step toward shining a new light on witchcraft and magic. Studies of witchcraft already underwent a major renewal during the late 1980s when scholars realized that witchcraft would not disappear under the influence of missionary education and particular westernized notions of progress. On the contrary, witchcraft was still present, and furthermore, gained a renewed strength and new dimensions (De Faveri, 2014). Following the ontological turn, some anthropologists applied its premises to the study of witchcraft. Kapferer and Bubandt both developed new approaches, moving away from the functionalism and structuralism while rejecting the notion that witchcraft is a set of irrational beliefs.

The question at the heart of the ontological turn and the study of witchcraft are the same: how can the other be taken seriously? What are the limits of rationality? How is it defined in different contexts? Should anthropologists go as far as believing in witchcraft? Since Evans-Pritchard's 1937 argument for the rationality of Azande views of sorcery and Malinowski's attempt to show how magical practices fulfill the needs of the individual, researchers have struggled to find a way to make sense of witchcraft without condemning their informants as primitive and incapable of rationality. In more recent times, the phenomenological approach of Kapferer (1997) to Sinhalese sorcery was an attempt at rationalizing magic and witchcraft through the point of view of the subjects. He demonstrates how sorcery makes sense for healers and victims seeking justice through elaborate rituals. Instead of explaining away the phenomenon of witchcraft, Kapferer suggests that practices of witchcraft may yield deep insights into processes of human action and consciousness. Despite Kapferer describing anthropology of sorcery as an important phase during which anthropologists have attempted to overturn colonialism and domination, I still argue that the ontological turn has not finished turning in this direction. Despite the attractiveness of this approach in a postmodern world on the brink of disaster, reason and rationality are still integral to scientific inquiry and are integral to the formation of modern anthropology (Kapferer, 2002). The genealogy of the discipline makes it all the harder to change the current discourse about witchcraft to include another's ontology. In order for the ontological turn to be completed, we would need to move away from any kind of representational content while trying to interpret how the people studied interpret themselves (Sivado, 2015). This new approach, where nature and culture do not exist as two separate entities, is fundamental for my current study of witchcraft among the Khasi. As I will show in the next chapter, nature in Meghalaya is a powerful self-controlled agent that

can harm and kill. It is inhabited by gods, goddesses, and different entities who can act when their world is threatened. They are non-human persons and who have close relationships with the human they choose to protect or harm. In what follows, I will try to show what these relationships are, how they are expressed, and what they reveal about Khasi ontology.

Chapter 3. Healing and Healers

Healing in Meghalaya

Biomedical healing is widely available in Meghalaya, and its services are considered the best in Northeast India. The hospitals in Shillong are modern and are visited by people coming from as far away as Bangladesh. However, healing, religion and politics are intertwined in Meghalaya. This is particularly true among non-converted Khasi. They continue age-old practices despite the uncertainties brought by colonization, globalization, and the integration to the nation-state of India. Healing in Meghalaya goes beyond a bureaucratically ordered set of schools, hospitals, clinics, professional associations, companies, and regulatory agencies. Khasi, Hindu and Muslim practices are widely used by sick patients (Leslie, 1980).

Many healers are indigenous tribal healers who belong to association such as the Seng Khasi. Others are traditional healers converted to Christianity operating independently. Christian faith healers of tribal origin are also helping to fight curses and demonic possession. Nuns and priests from tribal and non-tribal origin practice healing during religious services. Laypersons who are recognized for their power to heal meet their clients in private spaces. Faith healing is popular in Meghalaya. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal has penetrated deeply among the Khasi and other tribal societies. The Renewal began in the United States in 1967. It promised a dramatic renewal of Church life, based on a born-again spirituality of a 'personal relationship' with Jesus and direct access to divine power (Csordas, 2007). The Charismatic Renewal puts great emphasis on the Holy Spirit and His gifts and has enabled Catholics to have individualized expressions of their faith. In order to become a member, one has to be "baptized in the Spirit", whereupon the person receives manifest spiritual gifts (Kasomo, 2010). The Renewal proposes a personal encounter with God on the believer's part. Among its spiritual gifts, we find healing through the laying on of hands, glossolalia and revelation (Boucher, 2013). As in many countries, the Charismatic Renewal was introduced to India in the early 1970s. The movement is perhaps most prominent in the south-western state of Kerala (Csordas, 2007).

Hindu and Muslim healers also contribute to the medical pluralism of the state. Despite their specific religious and ethnic belonging, practitioners of different faiths and ethnic groups have shown a great openness to serve members of different groups. Both healers and their clients travel from one ontological world to another. This is particularly true of the Khasi, who, despite a mass conversion to Christianity, continue to seek help from animist practitioners, from Hindu and even from Muslim healers. The borders between these different healing practices are easy to cross. I was able to observe how people from different groups may seek healing according to their needs, and not according to their religion or ethnicity. In this chapter, through the distinctive stories of healers, I will show how healers create a narrative and a space where it is possible for people of different faiths and ethnicities to share the same ontological world, or to cross temporally in a different one than their usual assigned universe.

Local health traditions in Meghalaya are widely practiced and used. Each major tribe has its own system, despite some overlap, while every family has its own set of 'home remedies' passed down over generations for many common ailments. When these fail, the help of the local health practitioner is sought (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010). Indigenous Khasi traditional medicine is referred to as *nong dawai* (the man who gives medicine*)* and the medicines and medicinal plants that the healers use are referred to as *dawai khasi* (Khasi medicines*)* (Albert et al., 2017). Furthermore, the Khasi believe that some people are endowed with the power of foretelling future events, detecting the causes of misfortune, and casting away evil influence. The *nongai dawai kynbat* is the one who heals with herbs, usually for physical ailments. The *nongkñia* performs rituals and can 'heal' evil spirit-related problems. He makes a "diagnosis" and perform the healing ritual, the *Ksan Rngiew*, to restore good fortune (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010). It is important to distinguish between herbal healers, who only give out medicinal herbs, and the healers who perform prayers and rituals. The latter may also give out medicine, but they do not promote themselves as herbalists. They mostly perform divination and intercession with the gods. The most sought-after healer is the Syiem Saad*,* the queen and the high priestess of the kingdom of Khyrim, the cultural and religious seat of the Khasi. She specializes in problems related to the *U Thlien* curse. Victims of this curse may succumb to severe physical or mental illness so they seek to ward off the malediction (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010, p. 6). Both herbal and symbolic healing are recognized as an important cultural heritage of the Khasi. In 2011, the Khasi Hills Autonomous

District Council passed the *Protection and promotion of Khasi Traditional Medicine Act.* It defines Khasi traditional medicine as follows:

> "Khasi Traditional Medicine" means the comprehensive wisdom, knowledge, skills and practices relating to Khasi traditional medicine in the broad context of holistic wisdom including philosophy, theology, social customs and traditions, diets and foods, folklore and legend, sacred sites and space, traditional social lifestyles and community relationships, home remedies, spiritual and psychological healing, chants, prayers and invocations; that are practiced, performed and used by Khasi traditional healers, priests, elders, housewives and other practitioners throughout Khasi society (p. 2).

Despite its emphasis on medicinal plants, the Act also emphasizes the importance of healing rituals involving prayers, texts, legends, spiritual, psychological components, chants, prayers and incantations. The therapeutic use of animals and animal parts to cure curses and diseases is also practiced by some traditional healers (Mihsill & Keshan, 2017). Iamon, a young master's student living in the outskirts of Shillong, exemplifies this type of healing. As I was discussing with her about *U Thlien* and how to fight this deadly curse, she showed us different possible cures. She took from a cupboard something she called tiger milk: a big chunk of a powdery rock that can be licked to fight the power of *U Thlien*. It is said that when a lactating tigress's milk drops to the soil, it mixes with the mud and becomes a ball-like structure which the Khasi claim can cure burns, for which they use little chunks of it (Mihsill & Keshan, 2017). Elephant ivory is also considered efficient for fighting evil and demons.

The objectives of these healing practices are to fight sickness and misfortune, which can have many causes. People and their entourage self-diagnose, going by the symptoms they can detect. Natural causes such as viruses and bacteria may serve as a first explanation for sickness and diseases. However, if doctors cannot find an acceptable answer, curses and black magic may be suspected. The victim will then turn to traditional or faith healers. The concept of health among the tribals and their medical systems often involves social, cultural and environmental issues (Hasan, 2008). Moral weakness is also a good indicator of the possibility of getting cursed. One Seng Khasi official remarked that people behaving morally do not fall prey to evil:

> When we talk about traditional healing, to me it's not only the healing that is done through traditional methods of massage or maybe traditional herbal medicines or Ayurvedic medicines and so on, but it's also actually the spiritual healing and cleansing

> of the mind and thought that brings out that healing in you. Healing comes right from your inner self. No matter how much external aid you get for healing, if you're not strong from within, then the actual healing doesn't take place. When it comes to traditional healing, we also must seek divine intervention in the healing process.

By keeping up with Khasi traditional values, people may not fall sick. If someone is sick and more help is needed than the home remedies, the patient or his family may contact the healer, who will try to find the cause of the suffering. He will often start by looking for the cause within the household. He tries to find out whether any member of the household has ever committed acts of sin or breaking of taboo, such as marrying within the same clan, for which no forgiveness has been asked from *U Blei* (God). If this is the case, then the medicine man performs a prayer ritual whereby he implores God to exonerate the sinner and take away the disease. Another cause of illness or disaster can be the past wrongdoings of an ancestor or the clan (Syiem, 2010). A particular ritual is needed to determine the causes of these misfortunes and to plead with God for their removal. The ritual usually starts with the diagnosis, where the healer uses rice, eggs, or water to find out the reason for the affliction of the client. Often, many members of the family will be there to explain the problem and in participate to the ritual with their questions and comments. By reading the signs or having a vision, the healer can then offer a prayer to the deity to free the person from her or his troubles (Syiem, 2010). Divination by breaking eggs on a wooden plank is the common method. This rite is commonly known as *Ka Shat Pylleng* (breaking the egg) (Khyriemmujat, 2013). A board, with a handle, made of wood, is used to break the eggs upon. The egg is placed in the middle of the board on a small heap of rice grains. A prayer will be chanted to invoke the gods, with an appeal to send some divine signs of his presence. The egg is then smashed on the board after the invocation. Fragments of the shattered egg scatter on the board and some may fall off it. While most of the fragments may be small, there is generally a bigger one containing the yolk. This piece is called the "mother egg". Divine signs are searched for by looking at how the egg broke, and how its fragments scattered on the board (Khyriemmujat, 2013, p. 151). The rituals are usually held in dedicated huts that each have two rooms, one of them being a waiting room. The healer sits on the ground in the other room with all the right implements, in front of the window or the door leading to outside.

The Seng Khasi: Keeping Traditions Alive

Those who are recognized as Seng Khasi healers follow the *Ka Shat Pylleng* ritual. By breaking the eggs and observing the position of the rice and of the eggshell in the bowl, he can know if the request has been accepted by the god or goddess. Jyrwa (1984) describes the ritual:

> Seating himself on the ground, with a small heart-shaped board in front, the egg breaker would smear the egg with mostly red earth and having scattered a few grains of rice around the sport to scare away any intruding demons. He would then start addressing the egg as the 'daughter of the goddess' extolling its marvellous knowledge of the mysteries of life. The diviner would then use various types of incantations depending on the kind of situations or diseases or any other reason why the divination ceremony was needed. These incantations are prayers and intercessions to any offended demons in order to discover the kind of sacrifice which they would demand. When he is through with the incantations, he usually leaps to his feet and dashes the egg on the board with considerable force. From the position of the fragments of the eggshell, he can discover reasons making the demon to be angry with a person (pp. 88-89).

As a regional organization, the Seng Khasi has created a network of recognized traditional healers. It provides the infrastructure for the healing sessions, held according to a planned schedule. I visited one of the official Seng Khasi clinics with my interpreter and two members of his family in the countryside, about an hour by car from Shillong. We had to leave the highway and drive around for some time. After many false turns, we finally found the healing cabin. The small cement building had been separated into a waiting room and a healing room. People were waiting, sitting either on the floor or on wood benches. These were all villagers, with women dressed in *jainsem*[6]. The healer was seating in the next room, facing an open doorway. We could see and hear the people currently consulting with the healer: there was very little privacy. When the healer saw us waiting, he gestured to us to move inside the healing room. We skipped the line but there were no protestations from the other patients. The healer had his usual plank and a stainless bowl for throwing the eggshells. Since we had forgotten to buy eggs, I had to run to buy some from a stand near the road. When I came back, we sat down with the healer for the consultation. On that day, the objective was to rid my acquaintances from bad luck brought about by dishonest people. The four of us sat down on traditional low stools near the healer. My interpreter handed him the eggs and the rice. The healer exchanged a few words with the family: What is your family name? What is the problem you are facing? After a short exchange, he started to pray and intercede with the

[6] The traditional dress of Khasi women.

gods. At the end of the ritual, my companion had his car blessed by the healer. He wanted to protect himself and the car from major incidents since he had several mishaps on the road a few weeks prior to the ritual. To protect the car, the healer interceded with the gods through prayers, then threw the eggs through the doorway. My companion had to go and find the eggs, not an easy task in this tall grass. After that we followed the healer outside, where he blessed the car. The whole ritual took maybe 30 minutes. There was a level of improvisation and creativity at play. I am convinced the healer did not know he would need to bless a car and protect it against accident that specific morning, and that this is not a frequent occurrence. People usually visit healers to get help to resolve health and family issues. However, the healer quickly created a ritual in which my friend would find satisfaction.

Photo 3: Seng Khasi healing hut in the countryside of Meghalaya

According to Ramashankar et al. (2015), most Khasi traditional healers are involved in this profession for economic benefits, whereas a few are bound to practice due to the scarcity of any

recognized medicine systems in that area. My observations do not confirm this, as many of the traditional healers request minimum payments for their service or do not engage in it full-time. I agree, however, when authors say that some traditional healers are practicing for economic benefits. Sometimes, however, instead of giving money, patients offer food or other necessities. The economics of healing in Meghalaya would be an interesting subject to explore in future field research, since I witnessed to conflicts over the high payment required by certain healers for carrying out rituals.

Healing by the Syiem

Syiem healing practice is performed by the King or members of his family. It is learned through apprenticeship and helping maternal uncles who perform rituals. The "Syiem" clans are believed to possess special powers to heal certain ailments related to traditional curses. The ritual of *Kynthah Nar* (singeing of the hair) of the Khasi is a holistic healing practice performed only by the members of the royal family (Diengdoh, 2015). Preparation for the treatment process starts with the performer praying to *U Blei* for the power to heal. The healer prays over the water from the ceremonial house and then immerses a red-hot iron rod in the water to ward away evil spirits. He then burns a strand of hair of the patient (Diengdoh, 2015).

As I have described before, the Syiem operate their healing practice from the palace ground. Other Syiem also offers healing service. The gift of healing can be something inherited because of the genetic link with the King's family. For example, M. Syiemlieh heals people in his living room. He converted to Christianity when he was about 27 years old and became a Presbyterian. Since he belongs to the Syiem clan, he can fight *U Thlien* and heal patients affected by it. M. Syiemlieh moves from one ontological world to another without feeling any conflict. This is also the case with Christian tribal healers, who tend to perform personalized versions of Seng Khasi rituals. Even if they are Christians, they still invoke the Khasi gods and the spirits of nature. People also seek the help of these healers to ascertain the causes of various mishaps and misfortunes that might have plagued them or their families. Independent healers practice where they choose, according to personalized rituals.

From Bah Shabong to Bei: Innovating Within Tradition

Another example of Christians practicing traditional healing is Bah Shabong. A small man in his early 80s, he still leads healing rituals when requested by clients. I consulted with him twice after the initial interview. His ritual approach includes an intercession with the gods and a concluding ritual a few days later, in his home. His healing practice is purely traditional, involving Khasi healing elements such as eggs, betel nuts, and betel leaves, and centred around an intercession with the gods to gain their favours for the client. The intercessions usually take place on the Shillong golf course, below a tree, where he has conducted, rituals for over 40 years. I first consulted with him to have the research blessed and ensure its success. The healer squatted on the ground, as I tried to find a comfortable position on a small rock. Children were playing in the background, on a swing. Some people were playing golf higher up the slope. At one point during the ritual, a herd of goats came down the slope, followed by their shepherd. Ignoring all these daily activities, the healer cut a betel nut in three, and placed it on three betel nuts leaves with some lime. During the previous interview, he had asked me to bring some items for the healing ritual: six eggs, a water bottle, three samples of soil from around my living quarters, and betel leaves. I handed him the items. He took the eggs out and choose one. With a rock selected from the ground, he drew straight lines on the shell of the egg. He then prayed a long time over it, bringing it close to his mouth and mumbling rapidly. Finally, he put the egg on the ground and chopped it expertly with his machete. Pieces of shell flew around him, but his attention was drawn to the big fragments still on the leaves. The disposition could tell him if the gods would agree to hear my requests. The disposition of the pieces of the eggshell was apparently a good omen. He threw rice on the shell fragments and added some more of the rice in the water bottle. He also gave me some raw rice to eat, then a sip of water. He instructed me to eat some of the rice that evening and then throw the rest outside my house the following day. I was also instructed to drink the water, which was now blessed water. The follow-up ritual was conducted in his house, which was pretty in the inside but built with a makeshift roof in tin. There were drawings of Jesus bleeding on the cross. During the ritual, he started by asking questions about my mental state and my dreams. He then prayed, before giving me a small amount of rice to eat (I had brought rice and water from my home). He put some of the rice in the bottle of water that now I had to drink.

Rice is central to some healing rituals, to pose a diagnosis and chase evil away from the patient. As the client eats the rice and drink the water, he should be cured from all ailments. Rosa Marboh,

a Christian tribal healer, also uses rice to determine the type of evil affecting her patients. She lives in the Happy Valley neighbourhood in Shillong. To reach her house, my interpreter and I had to descend through an alley, on dangerous steps. There was open sewage and a feeling of decay. Some of the houses, however, had vegetable gardens at the back. We waited for her in a room that was very clean and comfortable, with couches decorated with flowery cushions and a lot of windows. There was a bamboo recipient on the couch that still had some rice in it. She finally entered the room and greeted us. She then sat down on one of the chairs with attractive cushions. After the initial greetings, we started to ask about her healing career. Rosa was born in a village in the Khasi hills. After her mother died, she moved to Shillong with her father. One day when she was a child, she had a dream during which a priest gave her a box, telling her to keep it. After her marriage, she had a dream with the same priest. He asked her to give the box back. She was sleepwalking and she opened her *almirah*[7]. She saw that there was a box there. She asked the priest: " …is this the box that you're asking for?" And the priest said: " Yes." So, when she opened that box, she found seeds with numbers written on them. The priest told her: "Throw the seeds!" When she threw them, rice fell out from the shells. Rosa and her father started seeking the meaning of these dreams. Finally, a Protestant preacher revealed to her that she had a gift for divination. He told her that when she would look at the rice at the request of someone else, she would know what type of illness was affecting that person. That is how Rosa started reading rice for people. Since then, when a patient comes to her, she throws the rice. She then reads the configuration of the grains. It confirms her suspicions about the reasons behind the illness. After she has identified the sickness, she prays to the Holy Trinity over the rice used for divination. Then she chose a certain number of rice grains, dip them in water and prays again over the water. Rosa then asks the patient to drink the water. The sick person is usually cured after this ritual and some personal prayers by the healer.

The use of rice is widespread among healers in Meghalaya. However, some use only herbal medicine and prayers. This is the case among some Khasi healers, such as Kong Esther. She runs a private clinic in a small concrete building in her backyard, with a waiting room with space for about 10 people. There is a more secluded consulting room, separated by a door from the waiting area. Patients speak with the receptionist about their prescription through a little window. The role

[7] *Almirah* is an Anglo-Indian term for a cupboard or a wardrobe.

of Kong Esther is to prescribe medicine and to pray for the health of the patients. She consults with her clients and then prays for them when she is alone in the evening. She also distributes herbal medicine, and is renowned for healing some traditional ailments, such as *niangsohpet.* This ailment is culturally understood as a childhood diarrheal disorder (Albert et al., 2015). *Niangsohpet* are identified as germs that live in the skin of the stomach or in the intestines of newborns and disturb the digestion processes. The baby will then get dysentery and all types of stomach problems. This eventually weakens the body and make the infant susceptible to various kinds of diseases like chronic cold, fever, constipation, and loss of appetite (Hynniewta & Kumar, 2010). Since Kong Esther is well known in Shillong for treating this ailment, doctors refer the parents of sick children to her. The symptoms of the baby (fever, cough, temperature, diarrhea and bronchitis) are cured after taking the medicine prescribed by Esther regularly. According to my interpreter:

> We always come to her for this *dawai niangsohpet* for my nephew and my nieces. They have all come to her to take the medicine, even I have taken it in my time. My mom always came here, she took the medicine, and she gave it to us. So right from your childhood, if your stomach is clear from these bacteria causing germs, there are less chances of you contracting ulcers and stones in your kidneys.

Healing has been practiced for generations in Esther's family. Kong Esther herself started healing in 2003, when she succeeded her mother and inherited her practice. Before that, Esther helped her mother during healing sessions and learned how to mix the medicines. Some Khasi clans have been healed by members of her family for generations. She sees herself as providing a complimentary but essential service to the sick. Since people are not always cured by doctors, especially if the ailment is associated with Khasi traditions. For example, a doctor cannot do anything against ritual food poisoning (*Bih*). People have no other option but to consult with traditional healers such as Kong Esther. She does not use rice as a method to identify the origin of the sickness affecting her patients nor did she specify whether she used prayers as a divination tool. I must then assume that her diagnosis is made by identifying the symptoms of the patient and then associating them with a specific disease.

Divination was then not used by all the healers I met. One of these healers was a Jaintia woman living in Shillong. The Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya are home to the Pnar (Jaintia) ethnic community, many of whom follow "indigenous" religious practices within a framework that has historically integrated some elements of Hindu and Christian traditions (M. Lyngdoh, 2017). Jaintia healing is

similar to Khasi healing, but the symbolic aspect of the ritual and the space where it is carried out are used differently. I will illustrate these differences with two examples, one in Shillong and in one in the Jaintia hills.

Bei, a woman of about 60, lives in Mawkhar, a higher ground neighbourhood in Shillong. This is one of the wealthiest parts of town, with houses built in ancient Assamese style, and the streets are clean and quiet. Bei is from Jowai, the capital of the Jaintia hills, and worked as a nurse in the army before her retirement. She is Presbyterian; her family converted to Christianity three generations ago. Nonetheless, family members never stopped practicing healing. Her maternal uncle taught her how some basic healing techniques when she was a teenager. However, she only started her healing practice after her mother died two or three years ago. Bei's healing technique consists of administering herbal remedies to her patients. The plants are collected mostly in the Jaintia hills. Bei travels by foot in the forests where these plants grow. Once she has collected them, she lets them dry in her house. Then the medicine is ground and mixed with mustard oil. She uses the medicine to treat health problems that doctors are not able to cure. It can take up to three months, but her patients will be cured with her special medicine. She also treats people who became sick after practicing black magic and the victims of *Taro*. Bei has been living in Shillong for decades, but still follows the healing traditions of her family. One of these traditions concerns the gender roles assigned in the healing practice. According to the healer, she is allowed and even encouraged to practice herbal healing traditions. However, she cannot perform ritual healing. Only male members of the family can lead such ceremonies.

When she heard about my interest in healing rituals, Bei quickly organized a visit to Jowai, where her cousin holds a weekly healing clinic. On a Saturday, we rented a cab and went to the Jaintia hills. The fieldwork party was comprised of myself, my interpreter, Bei and her adult daughter. The driver drove swiftly through the gentle hills and then the jungles of Western Meghalaya. After two hours of crazy driving, the car stopped near a concrete apartment building. It was not the setting I expected for a healing practice in the countryside. We went down a few steps and entered the one-room clinic. Bah Wisha, the healer, is a man about 60 years of age. People come to see him for various physical and spiritual ailments. The healing room is small and there is no specific waiting space. On the day of our visit, clients waiting their turn were sitting on a bench or on a

boarded bed near the door. The people currently consulting the healer were seated on the flour just a few feet from him. The healer and his assistant (who was preparing the medicine) were conducting their affairs simultaneously. I noticed early in our visit that they did not pray during the healing session. The structure of the consultation could be divided in three phases. First, the clients explained their ailments to the healer, and he would then propose an explanation. Then the healer used eggs and ginger roots to confirm the diagnosis. His assistant then prepared the medicine prescribed by the healer.

During our time in the clinic, many people consulted the healer. A family walked in, the parents, a boy, and his little sister. The boy was affected by *Um Thlien*[8] (he caught it when playing in the water near where a snake was killed). The healer immediately prescribed medicine to cure the symptoms associated with *U Thlien*. After some discussion, it was decided the mother was also affected by bad spirits. The healer threw a ginger root in the air and let it fall on the ground. He then looked at the disposition of the root on the cement floor in order to identify the origin of the troubles affecting the woman. After the ginger root revealed that bad spirits were behind her sickness, the helper gave the appropriate medicine to the woman. She handed him 100 rupees. Later, a beautiful young woman with a baby came for help. She was worried about a sickness affecting her child. According to her, he probably had *niangsohpet* in the gut. Since it is a common ailment among babies and toddlers, the healers prescribed an herbal remedy for the child. It was prepared and handed to the mother. The baby also had a nasty-looking bump on his head, caused by a fall. The healer suggested that if the infant did not look better after taking the medicine, the mother should consult a doctor. He also gave her some herbs to apply on the baby's head.

Bah Wisha's healing practices combine divination and herbal remedies. This visit illustrated that even though Shillong is only a hundred kilometres away from the Jaintia hills, there are major differences in healing practices. In Bah Wisha's clinic, nothing was confidential. Some very private problems were openly discussed while other clients were waiting just a few feet away. Ginger roots were the tool for divination, not eggs or rice. Healing clinics in Meghalaya usually have only one healer, but here there was an assistant helping prepare the medicine. We have seen that tribal healing in Meghalaya takes many forms, according to the origin and faith of the

[8] This seems to be a variation of the curse of *U Thlien*.

practitioner. Christian faith healing, as I will show, is more uniform, usually involving prayers, anointment, and other faith-specific symbols.

Faith Healers in Meghalaya

Christian faith healing is a popular form of healing in Meghalaya. Possession is part of the social reality, and priests and nuns are often asked to chase the devil out of places and/or people. At least two of the participants in this research were recognized as powerful exorcists. One was authorized by the Vatican to perform exorcisms in the region. The faith healers in this research were mainly Catholics priests and nuns, but also included lay men and women. Their techniques involve healing prayers and exorcisms. Despite their different ethnic backgrounds, all believe in the reality of witchcraft in Meghalaya. They are Khasi, Jaintia or Keralite from South India.

Some of the participants in this research are ordained priests who lead religious services in various settings in the state of Meghalaya. One of them is Father Leo, a Christian Khasi who became a priest. He is at the pastor of his parish, director of a school and coordinator of the Mystical Rose Centre[9]. Since he is a member of the clergy, he mostly heals through the laying of the hands. He believes that when priests pray to Jesus this way, the evil leaves and patients get healed. He is adamant that curses DO exist: the energy he can read from people affected by them is different from those suffering from other ailments. When praying for people who are just having physical sickness, he closes his eyes peacefully and ask God to heal them. However, possessed people can get strong and he is careful with his physical safety.

In Meghalaya, many priests and nuns are called upon to heal people affected by demons. Among them, Sister Agatha is well known for her exorcism skills. She is a Jaintia Catholic who found her vocation early. Even when she was small, she would gather other children to pray. However, her father did not agree with her becoming a nun and wanted her to continue her studies. One day, she was playing basketball and hurt her knee. She prayed and prayed, but still did not feel anything anymore in her leg. Then on one of the feast days of the Virgin Mary, she heard a voice telling her to get up. The voice said: "Anita [her baptismal first name] my child, get up, go to the grotto, you

[9] See video at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBP5mt2WM_o

are healed." She got up and realized that she could move her leg. She went to the grotto, where she sat and prayed the rosary. According to Agatha, Mary healed her so she can become her daughter (a nun).

Despite being a nun, Agatha does not see a contradiction between her faith and Khasi traditional healing. She once saved one of her students who was dying from the curse of *U Thlien*. The girl was badly affected and was only saved by receiving the blessing of the *Syiem* queen in Smits[10]. Agatha's main tools are prayers and Catholic rituals:

> The Catholic Church says that we have sacraments, we have the power. The number one is Holy Eucharist, so the devil has no power on the one who eats the body of Jesus. Then, second is the sacrament of reconciliation, here we have it every week. Reconciliation is the sacrament that chases away the devil completely. We don't use the word confession, we say reconciliation: I reconcile myself with God and the devil cannot stay in a soul that is at peace with God. We also have the holy rosary, we have the holy water, we have palm leaves, blessed palm leaves. That's very powerful, in the Khasi hills, all the families have them in case anybody gets sick.

She also encourages the empowerment of lay faith healers, such as Kong Fatima. Fatima is a Khasi woman who practices healing in her own apartment. She uses holy water and oil to bless her patients. Some of her clients previously consulted doctors or spent time in hospital, but biomedicine could not cure them. They were only healed after Fatima prayed for them. She also treats people affected by evil spirits, blessing patients with holy water and anointing them with oil. The objective is to strengthen their spiritual being. Fatima is also recognized as a healer with a power to heal grief. One family had lost a cherished son and nephew a few years before. The wound was still raw for all family members, particularly his mother. She suffered from multiple health issues since the passing of her son. Fatima quickly concluded that these health issues were all related to the death of her son. She told the mother that she kept expecting to join his son in death, since he had told her he would come and get her after his passing. Fatima prayed for her and blessed her with holy oil. The passing of the nephew greatly affected all members of the family and could not be healed in only one praying session. Fatima also made a house call for a family healing session. Fifteen people sat down in the living room on couches, in chairs and on the floor. Fatima started by reading special verses from the Bible. She then conducted prayers and gave

[10] See full story in Appendix 1.1

blessings for each family member, asking the family to pray aloud to Jesus during the whole process. She blessed each person with holy oil and put the rosary on his or her forehead. She then recited a prayer, before moving on to the next family member. It was then the niece's turn. She stood up so Fatima could pray for her. After a few minutes, the girl suddenly fainted in the arms of the healer, who almost collapsed under her weight. The younger brother had to come to the rescue. They lay the niece down on the floor for a few minutes before she came to her senses. When the grieving mother's turn came, she started crying loudly and the niece as well. Amidst the crying, it was hard to hear the prayers. Fatima made sure she put oil on the legs of the mother of the deceased boy, since she had pain in the knees and had some difficulty walking. This family session was aimed at healing both physical and emotional distress. Healing was provided by anointing everyone with blessed oil accompanied by prayers.

I was able to witness more of these charismatic healing events during a field trip to Jowai with Agatha and Fatima. The objective of the visit was to bring healing to a family who had lost two sons in obscure circumstances. Both young men had died suddenly without warning. Sister Agatha asked Fatima to come with us to Jowai to pray for their remaining family members. However, my interpreter and I were not allowed to assist to the praying sessions led for the souls of the young men and their surviving parents and siblings. Despite this setback, during the journey we were able to meet Sister Agatha's family. Her mother, her sisters and their children still lived in her childhood house in their village. Fatima had been asked to pray for one of the children who was deaf since birth. However, she ended up praying for every child in the household. I sat down in front of Fatima, as the deaf child was brought over by his mother. He was maybe 4 years old but could only articulate a few words. His mother sat on a stool beside Fatima. The healer found out that when she was pregnant, the mother had received injections for bleeding. That may have affected the baby. Fatima also mentioned the possibility that the father had been having extramarital affairs. This cheating may have put a curse on his son. Fatima followed a well-structured ritual for each patient. She started by asking them if they had a special request, then put the blessed oil on their forehead. She then lay one of her hands on their heads and recited a prayer. After the prayer, she discussed with each person what she felt about their request during the prayer.

Fatima is a charismatic healer who may have received what has been called *discernment* in catholic circles, a divinely heightened intuition understood as an ability to understand people, problems, and situations (Csordas, 1988). During the family healing session, she was able to read into a past situation where one of the younger nephews had fallen into a dangerous lake and almost drowned. The children had never shared these details with the adults. Fatima admonished them about how they needed to listen to the adults and obey them. As Csordas (1988), while it is quite common for priests and members of religious orders to practice ritual healing, many Charismatic healing ministers are laypersons. Second, while some healing ministers have had professional training in counselling or psychology, most have not (p. 126). This corresponds to what I observed among Khasi faith healers in Meghalaya. Furthermore, the proximity between Protestants and Catholics, sometimes within the same joint family, may have led to the emergence and acceptance of the Charismatic Renewal in the state. A Khasi male exorcist, Father Francis, was born Protestant. However, his father converted to Catholicism and all family members became de facto Catholics. Francis is an exorcist, but he also prays and anoints the sick. According to him, his healing practice takes the form of a confrontation between him, holding the power of God and Jesus Christ, and evil. This evil originates in the many devils who are found in the natural environment of the Khasi hills. He told me this story:

> One lady came today. She had a daughter who was already in class 11. I went to her village last year to bless a marriage. Then the mother said, “Father, my girl is very sick, just come and pray, what kind of sickness we don’t know. She got some sickness in the liver; she went to wash clothes in the river and when she came back, she was unconscious. In the village, there are many rivers where there are these devils. (…) I did not believe that it is like that, but I saw her weak and then when I went to pray then she became unconscious. (…) Then I took the holy water and threw it on her face two or three times, and I said,” In the name of Jesus Christ, if there is a devil, I chase you devil, I tie you and throw you at the feet of Jesus, and Jesus will do whatever he wants with you. Then I knock, I knock at this girl you know. I knock in the name of Jesus: "*Please be healthy*". Then she opened her eyes. "Do you recognize me?" Sometimes those who have got the devil. They will cheat you know. She said: "Yes." "Who am I? Tell me the truth." "Yes, I know you are a father, no?" "You are lying, do you know that I'm really a father?" Then she turned a little, then I gave a slap, two or three times. Then, thank God, afterward she became all right.

This story show how healers and victims of curses in Meghalaya are mixing the different ontological worlds they inhabit. The girl was possessed by a local water demon, but the exorcist was a Catholic priest. Despite the Christian elements of the process (holy water, calling out the

name of Jesus, the reference to the devil), the demon possessing the young girl is from the river, where deities and spirits live who can cause great harm to human beings. Both Father Francis and Sister Agatha demonstrated in their storytelling that they do not feel any conflict between their Catholic faith, their charismatic gifts and their indigenous roots.

Another member of the clergy, Sister Anita, also uses a mixed ontological approach to healing. She is a Catholic nurse who receives her patients in a small, covered space beside her church. Sister Anita practices a Khasi traditional ritual called *Mait Tyrut* to chase away the evil plaguing people with suffering, misfortunes, and accidents. The traditional funerary norms prescribed in the case of victims who died by violence require this special ritual. The word *mait* means "to hack" or "to kill" the tyrut (curse). The ceremony involves the propitiation of the Tyrut with the sacrifice of a fowl and other things (Lyngdoh, 2012). In her case and in the case of others, healing is not only spiritual or physiological, but also quite pragmatic. Sister Anita provides what I could call divine counselling. One woman was abandoned by her husband. She was desperate since she was really poor. Jesus told Anita that the woman should start selling dry fish. Once she did, she became rich.[11] Sister Anita also does phone healing for clients from other countries:

> From America, from Australia, from everywhere. People who got lost or sick…Yes, we got somebody who got lost, then separated. I tell so many people who are working in their own life a non-normal job, non-normal I call them because they go and do business with their bodies. But then when they meet me, so many in America and everywhere I would tell them: buy hundreds of these pictures of divine mercy that will give healing to you. Five people like this in America they are now doing a wonderful job. They don't like this evil business anymore, and they received the love and mercy of God. They themselves go to children and talk about this evil and they help other people to live a good life.

Not every healer, however, mixes ontologies in their practices. According to Festus, a Jaintia Catholic priest, Christian healing is the sacrament of confession. He believes in prayer and anointing the sick and sees similarities between tribal healing and faith healing, but not does not favour mixing the two. Festus admits that some people have a healing gift, but, according to him, only Jesus and God can heal.

[11] See full story in Annex 3.1.

Healing Centres: Religious Healing in Group Settings

Father Leo, Sister Agatha, Kong Fatima, Father Francis and Sister Anita are of tribal origin. They were all born Christians in converted families. However, in their worldview, sickness and misfortune are life events brought upon people by an evil rooted in the traditional tribal ontologies of the Khasi and the Jaintia. Some Christian healers do not belong to tribal groups. Meghalaya is home to two important healing centres, one of which is mostly staffed by Keralite priests from South India. The Holy Redeemer Renewal Centre is a Catholic mission in the outskirts of Shillong. Most priests and nuns residing at the centre are South Indians. The Centre holds retreats for people who seek to learn about Christianity and healing; it includes the main church, a chapel, a building for the priests and nuns, as well as dormitories for the people joining a retreat or a vigil. The clergy organizes healing masses every Saturday. They also organize 24 hours prayer vigils and retreats during which people can learn about Christ and healing.

Photo 4: The Holy Redeemer Renewal Centre near Shillong

On two occasions, I visited the centre with my interpreter to attend Mass. Most of the worshippers were women with children, or elderly people. Both Masses I observed lasted about four hours,

from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., with a short break in the middle. Each time, a woman with a microphone led people prayers in Khasi. During the first part, the priest followed the structure of the Catholic Mass as I knew it, culminating in communion. In the second part, emphasis was put on healing through prayers and the laying of hands. Some of the priests spoke Khasi easily and were able to deliver their speeches in the local language. Others did not speak Khasi and used interpreters during their sermons. At one point during the healing service, the priest took up a silver recipient with oil and sprinkled it over us. After prayers, he asked us all to kneel in front of him and then be blessed the attendees by putting sacred oil on their foreheads. After the blessings and some singing, the priest asked those present if they had various specific ailments. Each time, people with such ailments were asked to raise their hands. The priest told them each time: "Be relieved of your burden". Then: "A big clap for Jesus ". Everybody would then clap their hands. He also blessed objects that we brought from home. Some people had bottles of water that the Father blessed. On the second occasion when we attended Mass, a healing event had been organized. Special invitees were there to heal and bless people. One of the healers was so strong that a woman fell in trance on the floor.

These events shows that the development of Christianity in Meghalaya has followed global trends of the last two centuries. The history of Christianity in North-East India in the 19th and 20th centuries is closely related to colonial expansion. The arrival of William Carey, a Baptist missionary from England in Calcutta on November 11, 1793, marked the beginning of active Christian Mission work in North-East India. However, Catholicism took root much later. A small Catholic community existed in Shillong in 1890, but it numbered around twenty people and was composed mainly of Englishmen, Anglo Indians and a few Catholic servants coming from other parts of India (Syiemlieh, 2013). From 1889 the region was assigned to the German Society of Catholic Education. During the First World War, German Salvatorians were repatriated, and the work was entrusted temporarily to the Belgian Jesuits (1915-22) until responsibility was handed over to Salesians of Don Bosco in 1922. The pace of growth picked up with the Jesuits, and after that, even more beginning in the first decade of the Salesians' work (Pachuau, 2003). *The* Second Vatican Council, also called Vatican II, (1962–65), attempted to bring the Church into dialogue with modern culture. It was an attempt to “localize” or “indigenize” the Gospel into cultures, or more generally, to formulate a theology of the dynamics of the interaction between the Church and

the local culture. The objective of the Council was to renew the Church in response to the challenges of modernity. Liturgical books were translated into vernacular languages for use throughout the world (Phan, 2016). Vatican II brought a significant change in the Roman Catholic churches in India, including the use of vernacular languages for liturgy, the employment of local musical traditions, and the adoption of Indian architectural patterns in the building of churches (Thangaraj & Dass, 2018). This opened the door to the Charismatic Renewal in India. Before 1960, Pentecostal phenomena in the Christian world were almost entirely confined to Pentecostal denominations. Yet during the 1960s and 1970s, the Charismatic Renewal brought speaking in tongues (glossolalia) and teachings about Spirit baptism to growing numbers of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, and, beginning in 1967, to Roman Catholics (McClymond, 2016). The differences between the early globalization of Catholicism and the globalization of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal lie in changed conditions such as the growth of mass media and changed interaction with indigenous religions (Csordas, 2007).

For the clergy in Meghalaya, charismatic gifts such as healing are a strategy to convince people to either convert to Christianity, to adopt Catholicism or simply to follow a more Christian way of life. They see their presence in Meghalaya as essential to strengthen the faith of the people and insuring the conversion of any remaining pagans. Healing and conversion are tightly linked according to the priests of Umroï. Father Phillip told the story of a Hindu woman dying of cancer. She could not undergo treatment because of her advanced age. The family then met a Catholic priest and they started praying. The daughter converted to Christianity and prayed for the health of her mother. After a while, the mother did not need to do chemotherapy and was healed. She converted to Christianity as well.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is strong enough in Meghalaya to counter the worldwide Evangelical wave. Healing attracts many to the Charismatic Renewal. This is also the case in the other healing centre in Meghalaya, the Mystical Rose Centre**,** a church, and a convention centre not far from Shillong. Its infrastructure consists of a semi-open church, with space for at least a thousand people, a courtyard with a sacred spring and some devotional statues. To receive full healing, people must visit the centre for nine consecutive weeks, on Saturdays. Several spiritually gifted laypeople serve as healers at the Centre every Sunday. The day we visited the Mystical Rose

Centre, there was a special service. People had brought their bottles of oil to be blessed and placed them on a special rack beside the stage. During the service led by Father Leo, healers were requested to bless and give healing to people lining up in front of them. It was a huge event, and the place was full of people. Some fainted when receiving blessings from the healers. Many miracles of spiritual and physical healing have been reported at the centre. According to Father Leo:

> There was a man who was always drinking in Mairang, enjoying life…. He was middle-aged, maybe in his fifties or sixties. (…) One day he got cancer then he cursed God saying: "Oh God gave me this cancer, what a God, you are hopeless, I don't believe in you at all, so you give me this sickness … I don't care". Then his children, especially his wife, they are very religious-minded, they came to me and say: "What shall we do, we really feel pity for Daddy, he does not believe in God and he curses God because of this sickness so what shall we do?" Then I said: " Was he a Christian before? They said: "Yes, he was a Christian but then he does not go to church, he does not practice at all."

Despite his reticence, the man visited the centre for seven weeks. The fifth time he asked to confess all his sins and went to communion on the seventh visit. His cancer did not disappear, but Father Leo felt the man was happier and a changed person. Before his death, the man called his wife, his children and grandchildren and blessed them all. He was spiritually healed through non-charismatic Catholic rituals. However, the church attracts crowds seeking charismatic healing.

Faith healing by Christians emerged from Protestant groups. In Meghalaya, the first foreign missions were Protestant. Rapidly, due to the enrollment of indigenous people, many local churches emerged. According to a pastor, Bah Nongstoing, spiritual healing comes from Jesus only. With the Savior's help, he was able to heal one lady who was suffering from seasonal possession:

> Every season that sickness comes, but that sickness is not a natural disease. She was possessed, by the devil. She was always paralyzed and once she is paralyzed, she would fall, and vomit and the saliva would come out. It was going on for ten long years. The lady was maybe 50 years. That night they called me and requested me to come and pray. She was dead: they said she didn't wake up for two nights. But not totally dead: breathing was still there; however we could feel she was still alive. But she was not normal, she couldn't feel anything and then she couldn't talk to anyone. Then we went there and then we preached to the husband and the grown-up children. I told them: you repent if you have anything wrong against God, please come to God you know, humble

> yourself. We prayed to heal, to set her free. They shed tears, they cred and then they came to God. We prayed together, so after praying we laid hands on her and said: "In Jesus name, be healed from today you'll be alright Jesus will wake you up now!" Then she woke up. My friends told me that from that day onwards she was totally healed.

People welcoming Jesus with humble hearts and believing in Him will surely receive healing. When people ask Him for forgiveness and confess their sins, Jesus will forgive and heal. Once people receive forgiveness, they receive healing and then salvation. In the view of Bah Nongstoing, it is important for people who are terminally ill to receive Jesus Christ in their lives to die in Christ.

Hindu Spiritual Entrepreneurs

Religious minorities in Meghalaya, such as the Hindus, continue to follow their own practices for spiritual healing. Many Hindus have moved to Meghalaya from other regions of India and Asia to enjoy economic opportunities in the Northeast. Hindu healing in Meghalaya is practised mainly in the cosmopolitan city of Shillong, where most of the non-tribals live. Many Hindus currently residing in Shillong are of Nepali descent and have been living in the state for generations. Hindu healing in Meghalaya is also practised by women. Moreover, the rituals practised by Hindu healers address some local cultural ailments, such as *U Thlien* and *Taro*.

Many Hindus tend to view the various causes of illness, sickness, and misfortune as complementary rather than exclusive. Importantly, models of ill health and disease often include spiritual or divine influences. Disease and suffering are not solely physical or mental ailments; rather, they are often understood as conditions that include bio-moral, social, and spiritual imbalances (Cohen, 2014). Hindu religious healing takes many forms. The healers I encountered were spiritual healing entrepreneurs, practising in their own private shrines. Their techniques were influenced by their origins, their socio-economic status, and their gender. They were also shaped by family history and the creativity of each healer, and how they connected to the spiritual forces around them. Bah Samson Killing is a member of the Assamese Karbi tribe. He now lives in the Nonmyngsong neighbourhood in Shillong. His home and clinic are situated in a picturesque backstreet, a maze of concrete houses around courtyards and small pedestrian alleys. The clinic opens onto a courtyard. In Bah Killing's office, there is a desk and a bench for patients. On the other side of a curtain stands a shrine dedicated to the goddess Kali, with food and flower offerings.

Bah Killing is a tall, big man, with a white beard. The day I met him he was wearing a *Garmocha* (an Assamese scarf) around his neck. He had a Hindu tikka between the eyes. He explained to us that he was also a Taekwondo teacher. After the initial interview, I had some difficulties reaching him, except on the day when I met with him at a studio to shoot some photos as publicity for his martial arts studio. He showed up in his Taekwondo outfit for the occasion.

The rituals performed by Bah Samson Killing were of prime interest for studying spiritual healing in a remote but cosmopolitan city. Like most healers in this thesis, he would use rice to cast off bad luck away from those seeking his help. Samson held rice bought by the patient in his hands and pray, then wrapped it in newspapers and gave it back to him or her. The patient then was supposed to eat the rice. Other healing rituals by Bah Samson included sacrificing a goat or a buffalo to Kali and praying at his shrine for his patients. At least one female Hindu healer practices in Meghalaya. Geeta was born in Shillong, but her grandparents originally came from Nepal. She became a healer when Kali came to her in a dream and gave her the gift for healing. Even today, when she sleeps, the image of Kali comes to her. She meditates and prays to the goddess to show her the specific ailment of the patient. To fight against *U Thlien* or *Taro*, she uses a treatment that usually involves beating the patient with a broomstick. According to this healer, *U Thlien* patients usually suffer from swellings, since their blood is consumed by the snake. She prays and invokes the goddess on their behalf. Kali comes to her, and when Geeta touches the patient suffering from this curse, he or she is cured. Since Kali is known as the protector and is very strong, evil spirits are afraid of her and will flee when a healer invokes her name.

Geeta has a huge following, both from the Khasi Christian community and from the Hindu community (Nepali and others). Some parts of the ritual are clearly Hindu, such as the prayers in Nepali and the offerings to Kali. Geeta leads her rituals in a small shrine. People must crouch down to get into the space and then sit on uncomfortable little wood benches. However, she also prays over rice and beetle nuts, and sacrifices a chicken when she feels there is a need for more powerful intercession by the goddess. One day, a young Khasi woman wanted to see Geeta to know if she should start a new business. Even though it was Saturday morning, Khasi and Hindus were already waiting on the benches outside of the shrine. I waited with this young woman for two long hours. Finally, Geeta called us in. A bucket for the blood of the chicken was left near the

entrance. Geeta took what the girl had brought: betel leaves and betel nuts. She put the leaves on a plate with the betel nuts on top of them. She prayed with her beads, while chanting, as the client showed her a picture of her friend and potential business partner. After the prayers, Geeta said to her client that two girls who she did not name were jealous of her since she was starting a business. She also told her not to get married too soon, since the right man was not there yet. After the praying, Geeta and her husband sacrificed the chicken resting until then in a bag. The animal was kept behind Geeta, and I could not see or hear it before she took it out of its hiding place. The animal did not look afraid and was not moving or making a sound. Geeta put tikka paste on the head of the chicken and on the beetle nut leaves. She chanted for some time, before calling her husband, a short man with a big belly. He opened the bucket and used a Khasi knife to cut off the head of the chicken. The animal was beheaded to ask the gods if her client should go into business with a specific person. I can then conclude that, following the Khasi tradition, the chicken then acted as a mediator between the young women and the deities. The ritual thus becomes a Khasi rite, performed by a Hindu Nepali. It is worth noting as well that this young woman, born of a Muslim father and a traditional Khasi mother, is not converted to Christianity and her family continues to observe traditional Khasi religion.

Another example of how healing traditions meet and are renegotiated in Meghalaya is found in the practice of G.R.S Powdell. A Hindu of Nepali origin, he was born in the Bhoi region of Meghalaya. When he was thirteen years old, during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, he went to the jungle to collect banana leaves needed to make a bowl for a feast. He fell into a trance and disappeared. Everybody went to search for him but to no avail. His father visited a guru, who told him where to find his son. The guru also ordered the father to bring him the child once he was found. Then the guru would help him regain his senses and would teach him to heal. Accordingly, Powdell was brought to the guru when they found him. He was taught how to pray and to heal people. According to Powdell, his disappearance may have been a sign that he was possessed by a god. After his apprenticeship, he moved to Shillong. He opened a night clinic in the back of his house, a compound lent to him by his employer, an electricity company. The waiting space for the clients is in the back yard of the residence. Powdell's healing rituals are quite different from the ones performed by the two healers previously described. Very few elements are inspired by local Khasi

culture. After asking the name and birthdate of the patient and writing it down on a piece of paper, he then prays and prepares a charm for the client.

During one of my visits, there were a lot of people already waiting in the courtyard. Three (two wearing *jainsem* and one a *salwar kameez*[12]) were sitting on a chair near the entrance of the healing room. Three other women were sitting on a bench near the room for tuition classes. A couple of men were sitting under a tin roof. There were lots of mosquitoes and paper egg trays were burning to keep them away from the waiting crowd. Chickens were fighting in the courtyard. I waited with my assistant as it became dark, and more mosquitoes showed up. Finally, our turn came. We entered the consultation room. Powdell sat at a table in front of the shrine, while we took our seat on *mullahs* a few feet from him. I asked the healer to pray for the research since it had stalled. He asked me to touch the rice kept in a small bowl, since I had not brought any. The healer then asked my name, my title and my date of birth. He wrote the information on a small piece of paper. Then he prayed on the rice and on a string of red *mala* prayer beads. The healer then revealed that the research was slowing down because some people were jealous of my success. After this revelation, Powdell prayed with the beads a few more minutes. He then put them on my forehead, then on each side of my shoulders, before declaring that I also had been a little bit lazy! He determined that I should come back the next day, with flowers, earth, rice, and water to remove the curse of jealousy. In the meantime, he gave me two packets. One of them was to put first in the wallet, and then under my pillow tonight. He gave me another one with rice in it, to be eaten that night and the following morning.

The next day, I arrived as promised at 1 p.m. As we entered the prayer room, I noticed the different Hindu deities represented on the shrine, including Krishna, Kali and Durga. At the request of the healer, I took the items out of my bag: a bottle of water, the rice, the flowers, and the package I had kept under my pillow the night before. Powdell wrote my name on a piece of paper a second time. He inquired about my dreams of the previous night. I revealed that I had dreamt of a bridge, on which I was camping without a tent. According to Powdell, it meant jealousy. He promised to remove this curse, so that the research could move forward. He repeated the ritual of praying with the beads, putting them above and on the side my head. He took the flowers, dipped them in the

[12] Indian dress comprising pants, tunic, and scarf. Most Khasi women do not wear the salwar kameez.

water, and splashed me with the blessed water. Then he handed me a medicine wrapped in black tissue and plastic. He instructed me to keep the little package in my wallet from then on. He also told me to eat a little bit of the sacred rice each time I went out for research work. He also blessed a bottle of water that I had to drink from for three days, before throwing it out. Despite admitting to treating patients affected by Khasi ailments such as *U Thlien* and *Taro*, Powdell healing does not mix ontologies. The symbolic elements (flowers, praying beads and offering to the gods) are mostly those used during Hindu rituals. Powdell, however, spoke of healing individuals practising evil gestures such as casting Khasi curses, i.e., culture-specific actions.

This is also the case for the Chapagai brothers, three Hindu healers living in Nongrah, in the outskirts of Shillong. Their rituals are different from the previous Hindu healers described here. Among other things, they are astrologers of Nepali descent. Their father came from Nepal. Nongrah is a typical neighbourhood, with a mix of drab concrete housing and quiet lanes with Assamese and concrete dwellings. The house of the Chapagai family is on the top of a hill. During my many visits, I had to climb the steep hill on foot, since the road was in construction and not opened to cars. On the hilltop, I found myself in a different part of Shillong. It looked like a typical Indian village, with dust roads, animals roaming around, and women in saris. There were no fences between the houses. However, a fence in concrete separated the house of the Chapagai brothers from the dusty road. Behind lay a courtyard, and then the residence, a one-level concrete construction with a verandah. When I first visited them for a healing ritual, the healer was the older brother, Sharma. The session conducted for my interpreter took place inside a little room, lined with shelves stocked with products sold in the shop the brothers kept near the house. There were rows of bottled waters and of chip packets. I handed over the rice they had instructed us to bring during the interview, and Sharma started praying. He asked my interpreter some questions by pointing some of my companion body parts: *So, you have pain there, and there?* My friend answered each question in the positive. Sharma told my interpreter to take a bottle of water from the shelf. My friend selected a bottle and handed it to the healer. Sharma opened the cap, blew on the water while leaning close to my friend, then gave him some instructions. My interpreter had to apply the water on his body and drink it when he felt pain. Sharma also told him that, if he needed to come back, he should bring beetle nuts and leaves so that he could perform a proper ritual. The second time we visited them, the Chapagai brothers used sacred rocks to massage the affected

body parts of my friend. Hindu healing is then as diverse as the people practising it and the patients seeking help. Clients are not limited to the Hindu segment of the population. Khasi and other tribal people also visit reputed Hindu healers.

Akbar: A Muslim Healer

Muslim healing seemed almost exclusively reserved for an Islamic clientele. The only Muslim healer I met during this research has lived in Shillong most of his life. Muhammad Akbar did Islamic studies in Uttar Pradesh, where he was taught how to pray for the sick. During his studies, he learned in the Koran about witchcraft and evil practices and how to eradicate them. Akbar's patients visit him for spiritual ailments. According to the healer, bad djinns can make people sick. They are not dead people or ghosts and were created by God. They are made of fire and travel by air. This is how Akbar sees djinns: "A djinn is huge; fire is coming out from his eyes and his mouth. He doesn't have ears, so he looks so bad that if you don't use the Quran as your protection, you might just collapse there and die." Muslim healing then may refer to evil, devils and harmful deities, but it does not imply the same degree of ontological mixture as the other categories of ritual healing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified the different types of symbolic or traditional healing practice in Meghalaya. I first established a distinction between three types of traditional healing practiced by the Khasi: indigenous tribal healers belonging to association such as the Seng Khasi, traditional healers converted to Christianity that are operating independently, and healers of the clan of the King. I have shown how people will often go to the doctor to get treated. However, if the treatment does not work, they may suspect that evil is at work and seek help from a traditional healer. The healer will then intercede with the gods to find the source of the problem. He may also try to resolve the issue by asking forgiveness from the gods for any sins committed by the patients (Syiem, 2010). Previously, traditional healing practices were reserved to specialists among clans and families. However, religious changes, urbanization and globalization have lessened the role of maternal uncles in the transmission of traditional religion. The mass immigration of Hindus and Muslims of various origins has also modified the ethnic and language structure of the state.

Traditional healing practices have evolved accordingly. Despite these changes, the Khasi have been intensively involved in the preservation of their culture. The Seng Khasi association was founded to protect traditional culture from the dangers of colonization. Members of the society are Khasi who have never converted to Christianity, or who have renounced Christianity to return to traditional religion. The Seng Khasi is responsible for the organization of traditional healing. Since maternal uncles were the ones responsible for the family rituals, many of their links with traditional practices have been lost due to conversion to Christianity. To preserve traditional practices, the Seng Khasi have put together clinics with fixed schedules where healing sessions are offered to the public. I have also shown that Christian healing in Meghalaya is practiced by Catholic nuns and priests, laity healers, and Protestant ministers and gather mostly to a Christian clientele. Even converted Christians sometimes revert to traditional healing when everything else fails (Syiem, 2010). They do not question their faith when doing so. Rather, they see it as a pragmatic step to avoid further suffering. They do not stop there; some consult healers from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, according to the nature of the problem they are facing. Hindus and Muslims, by contrast, tend to gravitate towards healers of their own religious tradition. Other tribal groups also have their own healing traditions. Despite these differences, Christians, Hindus and Muslims believe that practitioners of other groups can heal them. This porosity between ontological worlds is also found in the narratives constructing knowledge about witchcraft and curses. Witchcraft practices belonging originally to the Khasi have crossed ethnic and religious lines. The case of the curse of *U Thlien* will be explored in the next chapter and will allow me to demonstrate how a local curse became part of the reality not only for the tribal people of Meghalaya but also for immigrants relatively new to the state.

Chapter 4. A Giant Snake and a Goddess of Wealth

Introduction

Getting cursed in Meghalaya is part of daily life. Anybody can become a victim, for example, by eating in an unknown *Kong shop* or walking in a crowded market. In Khasi society, curses are mostly owned by clans or individuals. They are closely associated with deities or family gods who must be feared and honoured. The keeper must fulfill the needs of these spirits, or they will turn against him (Kharbangar, 2006). One of the most fearsome of these curses is called *U Thlien*.

The origin of *U Thlien* is mythical, and the story associated with him is considered a legend. However, *U Thlien* is part of the lived reality of the Khasi people. He brings fear and suspicion in the daily lives of people. People suspect each other of worshipping the snake deity and offering human sacrifices to him. This sacrifice is done by either killing the victim directly or by sending a curse to her. People affected by the curse will slowly die, as the snake drinks their blood at a distance night after night. To fight this curse, healing is necessary. I will explain further in the chapter who can perform this act of healing and in what ways, according to the Khasi. I will conclude the section about *U Thlien* by offering some analytical possibilities of the phenomenon, and how it can be understood according to anthropological and social science paradigms as regards witchcraft. I will also explore other curses that are widespread in Meghalaya, such as *Taro* and *Bih*. They are as common and as feared as *U Thlien*. However, other named curses are free agents, living in the jungle. These evil spirits thrive in rivers, mountains, forests, caves, deep pools and even in the sky and can cause ailments of various types (Wolflanq, 2003)

U Thlien: An Evil Snake

In Meghalaya, some of the most powerful curses are named after a deity. Worshipping these gods and goddesses bring wealth and prosperity to the family (Kharbangar, 2006; Mawrie, 1981). *U Thlien* belongs to that category of curses: he is considered a god or evil spirit, and people get wealthy by offering him human sacrifices. *U Thlien* is a demonic creature as well as a household deity, and people who nurture him never admit or acknowledge that they keep him. *U*

Thlien is also the popular usurper, the creature who subverts the fundamental precepts of Khasi traditional religion, in which earning righteousness is the duty of human beings. Another term used for *U Thlien* is *Ksuid,* a generic term for a malevolent entity (Lyngdoh, 2015).

I read of and heard many versions of the myth of *U Thlien*. The setting of the story is the birthplace of Khasi identity, around a touristy spot called Cherapunjee. The drive from Shillong takes the visitor from a landscape of wild jungles to a plateau blessed with spectacular waterfalls. About three miles from Cherapunjee village, there is a place called *Dain Thlien*, which means: *we are cutting U Thlien*. Originally, *U Thlien* was a deity worshipped by the Khasi. He had control over this huge domain presently called *Dain Thlien*. He was the custodian of the wilderness of that area, which used to be heavily forested. In some narratives, the mother of *U Thlien* was a goddess called *Ka Kma Karai*. She was the daughter of the god *U Mawlong Siem*. The family of this god took pleasure in dancing and festivities. It is said that people sometimes heard revelry and the beating of drums within the mountain that were supposed to be those of *U Mawlong Siem*. This sound invariably portends the death of an important individual. *Ka Kma Karai* fled her home after becoming pregnant and put herself under the protection of her maternal uncle, who lived in a cave. In this underground refuge, she gave birth to a son who was deformed. He looked like a snake and wanted nothing to sustain him other than human blood. He was called *U Thlien* (Rafy, 1920).

According to the tales, *U Thlien* would attack and swallow passersby going to the market (Bareh, 1985). Eventually the villagers discovered the truth about the missing villagers. People decided to hunt the monster and to kill it. Two clever men (or a traditional priest in some stories), were chosen to go to the cave of the demon. One of the conspirators asked the snake if he wanted some food from the market. *U Thlien* answered: "Bring me pork, nice pork juicy pork, I'd like to have pork". The two men were thinking: "We'll heat up iron ore and when it becomes very hot it will resemble red hot pork, and then we will take it and feed it to him." They pretended to come back from the market and one of them said: "OK uncle, open your mouth, you know I've brought you some really good fresh pork that you'll enjoy." *U Thlien* opened his huge hungry mouth. The two men pushed red-hot molten iron ore down its throat. After swallowing the poisonous gift, the snake died in terrible agony, thrashing about the landscape and changing it forever. The snake was then dragged out of the cave and slaughtered. Villagers held a huge feast. The Khasi decided they should eat

everything of the snake, and each house received a piece of meat. People were warned not to leave any scraps of the meat. However, one of the women took the flesh home to keep some for her child. She kept the piece of flesh in a basket and forgot about it. Since the meat was not consumed, *U Thlien* came back to life. He asked the woman to give him a black sheep to eat. However, the woman understood that what he really wanted to eat was not a black sheep, but a human being with black hair (a Khasi). The woman did not tell anybody, got the snake his first victim, and became a nongshohnoh, one of the people who worship the snake. The woman was forced to care for the snake, feeding it human blood month after month, year after year. Thus, it is believed that *U Thlien* can only be appeased by the killing of a human being (Wolflanq, 2003). In return, *U Thlien* made her wealthy and prosperous. Subsequently Thlien worship spread through marriage, kinship and trade (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010). In another version of the story, in order to defeat the demon, a young man entered the cave with a herd of goats. He offered them to *U Thlien* one by one. The snake became so friendly that it began to open its mouth to receive the flesh. The youth then heated a lump of iron red-hot in a furnace. He threw the iron in the mouth of the snake, and it died. The youth sent the pieces of meat in every direction with orders for the people to eat them. Wherever these orders were obeyed, Khasi land was freed of *U Thlien*. However, similarly to the previous story, one small piece remained unconsumed. A woman carried the piece of meat to give to her son. She kept it in a bamboo basket. From this one piece arose many more *U Thlien* who infested the Khasi lands (Kharkongor, 2014). Although he is often described as a snake-like creature, it is very difficult to specifically ascertain the appearance of *U Thlien*. He is described to be "a mysterious creature," that resembles the devil. It is also said *U Thlien* can even change his shape (Wolflanq, 2003). He can physically transform himself into various forms such as fish, cats, snakes, etc. (Kharbangar, 2006).

The Ritual and the Clans

A ritual is needed for the snake to drink the blood. This ceremony is accomplished by specific clans, who worship *U Thlien* to be blessed in return with wealth. The ritual of worship involves singing, dancing and human blood. The families who owe allegiance to *U Thlien* are known as *Nongri thlen* or more commonly *nongshohnoh* (Kharbangar, 2006). In exchange of giving blood to the snake, they are blessed with prosperity and wealth. *U Thlien* usually shows up in the form of a snake, small or big (Khongkliam, 2012). Since the worshipping family does not hunt the

victims, it recruits "agents," the *menshohnoh*, to feed *U Thlien*. Father Francis explained how his sister was almost kidnapped by a *nongshohnoh*. His father was working in the fields, and his sister was waiting for him. A *nongshohnoh* came and tried to kidnap her. She was only about five years old. She cried and their father started to shout to her to run. He had a knife, and he was able to catch the man by his pants, but the perpetrator escaped. However, they saw a man with a hole in his pants later in the village.

The *menshohnoh* kills the victim, takes his or her blood, and gives it to the *nongshohnoh* family, who then feeds *U Thlien*. The *menshohnoh* can use magic to catch people and throw enchanted stones at their future victims, who then fall unconscious. The *menshohnoh* is then free to kidnap his prey. He can also throw magic rice on an unsuspecting victim or put some grains on her/his way so that the person will faint when stepping on them. This rice is first offered to *U Thlien*, and then it acquires the power to enchant and bring temporary numbness or senselessness to the victim (Kharbangar, 2006). The blood needs to be extracted from the nose of the victim by inserting a very sharp piece of bamboo in the nostrils. The *menshohnoh* will then suck out the blood until the victim dies. They may also chop off the victim's fingernails, the lips, the ear lobes, and the eyebrows. However, there is a simpler way of feeding *U Thlien* when the *menshohnoh* cannot get blood directly by capturing a victim. He may decide to get pieces of clothes or hairs from a victim. However, clothes drying outside are not useful. They can only be stolen when on the body of the victims. These items are then put in a bamboo vessel, and the *nongshohnoh* family waits for them to magically turn to blood. It can take months for this to happen, as the family will keep praying for the hair and the clothes to transform into blood. When it finally happens, the *nongshohnoh* then requests that *U Thlien* drink that blood through a specific ritual. In a secret room of their home, the worshipping family members first call *U Thlien* by beating the drum and chanting. The snake will eventually appear. It may show up in many forms such a cat, a lizard, or a snail. The face and the aura of the victim will form there in a cloth and *U Thlien* will come to eat the life force of the person, the *Rngiew,* "that Power of Man which is inherently born in him and he has it by virtue of being a Man" (Mawrie, 1981). Once their life force is consumed, victims die. *U Thlien* does not physically consume them, and they are sometimes still alive despite the deterioration of their health. People not directly killed by the *menshohnoh* suffer a variety of symptoms. At first, when the victims' hair or clothes are taken, they slowly start losing blood and become very thin and their stomachs become distended. They will either be hungry or lose their appetite. Victims may either

swell or get thin while their hair or piece of clothes turn into blood. It can make them blind and cover them with wounds, since *U Thlien* eats and bites them at a distance. It is a slow death: it takes up to a year for things to turn into blood as the victim slowly gets worse. Finally, when *U Thlien* comes and eats, the victim dies. According to San, a Khasi woman in her fifties, worshipping is a very social and festive event:

> There was a house nearby… So, they used to worship Thlien and when the day came for them to sacrifice somebody, all the relatives would come to their house as if there were a feast… You would just be amazed by the kind of people that come in there like all relatives from far and near, they come there to that house, it's like a feast but then they perform the ritual at night.

Such a crime is usually not committed in winter. Since *U Thlien* is a snake, he sheds his skin during that period. He comes out again in March; at this point he is very hungry. This is when the *menshohnoh* are hunting the most because *U Thlien* needs to be fed. If the story stays more or less the same across ethnic lines, it is impossible to get a consensus on who could be a *nongshohnoh* or a *menshohnoh*. Some will argue that *menshohnoh* are fake Khasi Christians and still adhere to the traditional religion. Although the *menshohnoh* can be mainlanders or Nepali, worshiping seems to be limited to Khasi people. A Khasi belonging to a guilty clan would have to take part in the worshipping activities, even if he does not want to participate. Foreigners are unlikely to keep *U Thlien* since they would need to believe to do so. They would also need to know how to do the ritual of worship properly.

However, a few people thought that worshippers could be other than Khasi. One informant remarked: "Some Bengali say: Oh! This Thlien of Khasi is very nice, you can get a high income! Even these Bengali, they keep that." However, Sister Agatha[13] was adamant that only Khasi can catch the victims and worship the snake. She pointed out that they must be at least part of an Indigenous tribe of the state (Bhoi, Khasi, Jaintia, Lyngngam). Faith and believing may then have a big role to play in determining who can worship and who cannot. Some even say that those who have less faith in God are the ones feeding the snake.

[13] A remarkable storyteller, Agatha shared some deeply fascinating personal encounters with me. See stories in Appendix 1.

The *menshohnoh* do not always know they are working for the worshippers. Under the influence of alcohol, they may sometimes see their victims as chickens or butterflies. On the other hand, some people may know they work for the worshippers, but there is no other job option in the countryside. However, even if they know and do it for money, they can be fooled by their bosses and won't receive the promised amount. They will be paid 50 rupees, thinking they received 100. Wealth is a central element in *U Thlien* narratives. Both *nongshohnoh* and *menshohnoh* commit this crime to make money. *U Thlien* is associated with the god of wealth; worshippers are blessed by the snake, and they get wealthy. Accordingly, when a businessman feed *U Thlien* with human blood, his business flourishes. People will flock to his shop, attracted by magical power. If the worshippers buy a car for one lakh (about 2000$), the money will be back in their possession as soon as they reach home. As long as the snake is fed and happy, the worshipping family gets rich. However, if *U Thlien* does not get the sacrifice, he will start feeding on the worshippers themselves. Ultimately, the people worshiping it will be hit by numerous tragedies. Bah Andreas, a Khasi intellectual in his sixties, remembers a girl who died because of *U Thlien*:

> She was very gifted, that girl. She went for medical studies, she got through and she became a doctor. She did not get married. Then after some time she died and there is the house of […] clan and the […] clan, that history, in my time you could hear it. They could hear the cry of the patient, of the daughter, she was crying: "Are you satisfied with what you have done for me?" And she understood what her mother was. The guilty act… That Thlien has sucked her up … And the parents did not want to tell people about her condition. That's a bad sign. She died before her parents did.

If the family stops feeding *U Thlien*, the snake will kill its members one by one. Anyone who consumes the wealth generated by *U Thlien* will end up being eaten. Even employees of the worshippers can be consumed by it. It may also try to expose the family members by appearing on the roof of the house as a fish or a snail, revealing himself to neighbours and passersby.

Some specific Khasi clans have the reputation of keeping *U Thlien* and everybody knows which family is worshipping. However, as time passes and families grow, it becomes very difficult to trace the specific clans. If someone does not belong to those clans, but wishes to start worshiping the snake, all he needs is an invitation to the house of a *menshohnoh*. Then the future worshipper may drink a cup of tea and the host will insist that he eats rice. The guest will then be tempted to worship *U Thlien*. Furthermore, if somebody finds a vessel in the jungle and it contains a Thlien, that person may also be tempted to start worshipping.

It is common wisdom that the worshipping clans cannot be exposed without danger for the whistle blower. However, there are some signs pointing to the guilty families. According to a member of the *Syiem* clan, a student went to his school telling his friends about what happened at night in his house: "He went to school, and he told his friends: I don't know what happened in my house. All my uncles, my aunties, my mom, and my grandmother were in a room and they were singing." The child told his friends that a music instrument was playing by itself during the ritual. This instrument is commonly known as the *Ksing Thlien*. As the instrument played, the child woke up and went towards the music. There he saw a snake dancing on the plate. It was trying to consume somebody, but when he was about to eat the aura of the victim, a dog barked and *U Thlien* got scared and disappeared. *U Thlien* was then prevented from consuming the victim. According to the *Syiem* family member narrating the story, the dog barking symbolized somebody who praying for the victim, or that the person was strong enough to defend himself or herself. Music playing in the middle of the night seems to be a recurrent sign of people worshipping the snake. According to one participant, she would always hear the *ding ding ding ding* of the ritual coming out of the house of her neighbours at night, because *U Thlien* was dancing, and the worshippers were playing the music. People were clapping and chanting, but when the police went there, they would not find anything. An informant provided a good summary of the fear of being cursed by the snake:

> My mother (…) would say "Don't hang cloth near your clothes, people might cut a little piece of your cloth and they will offer it to *U Thlien*. A little piece of your hair they will offer it to *U Thlien*." It means that it's a ritual being performed every day, just like black magic, to collect the blood of the person. Just like sucking the person so badly that the person will fall ill. That is how it's been described very often. There are times that the person who has *U Thlien* would go hunting for a human being in the night and would kill just to get the blood and to satisfy *U Thlien*. People who worship Thlien are the people who keep that in their house. K you must make him happy all the time. That is the offering: the hair, the cloth. If a person's hair has been taken and it seems that the person falls sick.

Healing from *U Thlien*

If the worshippers do not meet *U Thlien* requirements, he may suddenly appear in the middle of the night and suck them dry. It should not come as a big surprise, then, that people may wish to stop worshipping. They can do so by converting into Christianity or by seeking a healer. Father Philip, a Catholic priest from Kerala, explained how Christianity can save them:

> Christ is a person who always wants people to come to him. They can always be redeemed. First, it is happening because of ignorance, people do not know. When the people know many things, that is enough for some people's conversion. When people come to know about Jesus more and somehow, they can feel innately the good.

According to the tradition, repentant worshippers must give all their possessions to the king (the *Syiem*). They must go out naked in the street and throw away everything earned from *U Thlien*, or else it will come back to haunt them. The *Syiem* will then bless the repentant worshippers, give them new clothes, and offer them a place to live. Their previous lodging will be burned in order to clean it from evil (Wolflanq, 2003). Among Catholics, other rituals can be used to get rid of *U Thlien*, such as sweeping the worshipping room with a broom.

> One family called Father Sngi[14] to remove that Thlien from the family, because they could not do that by themselves. Father Sngi was so powerful. They wanted to get rid of that practice, they did not want that anymore, they wanted to change their lives. They could not do it by themselves, so they called this Catholic priest and they were not Catholics, they were not Christians either, they were non-Christians, so Father Sngi went there and they have a room where they keep this Thlien, where they kept that devil, they offer sacrifice there in that room, so Father asked them, where did you keep it? (…) So, Father took the broom. The devil is scared of the broom (Sister Agatha, 2016)

Father Sngi chased the devil away from the house. He was a powerful Catholic exorcist, but passed away in 2016, during my stay in Shillong. Christians provided a different perspective on *U Thlien* victims. One interpretation is that only people who have not accepted Jesus can be sacrificed. At the same time, Christians may feel that they cannot really elaborate about the subject or heal people affected by *U Thlien*.

I mentioned previously that, according to the general opinion, only Khasi can worship *U Thlien*. However, the opinions about the possible ethnic or religious origin of victims differ. It is not clear if everyone can be affected, -- i.e., Khasi, Hindus, Muslims, and foreigners. According to some Khasi, *U Thlien* is willing to drink any type of human blood. This diversification of victims has also been attributed by some to blood transfusion, since the blood from different ethnic groups is now mixed together.

[14] A well-known Khasi Catholic priest.

According to some Khasi intellectuals, however, only a Khasi can be a victim since *U Thlien* was cut into pieces and eaten by them. Following his demise, the snake took an oath to destroy the entire Khasi people by drinking their blood. Religious affiliation is not important, if the victim is an ethnic Khasi. In any case, *U Thlien* cannot be cheated by his worshippers and will know the ethnic origin of the blood (and, if it's even human). A few times, people mentioned that those with strong luck could not be caught by *menshohnoh*, but those with lesser luck could easily fall prey to the snake. It is difficult to say if *U Thlien* will only eat Khasi blood or if it will accept the sacrifice of a foreigner. However, everybody can receive healing for the condition if they feel they have been cursed by the *menshohnoh.* Traditionally, the only way for the victim to survive was to seek healing from the *Syiem*. The ritual is still performed today. The king treats the victim by burning a strand of his or her hair with an iron rod. As it is being placed on the victim's hair, the *Syiem* recites prayers. The victims are given a little water known as *Um Syiem* (water of the Syiem). The water is then mixed with the water brought by the patients themselves and is used for drinking and washing the face (Wolflanq, 2003). Following that ritual, *U Thlien* rejects the blood of the victim and he or she is saved. One informant was affected by *U Thlien* in her teens. She lost a lot of weight and became weak. Her mother took her to a *Syiem* in a Shillong neighbourhood, and she was fine immediately after the ritual.

> My mom took me there, then when I went there the lady asked, then my mom said that I wouldn't anything, so the lady she burned my hair, three times it didn't get burned and then later on you know, the fourth time it got burned. Then she burned this [leaf]? She burned that also, but it did not burn and then just after that lady you know did the puja and everything. Then not even fifteen minutes later, the moment we came out of that lady's house, I felt so hungry. I've never felt so hungry in my life.

The power of the *Syiem* to fight *U Thlien* is divine, according to informants. In some origin stories of *U Thlien*, the *Syiem* clan was originally responsible for killing *U Thlien*. Its members are now responsible for healing victims (Lyngdoh, 2015). Members of the Syiem clans are protected from *U Thlien*. The snake cannot consume them. The most sought-after healer is the *Syiem Saad,* the high priestess of the kingdom of Khyrim, the cultural and religious seat of the Khasi. The *Syiem Saad* specializes in *U Thlien*-related problems (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010). One participant in the research remembers when she visited the *Syiem* as a child:

> I remember when I was young, she [her mother] would take me to the Queen and the

> Princess in Nongkrem and I would get my hair burned. Because they believe that somebody had taken my piece of hair and has done the black magic to the offering it to *U Thlien* that's why I was not eating well, I was not performing well, I was falling sick… That has happened to my brothers and sisters as well, I've seen that my mother was taken. She would say that when your hair or your clothes, and say, "Don't hang clothes, people might cut a little piece of your clothes and they will offer it to *U Thlien*. A little piece of your hair, they will offer it to *U Thlien*.

Each healer of the Syiem family has their own prayers. According to one woman waiting to be healed in the courtyard of the palace:

> I came here because I want to seek help from Syiem. We believe in that *U Thlien*, so we used to come take help from him by his praying and he burns our hair, like that and we will get cured because if you go to doctor also if suppose it is *U Thlien*, it won't get cured. We see strange things, sometimes you see the black cat, she will try to bite… [or]the snakes [with their] mouths are red. When he is at the last stage when *U Thlien* swallows anybody, we will see that. We scream in our sleep too … They have got these people keeping these Thlien. They are just like this what they call in, just like jadoo[15], no? Magic power.

When asked if she knew who was responsible for her illness, one patient answered that she did not know, but that she would be all right with the blessing and the prayers of the Syiem. She was healed once before, but the symptoms came back. Any member of the royal clans possesses the power to heal those afflicted by Thlien and can carry out the ritual, even if they are not directly from the royal family. Some *Syiem* healers operate independently outside of official healing places. They are from non-ruling branches of the clan, but they are still authorized by tradition to do this kind of healing. They have different rituals than the ruling family. One Syiem healer operates from his living room. According to him, people affected by *U Thlien* cannot smell the Khasi garlic. Therefore, he mixes garlic in the water used to cool off the iron rod. He explains that after the hair burning, the items collected by the *menshohnoh*, such as hair and pieces of clothing, will no longer be usable.

Kong Esther Syiem, as shown in previous chapter, is another *Syiem* healer operating independently. She has personal prayers to chase Thlien. She treats the symptoms as she would for every other problem by praying and giving the client medicine (the best way to fight *U Thlien*, according to her). She also ritually burns the hair of the victims with a hot iron rod, symbolizing

[15] Magic, in Hindi.

chasing away *U Thlien*. When somebody cries when she burns the hair, it's because *U Thlien* inside him or her fears Esther's healing power. She does not think that *U Thlien* is literally inside the patient, but that the victim is swelling because their stolen items (clothing and hair) are turning into blood in the bamboo vessel kept by the *nongshohno*h for this purpose in their house. Khasi healers from other clans than the *Syiem* also proclaim they can heal *U Thlien*. For example, Bah Nebar not only treats patients with medication and prayers, but he also uses the same iron tool as the *Syiem* clans to burn the hair of victims. He also prays to the mother of *U Thlien* so that the items in the bamboo vessel are not turned into blood anymore. Bah Nebar tries to convince the snake that the victim should not be eaten. In this way, he is destroying the power of *U Thlien*. As for the medication needed, he gets it from the jungle. In his case, even if he is not a *Syiem* and practices independently in his clinic in the tomato market, he has been allowed by the Seng Khasi to perform healing. He also innovates by using a piece of the original molten iron bar fed to *U Thlien* to heal his clients by burning a strand of their hair. He admits that only this iron tool gives him the power to cure people suffering from *U Thlien*. It is interesting to note that even the *Syiem* royal family in Smit does not use this in their rituals, only an ordinary iron rod.

Khasi healers use prayers and medicines to heal victims of *U Thlien*. Some of them also perform personal rituals. However, non-Khasi healers also treat the symptoms of the curse. Some of them were born in Meghalaya, but others have immigrated to the region and were not familiar with *U Thlien* before their arrival. Both categories of healers admitted knowing and healing *U Thlien*. Hindu healers diagnose and treat *U Thlien* through the same process, using medicine and prayers. They may give Ayurveda medicine and pray for the victims. Geeta, the female Hindu healer mentioned earlier, meditates, and prays when the goddess shows to her that the patients are suffering from *U Thlien*. In his clinic near Polo Bazaar in Shillong, PW, another Hindu healer, uses ivory from elephant tusks and herbs. He makes his patients drink a specific brew for five days. If they are still suffering after the treatment, he gives them more medicine. He talks to the evil being politely and requests it to leave. If it does not, he fights with it until *U Thlien* agrees to leave. During the first fight, he uses, ginger, water, flowers. If it does not leave the patient, he then offers eggs and finally a chicken sacrifice. These Hindu healers have lived in Meghalaya for several years. However, even among newcomers to the region, *U Thlien* has become popular. The Chapagai brothers learned about *U Thlien* when a patient came to them about the ailment. From

his body language, they could understand that he had something evil in him. They learned about *U Thlien* when they verified with rice and read the *Rig Veda*, a collection of Hindu sacred texts, to find out the source of the ailment. Most of the Christian faith healers also heal victims of *U Thlien*. Fatima chases him in the name of Jesus Christ. She blesses the victims and anoint them with holy water so that their spiritual being will be strong. Once she is done, *U Thlien* will not be in the body of the victim anymore. During fieldwork, it seemed every healer in Shillong knew about *U Thlien* and of a ritual to heal affected people. The traditional ritual to fight the ailment is still practiced in the official royal courtyard, but new rituals have emerged in other places. They reflect the cultural diversity of Shillong. In such a cosmopolitan healing landscape, it becomes difficult to determine who is treating which ailment. Some Khasi healers agree that non-Khasi healers can heal Thlien, since even Nepali and Hindus seem to become victims as well. One informant disagrees:

> I will not support that at all, because they've got a lot of very strong elements of the traditions of the Khasi and how it's being treated. It's always believed it's only through the Princess over the years. How can somebody who doesn't come from that lineage of a princess house can do that?

Some healers and non-healers are considered to possess a spiritual gift to fight *U Thlien*. Andrew, the schoolteacher, had an uncle who had what he called the power of speech. When he would meet the dangerous *menshohnoh* in the jungle, he would tell them: "You stand there, you stand there, don't you stop me, I will go my own way, and you stand there." The men would not be able to move before sunrise and his uncle would be allowed to flee.

Some non-healers also use home remedies against *U Thlien*. Iamon and her brother possess a claw from a specific animal, and they scratch the person affected by Thlien with it. The power of this *tyrpud* claw (a bird similar to a chicken) resides in its capacity to kill snakes due to its sharpness. Outside of healing rituals, a whole edifice of protective defenses against Thlien has evolved — such as the practice of carrying a handful of rice grains from home or eating a bit of earth as a remedy against the hypnotic spell cast by agents of *U Thlien* (Lyngdoh, 2015).

Worshippers of *U Thlien* are not immune to his power. When he does not get human blood, he will try to expose the worshipping family members. He will appear on the roof of their house in a known form such as a fish, and the neighbours will then know. If *U Thlien* does not get the sacrifice he wants, he will start feeding on them. They will see a reversal of fortune and health and they

may go to a healer to find a reason for their ailments. However, once in front of the healer, they usually will not admit that they are worshipping *U Thlien*. Even if the relationship with the snake is destructive, wealth is too attractive for these families. Most healers perform prayers in order to heal the worshippers asking for help. According to Bah Nebar, if a *menshohnoh* wants to get rid of *U Thlien*, the healer needs to unbind them from evil. The healer will ask for forgiveness from the snake and then sacrifice an animal in its name, such a goat or a chicken. Hindu healers also acknowledge receiving clients who were possibly worshippers. According to the Chapagai brothers, the patients do not directly admit that they are worshippers; however, they offer some hints. The brothers heal these patients without dealing with the prospect of him or her being a worshipper. Geeta also does the puja for worshippers and prays for them to stop their criminal activities. Christian faith healers use prayers to heal the worshippers and unbind them from the evil deity. Father Phillip received people worshipping *U Thlien* or *Taro* many times and helped them with prayers and counselling. Some people get better in minutes and others take days to be healed.

Comments on the U Thlien Narrative

The following points were often raised by the participants about *U Thlien* and reveal the many ways people think about *U Thlien* without questioning the veracity of the narrative. First, the curse of *U Thlien* has crossed the ethnic and religious borders of the different people of Meghalaya. Traditional Khasi, converted Khasi, Hindus and Muslims confided in me about Thlien, and how to fight the curse. I first thought that Catholic priests and nuns would not condone such a narrative. However, interviews and informal conversations revealed that they did believe in Thlien and had even had fights with the snake. *U Thlien* tradition has become an expression of the traits deemed "evil" in contemporary society and that are frowned upon by the Church (Lyngdoh, 2015). However, the Catholic healers interviewed were not concerned with social inequality; rather, they still described it as being about a snake drinking the life force of a poor victim in the middle of the night. The stories told by Father Francis and Sister Agatha reveal that they still see curses and black magic as real. However, in their view, only Christians who are weak in their faith visit traditional healers. They argued that these people should visit Christian faith healers to get help. Elements of indigenous religion survived colonialism and conversion to Christianity, even among the members of the clergy.

Another interesting analytical path is to investigate the possible link between property and *U Thlien*. Every Khasi belongs to his mother's clan and property passes from mother to daughter. The youngest daughter (the *Khatduh*) inherits the biggest share of the property of her parents (Pakyntein, 2000). Her husband lives with her in this family house. Traditionally, sons had no claim to landed property. After marriage, they moved to their wife's house (if she was a *Khatduh*) or established their own house. Other daughters got their share at the time of their marriage (Mathur, 1979). The older daughters also inherited a portion of the property (Pakyntein, 2000).

Since *U Thlien* attaches itself to a house (a property and a clan name), he is travelling through the female blood line across generations. *U Thlien* will stay not only with the *Khatduh* but it will follow anyone in the family (Kharkongor, 2014). When *U Thlien* begins to live in a family, there is no way of getting rid of it. If a *U Thlien*-free clan receives property from a worshipping clan, it will have to give up the gift to get rid of the curse. Keeping the *U Thlien* is a dreadful task, exactly like keeping a serpent in the house (Mawrie, 1973; Wolflanq, 2003). However, because of this irremediable link to inheritance, not everyone thinks that *U Thlien* is a demonic entity. Kong Ro believes that *U Thlien* is the brother of *Taro*, his sister, and that they are just part of some households. People fear *U Thlien* worshippers, but according to her: "I have friends and they are good to me, so how would I not be good to them? And just like we have the goddess of our clan, they have *U Thlien* and it is hereditary". According to Kong Ro people should be accepted even if they worship *U Thlien*, since it is part of their inheritance. Property is not the only way of receiving the benefits of worshipping. The *nongshohnoh* may be business owners and make payments to many different people who risk of being eaten, since they have received money from worshippers. Furthermore, since there are now mixed marriages between Khasi and non-Khasi, *U Thlien* can hypothetically be passed to non-Khasi.

U Thlien as Symbol: Social Change and Nature

One interesting interpretation is quite common in the anthropological analysis of witchcraft. Rumours about *U Thlien* attack could be on the increase due to rising tensions during a period of great social change. Before the British colonization, Khasi society was quite egalitarian. Colonization and then integration of the state to a globalized economy, as well as the following

exodus to urban areas, meant that some individuals became very rich. One informant gave an example:

> You sell this pebble; I also sell this pebble. We have the same quality of goods, goods that are everything, but our sale is lower. We cannot even fetch our food twice a day like the other one. Why? In this thing, something is there which is mysterious. Greed, profit, jealousy, concentration of wealth and property.

In this context, the narrative of *U Thlien* serves the purpose of accusing the newly wealthy of worshipping the snake. It creates a relationship between wealth and social marginalization. *U Thlien* narratives have caused mob violence and lynching carried out against members of the community suspected of keeping *U Thlien* (Lyngdoh, 2015). These people were generally well-off, and their wealth caused jealousy among their neighbours. However, jealousy and social inequalities cannot explain all the acts of violence. In April 2013, around four thousand villagers attacked and set fire to the two-storied residential building of a prominent businessman after accusing him of practicing witchcraft. The same year, a couple was murdered because they were suspected of witchcraft. They were hacked to death while working in their fields.

U Thlien story could also be an expression of a conflict between man and nature. This narrative seemed to have emerged at the beginning of iron mining in Meghalaya. According to some versions, *U Thlien* was the custodian of the jungle, which used to be large and heavily forested. He was protecting the wilderness around his lair. Before colonial times, the Khasi were expert in metallurgy. Stone and iron implements dating to 1226 B.C. have recently been excavated and traces of very ancient workshops can still be found in the countryside. These human activities may have changed the landscape. Tremendous energy was needed to extract ore; many forests disappeared to achieve it. The *U Thlien* myth may be a cautionary tale about the dangers of destroying the environment (i.e., the humans were destroying the jungle and the snake ate them to protect the sacred groves).

The snake is a potent symbol in many South Asian cultures. Snake figures are prominent in many popular devotional practices throughout India (Jones, 2010). Snakes are subterranean creatures. They live in caves and they control that realm. It is then not a surprise that it may represent the hidden evil of human nature, the dark side of society. According to the original narrative, even if

the evil spirit was killed, it remained alive in society due to one old woman's unfortunate act. However, *U Thlien* cannot be considered a mere symbol in contemporary Meghalaya. *U Thlien* is believed to be ghost-like, a kind of demon or evil spirit (Wolflanq, 2003). One informant emphasizes the possibility of believing in Thlien without ever having witnessed the ritual:

> For me, it's like the way my mother described or the way my ancestral grandmother and everybody described it, it is not a story, it's very real. It's very much there. How it functioned and evolved and its practices is something I have not had a close encounter with or experiences happening to my family or my close ones. Moreover, it's like there has not been very much of, what they call it? Writings about it, the way curses and oral interpretation of culture, the writing or the curse is not that much there. It's also one of the challenges of things.

In the Khasi ontological perspective, *U Thlien* is a reality. When asked how as a Christian she reconciles the fact that *U Thlien* and *Taro* are linked to the original religions of Meghalaya, Sister Agatha explained:

> That's why we Christians we are trying our best to educate and to evangelize our people, throw away this kind of evil… It is destroying the society, but now compared to before because of the influence of Christianity, much less… Very little is there, not much. Those who are doing it are Presbyterians, Presbyterian church, it's not a true church of Jesus Christ. Because it formed by a human being, while the Catholic church is formed by Jesus Christ.

In contrast to his experience with *Taro*, Father Festus does not know exactly if *U Thlien* is real because he has not seen any evidence of him. According to Festus, those who believe in its existence are those who have seen how *menshohnoh* kills and cuts people. Some people, after seeing a suicide victim who apparently hanged herself, will say: "No, this fellow did not hang by himself, he did not commit suicide by himself." These people will read the signs and symbols of a sacrifice to *U Thlien* as an apparent suicide. Father Festus was present at an event in a village when it was shaken by a *U Thlien* panic. He went to preach in a a retreat for a group of Catholic nuns. That night, someone in the village was killed. It seems that the murderers fried the heart and the liver of their victim and ate them so that an evil spirit would go away. According to Festus, even if widespread education has lessened the number of such cases, when someone dies, it is often attributed to *U Thlien*. The narrative has been adopted by people from all ethnic and religious groups in Meghalaya. *Ka Taro*, another important curse, is also part of the cosmopolitan witchcraft

of Shillong and the surrounding countryside. However, it first emerged in the Jaintia hills, a district of Meghalaya predominantly inhabited by the Jaintia, the close cousins of the Khasi.

The Possessing Evil: *Ka Taro*

According to Khasi mythology, *Ka Taro* is a family goddess who brings material riches, wealth, prosperity, and splendor to her worshippers. Those who keep her maintain their own private and secretive ways of worshipping in the form of sacrifice. The *Taro* curse may have emerged at the same time as other wealth-generating monstruous deities (Snaitang, 2012). This demonic force brings suffering to those who borrow money or material articles from her keeper. She also brings sickness, seizure and mental problems to close friends and lovers of her keeper. Her only way of social dealing is by bringing distress that can eventually lead to death (Mawrie, 1981). How a *Taro* enters a person is unclear. The curse may be cast from a distance. However, sometimes *Taro* resides in certain families whose identity is known to the entire community. The Khasi believe that one who has visited or been in contact with a family that possesses *Taro* can fall ill. Locals avoid being 'in debt' in any way to families with *Taro*. Nothing is ever borrowed from them, and all payments are made in full and immediately if anything is bought. Eating or drinking in company of these families is avoided, but, if politeness requires that one partake of food or drink, a symbolic payment, throwing behind a coin as one comes out of the house, is made. Those who fear or are mentally 'weak' are more susceptible to *Taro* (Albert & Kharkongor, 2010).

Four ways to be affected by *Taro* were identified by informants and in the literature. First, since every household in the Jaintia hills has a protective goddess, if the family does not obey and worship her, she will get angry and make them suffer. She demands the sacrifice of a rooster, a pig and a goat every year, and misfortune may affect the family if they fail to offer these (Goswami, 1976). Second, people may get *Taro* if they do not repay the loan taken from her keepers, since their goddess may get angry at the borrowers (Wolflanq, 2003). Third, it is also possible to get affected *Taro* when changing clan names. If someone does not ask permission from the goddess when doing so and does not perform the required ritual, she may become angry. The Diengdoh family was punished by the goddess for this crime. During a long ritual with Kong Ro, the healer was able to determine that the family goddess was angry. Since Jaintia and Khasi societies are matrilineal and the great-aunt adopted her husband's title, it was considered a betrayal of her

original clan by the goddess. Since then, there is a curse affecting the mother's side of the family. *Taro* may reside in certain families whose identity is known to most in the community. Someone can become a victim when eating from an unknown *Kong Shop*[16]. People usually know which food shops are safe, and which ones should be avoided. According to the rumours, the owners of the shops are poisoning their victims to be blessed by the goddess. They are rewarded with wealth for each victim, so they will become richer and richer. It also ensures that nobody will steal their potatoes, their food, or whatever they cultivate. Father Leo shared with me the following experience:

> I went for a house blessing and a group of children were with me. And you know boys and girls. They see fruits there and they all run and pluck all those fruits, no matter if it is ripe or not ripe. But then it happens I was surprised went we went to one garden, full of fruits. And then these boys and girls they don't pluck then I ask: hey boys, see these fruits here full ripe, come on enjoy yourself! Then they say: father we cannot touch here. Father, there is here, there is *Taro* there is *Ryngkew* here, there is something here.

They believed that this house was guarded by *Taro*. In this explanation for *Taro*, there is a direct link to property, ownership and wealth. Rosanna explained how this works:

> Suppose now she gives me a loan 5000 [rupees]. And then in a few days I tell her that I have returned your loan, but she says, *No, you have not returned it*. That way there'll be arguments between us, so what she'll do is, because she wants her money back and I am not giving it back, she will give me *Taro* so mostly this *Taro* is given in case of when I lend something to somebody, and he doesn't give it back.

For Festus, a Jaintia Catholic priest, *Taro* is own by family members. If someone caused sorrow to the family, *Taro* goes out and torments the people who are responsible.

> And if I am the son of somebody who has *Taro*. I pass by the road, and there's a girl, a beautiful girl walking. I like that girl because she's pretty, I look at her, that *Taro* goes to her. And that girl starts having fits and she starts having those symptoms.

Since daughters inherit the properties given by their mothers, the women of the family will also inherit the curses. Despite being from a different ethnic and religious group, Akbar came to the same conclusion: *Taro* happens mainly because of property in the Jaintia hills. Most of the *Taro* cases he saw were the results of property disputes. However, among Hindus, explanations may

[16] A traditional Khasi canteen, usually managed by a Kong (respectful term for a woman in Khasi)

differ. According to Geeta, *Taro* is a kind of a spirit kept by people. Sometimes they do not know they have inherited it. Those who know may give *Taro* to their victims through a specific ritual. They may throw a cursed object on the road and when someone stamps on that puja, he will get *Taro*. The victim will become unconscious and speak about the owner who has come to ask for what they have not returned. The victim will be set free once the amount due is paid (Syiemlieh, 1994).

I have shown how *Taro* is in some cases similar to the evil eye. Someone may be unaware that he is a *Taro* keeper. He may curse people unwillingly: "If I fall in love with one, then after I left her the family of that lady will give me *Taro*. The symptoms are mostly vomiting like we can't eat just feel tired, boring like that, epilepsy kind of syndrome." If a boy keeping *Taro* sees a pretty girl walking in the streets, she can get affected. A compliment can also cause *Taro*, as well as jealousy directed to a specific person. The curse can also be sent by a black magic practitioner. Boyfriends and girlfriends have been known to use black magic to send *Taro* after a break-up to punish their ex-partner. In other cases, *Taro* is an evil spirit that possesses people. The symptoms are similar to those of epilepsy. Animal sounds can also come out of the mouth of the victims. They may have spit and foam around their mouths, since they may have eaten somebody's hard work. One informant shared what happened to her younger sister:

> When my sister was very young, my mother had taken her to the market, she was very small and cute, so someone who has *Taro* liked her and then the curse followed her. The affected people do a lot of things which are not easy to explain also, and they get affected, they speak in different voices or in the same voice but in a different language. Then they get so much affected sometimes the *Taro* kills a person.

Victims of *Taro* will fall sick and experience hallucinations. They will speak in different voices, or in the voice of the *Taro* keepers. In this way, it is easier to identify the person who caused the illness (Wolflanq, 2003). They may also speak about the reason why the curse was cast: " Why did you take my fruit? Or: why did you kick my pumpkin?", the voice may ask. If someone has forgotten to pay back money to a *Taro* keeper, it could scream: " Pay back my money!" Compared to the narrative of *U Thlien*, the stories about *Taro* are less homogenous. Despite different interpretations about the casting of the *Taro* curse and the associated symptoms, *Taro* can be healed by almost all healers in Meghalaya. Father Leo operates a church and education centre in a place where few people believe in *Taro*. In this area, people are mainly Catholics or belong to another

Christian church. However, the priest once worked in a parish where it was more common. According to him, the Khasi have a lot of similar small devils who like to persecute people. During our first visit to the healing centre in Umroï, Father Jude gave a sermon specifically on *Taro*. Witchcraft and curses are real, according to him. He can pray for the victims of such acts and to heal them.

> So, they give something or maybe ashes maybe they use so they put a room or putting a land, so it is access to your body or to your house like that. And once it happens, you almost behave like a mad man. I have not made a study but sometimes when we pray for him, that fellow will become okay.

The main weapon for the Christian healers is their prayers and rituals. According to Fatima, anything as evil as *Taro* or Thlien is very easy to treat in the name of Jesus. People do not die of *Taro*, and it is easier to remove than other curses. Hindu healers talk extensively about *Taro* and are quite knowledgeable about this curse. The Chapagai brothers came to know about *Taro* through affected patients. People affected by *Taro*, are not themselves anymore. When they find out that *Taro* is inside their clients, the brothers communicate with the hidden evil power and they ask him, who are you? Where are you coming from? Then they trace back the origin of the curse. Was it given by a neighbour? A family member? An enemy? When a patient is affected by *Taro*, the brothers use kwai, beetle nut leaves, and candles and offer them to the goddess, Ka *Taro*. They then come to an agreement with the curse: "See, we have given you some offerings, so leave this patient". In some cases, *Taro* leaves immediately. However, if she does not leave, they must pray again to finally reach an agreement with *Taro*. Geeta also does treatment for people affected by *Taro*. She finds out they are affected by the curse by praying to the Hindu goddess, Kali. The treatment usually involves beating the patient with a broomstick. She uses the broom because, when the sorcerers are casting the spell, they curse an object (a broom) and throw it in the road. When someone stamps on the broom, this person becomes a victim of the curse.

Powdell first does a ritual for people affected by *Taro*. He then calls them back after a week to see whether they are feeling better. If they are not, he gives them medicine by using the elephant's tusks' powder to make a talisman that the patients have to wear. He also gives them a bit of the powder to mix in water and drink it. *U Thlien* and *Taro*, the god and goddess, are very afraid of elephants' tusks, and they will not enter a house where one is kept. Similarly, Muslim healers start

any ritual against *Taro* by praying the Quran. They protect themselves first, by creating a shield. The next step is to make a *tavis* (a Muslim talisman) and tie it on the patient. This *tavis* will force the evil inside the patient to confess if is possess by *U Thlien* or *Taro*.

Some people are keeping *Taro* and want to get rid of these family evils. This is especially true of people converting to Christianity. According to Father Phillips, it is possible to pray for them so that they get forgiven. Once they know about Christianity and Jesus, people will convert and stop worshipping *U Thlien* or *Taro*. Traditionally, however, to get rid of *Taro*, the keeper had to throw away everything at nighttime, including money or clothes. They had to go out naked into the street, and then a friend would bring clothes for the family members. Sometimes people do not know they have inherited *Taro* from the previous generation. They may realize it when guests who have been drinking and eating in their house are falling sick. The ownership of *Taro* may also be revealed when their victims visit healers to discover who cursed them. According to healers, *Taro* owners need to be treated equally as other patients since *Taro* may be kept involuntarily. Even if they do not worship it, it may still haunt them and destroy their family.

Taro is not treated by the *Syiem*, since people visit them almost exclusively for symptoms related to *U Thlien*. Healing *Taro* is not part of *Syiem* activities, but it was interesting to see what they think about the curse. During a visit to the *Syiem* royal house, I exchanged with a patient and with the king's father about *Taro*. The king's father admitted that *Taro* can affect anyone, even him and his son. One patient waiting on the bench beside the little treatment shack said that *Taro* was more dangerous than *U Thlien*. In his opinion, *Taro* symptoms are similar to those experienced by the characters in the movie *The Omen*.

Besides *U Thlien* and *Taro*, there are other evil spirits in Meghalaya. One of these is *Ka Sabuit*, the Khasi equivalent of *Taro.* It is like the evil eye: a compliment or a single jealous glance can cause severe colic pain. The healer will put a little lime on his fingertip and after spitting on it three times, will apply it on the stomach and the toes of the suspected victim. It is meant to drive away the evil spirit. This process is also sometimes done on food items. Another common way of repelling the curse of Sabuit is by using betel leaves and lime which is then buried in the hearth of the home (Wolflanq, 2003).

Ka Shwar is a Khasi female deity. This is another wealth-generating goddess with the power to inflict symptoms similar to those of *Taro*. Certain families choose to keep her as their household deity. To generate riches, wealth and prosperity, *Ka Shwar* becomes a merciless spirit and promotes violence. She is known for twisting the necks of her victims until death follows (Mawrie, 1981; Snaitang, 2012). The keepers of *Ka Shwar* (those who worship her) can cast an evil spell on anybody who illegally intrudes on their property or take their belongings without their permission. The victims affected by the evil spell will get convulsive fits as the evil spirit strangles them or twists their neck (Kharbangar, 2006). Father Francis associates *Taro* with *Ka Shwar*: "When I was a small boy in my village, one lady, she got *Shwar*, and our people bound her with chains. But she was able to break those chains too, can you imagine?" Father Francis also explained about the dreaded *puris*:

> Suppose you are going on a footpath and maybe that devil is there and so at night you will be dreaming, and you will get a headache and you cannot sleep, and you speak all sorts of things, you'll be insane, you'll be mad. So that is called *lyngkhuh* or maybe we have this *Ksuid* wah? The water, the spirit that stay in the water. But it's not, it's not Thlien. It is called *Ksuid* puri. So, sometimes males were liked by the female puri (fairies).

When a female *puri* likes a human male, he may fall sick and experience hallucinations. He will not drown if he falls into the water.

The Poisoners: *Bih* and *Lasam*

Ka Bih is a different household-tormenting goddess that belongs to the same family of wealth generating deities as *U Thlien* and *Taro*. Most who keep this family goddess sell tea and snacks around cities and towns. The shopkeeper secretly poisons the food of the victims. Ka *Bih* causes slow and gradual pain and makes people sick and weak. It often results in death (Snaitang, 2012). *Bih* is a well-known curse in Meghalaya. "Ka *Bih*" means poison and it is even more dangerous than *U Thlien* or *Taro*. This evil spirit gives wealth to the worshipper for the human sacrifice he offered by poisoning his customers. There are different types of poisons used to make someone sick or kill him or her rapidly. According to one informant*:*

> Myself when I was at Nongstoin, the car may stop somewhere in midway to a tea shop, but since I do not know that place I never get out and take tea in this unknown shop.

Poisoning is closely related to the clan system. Some clans keep the poison, as others are keeping *Taro* or *U Thlien*. It is also inherited from one generation to the next. The symptoms of *Bih* poisoning are mostly vomiting and feeling tired. The sickness starts with a feeling of dizziness and an urge to vomit. After a few hours, people start bleeding internally. Food poisoning can evolve into a chest infection, which makes people vomit blood. The Khasi have a recipe for a counter-poison for *Bih*, a type of herbal traditional medicine. Most people keep it in their home just in case. This remedy, however, did not save the mother of one of my informants.

Mei Tei is an herbalist. Herbalists are common in every state of Northeast India. They are expected to diagnose and prescribe medicines for everyday ailments, prevent and to alleviate misfortune or evil, provide protection against witchcraft and misfortune, and to bring prosperity and happiness (Ramashankar et al., 2015). Mei Tei's mother was one of *Bih*'s victims. She usually went to the market once a day. On one fateful occasion, she went a second time to pay her debts to the same shop. When she came back from the market the second time that day, she was not feeling well. She then went to sleep. The next morning, she was dead. Mei Tei's mother was rarely sick, so it was a mysterious death for all who knew her. A few hours after he death, her body suddenly started to swell and to become greenish. Her teeth became loose; every tooth was shaking. Her body then became totally black, as the poison was consuming her inside. It was burning her intestines and her organs. Mei Tei was told that her mother had tea and a snack in a shop belonging to a woman known for poisoning people. However, they could not press charges since there was not enough proof. The Khasi usually bury their dead after three days, but in this case, they had to the mother faster. A very bad smell was coming from her body: they could see through the glass of the coffin that she was still bloated.

Lasam is another form of food poisoning. Affected people suffer from bleeding gums and loose teeth. This spiritual ailment is carried from generation to generation by specific families. Victims do not die, but it can affect even the foreigners, not just the Khasi. This type of food poisoning happened to one of my informant's brother. Some of his teeth fell out and it took some time for him to be cured. He went to a Khasi healer and was given medicines. It may have been caused by

eating foods in a shop widely known for food poisoning. People knew the shop and identified it as a food poisoning source. Kong Ro told the following story on how she treated someone affected by Lasam:

> There was a policeman just a few days ago who came to me. His face was swelling, he didn't even talk. The doctor said that he had some kind of a gum cancer; they even gave him appointment for the surgery that he was so scared of. He was like, *let me try Khasi medicine*. So, somebody recommended him to me, so I prayed for him. I found out that it was Lasam; I gave him the medicine to apply. By, the next day the swelling was gone he was fine.

Curses are not the cause of all misfortunes affecting people. The funeral rites of a dead relative must be performed well by the surviving family members. If the dead are not shown respect, the spirits may become *Tyrut* (bad spirit) and cause serious ailments, financial loss, or some other form of misfortunes. The spirit of a dead person can also become *Tyrut* if the that person died of unnatural causes (Khyriemmujat, 2013). Bad spirits can be sent to enemies or competitors by a sorcerer.

Conclusion

The witchcraft system in Meghalaya comprises many curses. Some are well known regionally, such as *U Thlien*, *Bih*, and *Taro*. Some are limited to local areas. The deadliest curses such as *Bih* are more widespread that less dangerous ones, such as *Lasam.* The most powerful curses are named after a deity. Worshipping these gods and goddesses bring wealth and prosperity to the family. *U Thlien* seemed the most prevalent of all the curses. People mentioned him right away when interrogated about witchcraft. They expressed fear and told stories about the famous snake. *U Thlien* also cuts across ethnic and religious lines and is present in every socio-economic group, in a vast geographic area. In places where there are no recognized families worshipping the snake, it is said that kidnappers and murderers will still enter the area to ensnare victims. According to one informant: "They are now everywhere, and it is difficult to know the culprit ". The narrative of catching and healing the curse is remarkably coherent and does not change much from one healer to another, or from one victim to another. *U Thlien* is one of the founding myths of the Khasi. The narrative is shared among most households, rich or poor, in urban and country settings. Today, the story of *U Thlien* is part of the lived reality of many people. People express fear of being cursed

by it. When they suspect themselves or their relatives to be targeted by the owners of the snake, they will visit different healers to have the curse removed. The *Syiem* have the divine power to heal the curse; in precolonial times they were only ones able to do so. Shillong however has become a cosmopolitan city. The Khasi have converted massively to Christianity, and Muslims and Hindus have migrated from mainland India and Nepal. By adopting the curse system of the Khasi and the Jaintia, these newcomers also integrated local witchcraft practices in their specific healing repertoires. Even if they do recognize it as real, people do wonder why it is happening to them. One informant told me about his experience:

> Talking about our farm, two years ago, nothing grew in the farm. We had so many problems. Whenever we tried to grow something, it did not grow. One fine day, the lady who used to live here with her husband was cleaning out the garden. Suddenly she found a doll in the mud. They put leaves and all over it. She said: we found this! Immediately that lady she went to a pujari nearby. Then he said, *okay somebody has done something in that area, so I cannot help because I don't have the strength, so you have to go to someone else*. So, we went to someone in the Bhoi area. He did the puja. I don't know whether it happens in other countries or not but in our part of our country it happens all the time. And we are always a witness to this. I don't know why people like to do these things to us. I don't know why they like to do it but is, and that puja. We couldn't take the doll, it was burnt where we found it, so we took the eggs and the chicken. He did the puja and all, so that's it. After that everything was fine. Things started to grow again, but we don't know who did it. It's something mysterious. We don't suspect anyone, it's just that it just happened to be there in our garden.

Despite the diversity of the people retelling this narrative to one another and to researchers, the elements of the story are coherent from one version to another. Murderers and kidnappers are hired by specific families. These clans worship a deity shaped like a snake and feeds it human blood to ensure their own prosperity and health. The same principles are found in the storytelling about other curses in Meghalaya. Curses bore the names of deities, and they needed to be worshipped through human sacrifice. When their needs are met, the deities will guarantee wealth and prosperity to their worshippers. Only healers can remove these curses and save people. One of these healers is Kong Ro. Her practices include long and innovative rituals. She investigates the lives of her clients and even the sins of previous generations to identify the source of the misfortunes affecting them. She then works to unbind the treads linking past and present for her clients to regain health and happiness. In the next chapter, I will describe her practice and how she intervened in the lives of the Diengdoh family.

Chapter 5. A String of Misfortunes

Introduction

KR: Are there betel nuts in your place?
Me: No.
KR: Oh, so people only chew chewing gum. You will have to pray on chewing gum.

This statement made by a Khasi healer demonstrates how there are no contradictions between my world and hers. In the previous chapter, I have investigated the different curses inhabiting the landscape of Meghalaya. I have shown who heals what and how. I was able to demonstrate how the ethnic and religious borders are constantly crossed during healing quests and how people construct the realty of a world in which witchcraft exists. The reality of magic has often been challenged and submitted to the test of reason, mostly influenced by Eurocentric thinking. The lack of tangible proofs of a causal link between the victim and her/his symptoms may explain this reluctance to believe in the possibility of witchcraft. The sorcerer remains the invisible perpetrator. However, in Meghalaya, reality is not seeing witchcraft, but hearing about it. The proofs are in the bodies of the victims, mangled by *Taro*, *U Thlien* and *Bih*. In Meghalaya, the sorcerer is notoriously absent. He is, however, mentioned so often that he becomes real. To understand witchcraft among the Khasi, I had no other choice then to follow the therapeutic quest of victims. The reality of witchcraft is anchored in the experience of symptoms by the Khasi and their neighbours. The sorcerer is seen as real. It is through their voices and actions that we can start studying human-non-human relations in the Khasi world (as Descola) or use controlled equivocation (as Viveiros De Castro) to translate imperfectly what witchcraft means for the people of Meghalaya.

The narrative of this chapter is based on the story of one Khasi family, the Diengdoh[17]. The family includes the aging mother, many adult children, and several grandchildren (aged from seven years old to early twenties). The adult children mostly work in the public sector. The family had experienced many heartbreaking deaths including several family members who passed away in

[17] The names of the family and of its members have been changed to preserve their privacy.

less than a year. At the time of the fieldwork, they were still searching for answers regarding these premature deaths. Various illnesses affect the adults, ranging from unexplained weakness to infertility. All these tragedies led them to embark on a therapeutic quest. As the health situation of one of the sisters deteriorated during my stay, the family opted to try the services of a healer they knew well, Kong Ro[18].

Kong Ro and the Therapeutic Quest

The family's therapeutic quest started with a long series of visits to Kong Ro, a Khasi healer residing in the outskirts of Shillong. Though Catholic, she practices a highly personalized form of Khasi traditional healing. Kong Ro became a healer thirty years ago but followed in the step of her mother. The divination, intercession and healing technics were passed down from previous generations. To diagnose the reasons behind the health and social problems of her clients, she reads cards from a regular playing deck. She then conducts rituals with rice, candles, bottles and wool threads.

The healing room is in the converted garage of Kong Ro's house and is furnished with three wooden beds covered with thin mattresses. People sometimes just lie down on those when tired during a long prayer session. Kong Ro stores her liquid medicine in plastic bottles on the wood shelves of the garage. A long uncomfortable bench sits against the wall and a low table where the cards are displayed stands near the bed. Since the residence is in the hills, this room can become quite chilly. A small portable charcoal stove helps in keeping the healer, her assistants, and the patients warm. There are also a few small traditional stools that allow people to get closer to the table. Kong Ro always sits on the bed nearest to the door. There is a constant flow of people and animals going up and down the street, with whom she interacts when the door is open or half-closed. The healer always wears a colourful scarf on her head and a sarong, as well as a *jainsem*. She often has a cat on her lap or her bed, and one of the family dogs guards the garage door.

Consultations with Kong Ro involves a fluid ritual. The Khasi takes the privacy of their family matters quite seriously and she creates a safe ritual space. She never performs with the garage door

[18] Kong is the respectful greeting term and title used for women in Khasi.

open. She is always chewing kwai and rarely goes an hour without putting fresh leaves and betel nuts in her mouth. She shares some of this traditional mixture with everyone as a sign of hospitality. During her prayers, she uses many of the typical elements of Khasi healing as offerings to the gods: betel nuts, betel-nut leaves, and lime. However, she was the only healer I met who used threads of wool and matchsticks. Threads are very important in Khasi culture. When buying a property, the length is measured with threads. The measurements of a house are counted in threads (for example, the distance between the pillars or between two doors). Matches and candles are also extensively used in Kong Ro's rituals. Matches represent the strength and bonds of a family and have the power to unravel curses. Candles represent enlightenment.

At the start of a healing ritual, Kong Ro will usually tell stories about previous patients. There is always some culturally important moral lesson in these tales. One day, she told me about a woman whom she cured of throat cancer some twenty years ago. Recently, the patient came back to see her for the same problem. Kong Ro discovered that this woman had made a huge mistake. She was building a new residence beside her recently deceased mother's house, without respecting the prescribed year of grieving. This story brings out what is appropriate when a parent passes away. Telling stories during healing session is not unique to the Khasi. Flueckiger, who did fieldwork in Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, remarks that breaks from healing "action" are often occasions for a story. The stories are carefully chosen to establish and reinforce the healer's authority, to construct the worldview within which such spiritual healing is possible, and to nurture the healer's relationship with his patients (Flueckiger, 2003). Among the Khasi, the stories also illustrate appropriate conduct when interacting with nature, which is protected by many gods. If they are offended, they can make human beings fall sick and even die. In this vein, Kong Ro told the story of a patient who was seriously ill. Kong Ro found out that during his college days he had gone for a picnic with his friends and had defecated on a sacred stone. In another story, she illustrates how one should not go to the jungle and pick up anything they want:

> A man went to the jungle and picked some fruits. That was fine. But he took some home for his sister and his wife. He was not supposed to do this. Nobody is supposed to take these fruits out of the jungle. So, three weeks later he started to have skin allergies, and his wife pricked the boils. Then it became bad, and they brought him to the hospital. They put a cast on it, and when they removed it, there was only bone, no more skin. It smelled really bad. They (the doctors) said it was cancer. Final stage. So, they brought him to Kong Ro. So, when they arrived, he stayed in the car. It smelled so bad she had

to cover her face and only his son could bring the rice.

Taking too many photographs in the jungle can also lead to sickness. Since people have forgotten that these places are sacred, they fall sick and end up coming to Kong Ro for healing. Knowledge of the sacredness of the jungle also influences her life and her choices. In the past she used to organize picnics for her employees working in her fields. She would hire a bus but warned them not to drink or party too hard. However, they would start drinking on the bus and they would dance and sing during the picnics, so she decided not to organize these outings anymore.

Kong Ro's stories are cautionary tales for people consulting her. She also uses stories to legitimate her practice. For example, she told the story of a policeman who came to see her. His face was swelling, and he was not able to talk anymore. The doctor told him he was suffering from gum cancer. They even gave him an appointment for surgery to remove the tumour. Before he could go however, somebody recommended Kong Ro to him. When she prayed for this man, she found out that it was *Lasam*. This curse affects the mouth of any person whom the curse keepers[19] are envious of or find fault with for any reason (Wolflanq, 2003). She gave a medicine to the man. The next day, the swelling was gone, and he was cured.

Kong Ro has also many stories that illustrate how she fights evil. One of her neighbours was practicing black magic. Early in the morning he would go to other people's houses and perform rituals near their drinking water source. That household would then fall sick. The son of the man also became unwell and came to Kong Ro. Through her prayers she found out about his father's deeds. She asked the son to wait for his father to show up at a specific house in the morning. The son saw the man enter the designed place and perform the evil ritual in the water. It was revealed that he was a Thlien worshipper but that he covered up his evil deeds by going to church every Sunday. When the father came to know about Kong Ro uncovering the truth, he and his wife came charging at her and screamed: " How dare you tell us that we are devil worshippers, how dare you blame us they said that?" She told him: " Do not shout or yell, let's talk." She took two bottles of water and asked him to put rice in whichever he wanted to. She said: " Let's find out who is a devil worshipper and who is not!" He chose a bottle he put rice in it, and suddenly it was full of insects.

[19] See previous chapter on Khasi curses.

She said: " This is enough to show that you are a devil worshipper!" The man was scared and decided to leave Kong Ro's house. A few days later, he fell sick and died.

Reading the Cards and Intercession with the Gods

After telling the stories, Kong Ro usually reads cards to determine the cause of the problems affecting her clients. She uses a simple playing deck and makes different shapes with the cards on the table. The healer then reveals past events and current situations by the pattern of the cards. Once the reasons behind the ailments have been revealed, Kong Ro will pray for the gods to relieve her clients. The intercession may take many hours as she asks the divine for help, while the clients are waiting on the stools or on the beds. Once the gods have heard her, she will lead either a simple ritual or a longer one to assess if the gods agree to help with the healing process. During this process, she uses different ritual elements. She will often read patterns in the rice, with the support of betel nuts and betel leaves. However, she may also sometimes conduct elaborated rituals involving numerous glass and plastic bottles. Depending on the verification tool used, she may ask the cards if the deity agrees to the request, or she may check the movement of the matches floating in a plastic pot filled with water or oil. Over the course of many visits to Kong Ro, the Diengdoh family tried to address the numerous health issues they were facing. Kong Ro worked to discover the threads linking every member of the family. She determined that wrong doers had cast a very strong evil spell on the Diengdoh.

Ritual for Anna

Anna had been experiencing psychosis for a few years before I met her. The symptoms came back during my stay in Shillong. One morning, her younger brother told me that she was not feeling well, and they were thinking of sending her to a psychiatric hospital. That day, I visited the Diengdoh house. The situation was very tense, despite everybody looking calm and just chatting in the courtyard. When I got there, Anna was sleeping. I sat down with her brother on the verandah outside. Since everything was quiet, he went to buy some snacks at the shop a few yards from the house. The mother stayed in the courtyard to clean up the dog's shed. Sitting down on the porch, I was facing the inside of the house. As I was waiting alone, I suddenly saw Anna getting out of her room and walking like a zombie towards the kitchen with an empty gaze. I called out to the

mother to warn her. She panicked and rushed inside. I followed her. As we got into the kitchen, we saw Anna opening the gas oven. She was trying to light a candle with the flame, probably to burn herself afterwards. We stopped her just in time and returned her to her room despite her protestations. After these unsettling events, and as Anna was resting in her bed, the family discussed the situation. There was confusion, as people did not know what to do. Anna kept having these fits and trying to harm herself. For economic reasons, they were hesitant to send her to the psychiatric hospital. Anna had just made a good business deal, and her partners would harass the family if she was admitted to the hospital.

As the discussion about the situation continued, she woke up again. She tried to bite herself madly, then fell in an epileptic state. Her eyes were rolling in their sockets. The fits calmed down suddenly. In a half-conscious state, Anna asked for some alcohol. They decided to give her a small cup and she drank avidly. As she was lying down, Ella, one of the sisters brought oil made with medicine herbs prescribed by Kong Ro. The sister gave her a full-body massage with it to Anna, from head to toe. She rubbed hard, making sure the oil got into Anna's skin and hair. After the massage, the patient was quiet for a while. However, after some time the fits started again. Ella phoned to seek help from some friends from an NGO. When they showed up, they evaluated Anna's condition. According to them, she needed to be taken to a hospital since her blood pressure was quite low. Suddenly, she started to have more fits. They agreed with giving her a bit more alcohol. As she was calming down, they tried to reason with her. If she tried to harm herself again, they would have to bring her to the hospital against her will. Finally, it was decided that they should go and get some medicine for her. One nephew came back quickly with it. As she was quieting downs, and we were eating lunch, a boy yelled that she was escaping through the main door. We all ran outside, but they caught up with her, as she was just fifteen metres from the house. The reasons behind these dangerous fits are numerous. Anna was greatly affected by the passing of her father and the death of her husband. Grief made her drink more. These symptoms emerged in a time when the family had already been hit by numerous tragedies. As a member of the family said:

> He [Anna's husband] was a very nice person. After he came to our family, he treated my mom like his own mother, my dad as his own father and he didn't go back to his own family. The kind of love, the kind of support and respect he had for my parents and for this family, he could even die, if you told him to, he would die, he was that kind of person.

Anna's illness was particularly hard on the family since she was the main breadwinner at that time. She tried to commit suicide many times by hanging herself, by throwing herself out of a moving car or by jumping out the roof of the house. Sometimes she would be just sitting in the kitchen, watching Indian serials on television. Suddenly, she would grab the traditional Khasi coal heater and pour its content over herself. She was taken for counselling, but they could not do much for her. As a member of the family explained further:

> There are people trying to harm her. She has depression, but there are also people trying to harm her. They saw she was the one the most responsible for the house, she took care of me and they wanted to harm her. They wish we would disappear one by one, and that my mom would be left alone, isolated. But my mom is strong, without my mom we would have vanished.

There are a lot of competition and many enemies in Anna's field of work, some of whom sent curses to her. She started falling ill at the beginning of 2015: she would suffer from sudden amnesia, and she would ask her mother: "Where was I, what am I doing? And what paper did I signed?" She seemed to forget everything.

During my stay, the family worked hard to convince Anna to seek spiritual healing. She finally agreed and we brought her to Kong Ro for the first time. That day, Kong Ro started to pray specially for her. Anna was sitting on the stool near the healer's bed, and suddenly fainted. She was caught by her brother just before she crashed on the floor. We brought her to the second bed. I grew quite alarmed as she began suffering again from convulsions. Her eyes were open, but she did not see us. Her body was shaking, and her right hand was stuck in a strange position with three fingers sticking out. Her younger brother ran for his bottle of water in the car and came back promptly. He poured the water on Anna's face, and she came back to life quite suddenly. She fell back on the bed, as we breathed a collective sigh of relief. She rested a moment, while Kong Ro began the diagnostic part of the ritual.

After this terrifying incident (it reminded me of a bad horror movie) I was grateful for the now gentle pace of the ritual as Kong Ro threw rice in the water and prayed silently. After a long while, Anna left the bed and came to sit down with us again. Kong Ro blew on the blessed rice and then told Anna to eat it. She also gave her a bottle of red medicinal oil and told her to apply it to her whole body every day for a week. Despite Anna's return to a normal state, the family was warned

to keep a close watch on her. According to Kong Ro, Anna was close to death. The evil entity affecting her was very jealous of the educated and clever people in the Diengdoh house. When she read the cards, Kong Ro saw all of Anna's enemies. Since the last person who died in the family was her husband, Anna was the next target. Kong Ro warned that if anything happened to her, her children would follow her to the grave. Then all the other members in the family would also die.

Anna's constant religious shifting also brought the wrath of gods upon them. The healer made fun of her client and her different forms of worship. She joked about the fact that Anna was a Buddhist one day, a Muslim another day, and a Hindu the following one. A lot of sadhus (Hindu religious men) came to the house when Anna invited them. She accompanied them in prayers for hours and even built a temple near the house. She wore the tikka as if she was a married Hindu woman. However, after some months, she grew tired of the sadhus, so she gave them beef with turmeric for dinner. She also converted to Islam for a while and did not eat pork. However, when she came to Kong Ro, she forgot about her new religion and ate pork two days in a row. According to Kong Ro, no new god could accept her, and she had to remain with the original one. At one point during the ritual, the healer sang a Hindu tune to ask for forgiveness from the Hindu gods whom Anna used to worship. The younger brother resumed Anna's situation:

> If we don't cure her now, it's going to go to him, so the next ritual it is tomorrow, Kong Ro wanted to do it today but she is very tired. Since Sunday she hasn't taken a bath, she didn't brush her teeth, she didn't do anything. When she performs the ritual, she can't take baths and she can't use water except just for washing hands. She was suffering so much for us, she was feeling weak, she was feeling sleepy, she was constantly not sleeping. She told my mom, let's stop today. She'll rest, she'll have a bath and then tomorrow she is going to help them [Anna and her son].

The reasons behind Anna's problems are numerous. She obviously had a drinking problem, as acknowledged by her family. They sent her to a rehabilitation clinic at least once and consulted with a psychiatrist about this problem. However, they also recognized cultural diseases such as *Taro* and *U Thlien* as a possible cause of Anna's woes. According to them, some evil people may have taken advantage of the fact that she was very intelligent and hard working. They started performing rituals to curse her and steal money from her. Kong Ro felt very sad about Anna's situation, because she was afraid that she was in real danger. The story of Anna and the Diengdoh

show how multiple explanations for illness can form a coherent narrative despite emerging from different ontological worlds. For her family, there was no conflict in different interpretations for her mental health problems. Her drinking issues made her weaker, and some evil doers used this weakness to send curses to profit from her business flair and money. Kong Ro had to remove the ties between Anna and her persecutors to help her.

The notion of ties is crucial in Khasi witchcraft and healing. Somebody sending evil will tie it to his victims. To be healed, curses and evil must then be untied. Kong Ro's rituals follow the same principle. From our first visit, she perceived that the whole Diengdoh family was tied up in toxic relationships. Her role was then to untie them, remove the toxicity and make them whole again. Since the joint family was composed of more than 20 people, the task was long and arduous. We had to visit Kong Ro many times, to fix the physical and mental health issues of different family members. Our longest visit lasted more than 24 hours. That day, she did a complex ritual with bottles and treads to fix the health issues of the families and to untie curses and unhealthy relationships, using a display of plastic containers and three glass bottles. Since I was not allowed to record the rituals or take pictures, I drew some basic diagrams to help readers understand the complexity of her rituals.

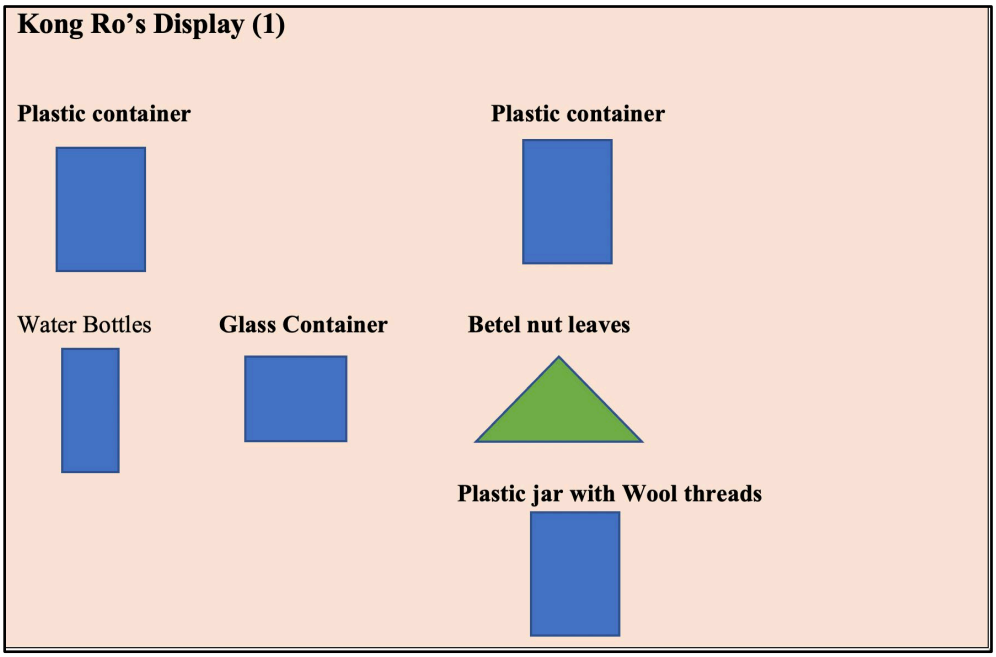
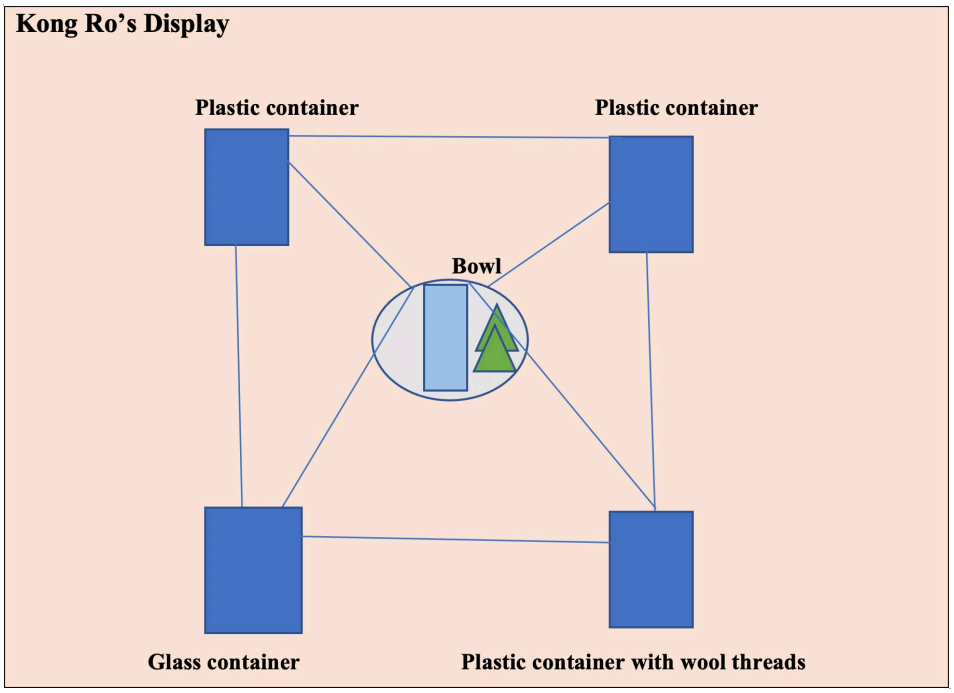


Diagram 1: Kong Ro's ritual table

In preparation for the ritual, the glass bottles were filled with water. The two plastic containers and the three glass bottles were full of oil and matches. These were disposed on the table in front of Kong Ro's bed. The family brought three packs of lime (the same lime used in kwai). The recipe used for the ritual was the classic kwai mix: lime, betel nuts, and betel leaves. Kong Ro put the ingredients in the bowl. She then emptied three or four boxes of matches in it before adding wool threads (black, white, red). She covered these items with rice, handful by handful. She then asked one of Anna's brothers to add rice in every glass and plastic bottle in display on the table. After he was done with his task, Kong Ro placed one of the glass bottles full of water in the middle of the bowl, took out a whole skein of purple and white thread and tied it around the bottles and plastic containers. At the end, the whole display on the table looked like Diagram 2.



Schema 2: Kong Ro's ritual table after step 2 of the preparations for the ritual

When the threads were finally all tied, she placed the rest of the wool in the bowl in the centre of the table. She then started the intercession prayer to ask the help of the gods. This prayer took more than an hour. The whole assembly, including myself, lay down on the beds as we waited for the prayers to conclude. She then finally came out of her semi-trance. She blessed the rice brought by

the family for this purpose and asked each member to put more grains in the middle bottle. Then she asked the older brother to light five matches, one after the other and drop them in the same bottle. The rest of the family was then requested to put rice in the bottle, one handful for every child in the family. Then the other brother dropped the matches in the bottle. They repeated the cycle of prayer and throwing rice in the bottle one more time. The healer's intercession with the gods was then over and the waiting began to see if the divine agreed with her petition. For reasons left unexplained, she then asked the men to leave the garage, and the women were left alone. We all came closer to her, sitting down on carpets near her bed. Our gazes were fixed on the rice moving down slowly from the top to the bottom of the container. As we were watching closely, Kong Ro continued to pray. Finally, she stopped praying and checked the bottle herself. She seemed satisfied with movement of the rice. She called the men back inside and they sat down again on benches, beds and mullahs. Kong Ro then proceeded to put more threads around the bottle. This took a long time, as she and her helper (her husband), needed to unwind the different skein of many colours and then wind them around the different parts of the display. Once this step was done, however, dinner time was looming. Everything stopped for us to eat. Kong Ro and her husband covered the display with newspapers. The women of the house (daughters and daughters-in-law) began to show up in the garage with silver dishes full of food. We were served a royal dinner in the garage with three sorts of meat (beef, chicken, and pork), rice, fish, and a dessert. The atmosphere was lighter, as people were joking around and making fun of my inability of eat the fish without getting fish bones stuck in my teeth. Kong Ro told stories, making people laugh. Suddenly, she said that I had sinus problems. Standing above me, she started massaging my shoulders and my scalp vigorously. Finally, she diagnosed that I also had gastric problems and offered some medicine for this medical condition. She also said that when she touched me, she felt that in Canada there are no spiritual healers to cure bad omens. However, she could feel by touching me that if I prayed to any god, I could help the people affected. We were still waiting for a sign from the bottles, but nothing seemed to move in the plastic and glass containers. The evening was dragging on, and Kong Ro's husband brought cushions to make it more comfortable. It was now 9:30 p.m. She told more stories and prayed on the rice. Kong Ro and her husband, who was acting as her assistant, went on talking while looking at the bottles and spinning the threads until about 1 a.m.

At 8 a.m., I was awakened by Kong Ro telling stories. As we were slowly waking up, something suddenly seemed to move in the bottles. Kong Ro started praying again and everybody became attentive to what was happening in the containers. After a short kwai break, she interpreted the movement inside the bottle. According to the healer, the gods were agreeing to help the family and the curse was about to get lifted. She put rice that she had just blessed in an orange plastic bag, and she gave instructions to the younger brother to eat the rice at home that evening. Then Kong Ro's husband went under the bed to pull out a giant ashtray. She gave a pack of matches to each of the Diengdoh brothers. They then burned the threads around the bottles as she was praying. The flames did not move far away from the bottles, a good thing in such a closed space. The mother knelt in front of the tray and moved her hands to her face, bringing the smoke to her eyes, nose, and mouth. She also passed the soles of her feet in the flames. The rest of the family did likewise. Once the threads stopped burning, they removed the charred materiel and placed it in the tray. They then placed the used display in a basket. Kong Ro dropped the soil that the Diengdoh had brought from home into the 3 bottles, handful by handful. The contents seemed to sink to the bottom. Kong Ro interpreted this sudden movement as a positive step towards removing the curse. They then placed the glass bottles in the basket with the newspaper, and someone disappeared outside with the display, to leave it in the jungle.

In the days following the ritual, Kong Ro would continue to fight against the evil affecting her clients. The burned display left in the jungle would need to be checked after a few days later to see if the fight was successful. In the healing ritual I have just described, we see the importance of threads among the Khasi. However, I feel that it is difficult to generalize about the use of such symbols in healing, since I did not see any other healer using that method. Threads symbolize the relationships in the family. By burning them, Kong Ro tried to remove not only evil but also the negative influences that may affect family interactions. During the rituals, she came across many curses affecting the Diengdoh family. The Diengdoh found out about the impact of their ancestors' actions during the visits to Kong Ro. They ended up learning quite a lot about the past of the family. She was able to identify up to three different curses that are still afflicting the members of the family. According to the younger brother: "It was like peeling the orange to find the pulp, okay, she was trying to find out what was the main source of the problem. The first thing she detected was the problem, from my mom's side. " One was the cause of the recurrent possession

suffered by another sister, Mary. The second curse was caused by the anger of the house goddess. The third was the result of a family sin committed almost seventy years ago. Wrongdoing by ancestors can cause harm to several generations afterwards (Syiem 2010).

Mary's Possession

Mary is another Diengdoh sister who has been suffering from curses sent by enemies. In early May 2016, Mary experienced weird and scary symptoms. Her stomach started swelling as if she were seven months pregnant. It caused her severe pain. This had happened to her before, but the doctors could not find the reason of her sickness. We already had started her cycle of visits to Kong Ro. The younger Diengdoh brother called the healer and she asked that they come right away.

The brother called me in a rush to tell me to get ready. When they picked me up from my apartment, he was driving. His mother and his older brother were in the back with Mary, who was lying down across their laps. She was in so much pain that she was barely conscious. During the car ride (about an hour), she was moaning and screaming. Traffic was not as bad as usual and we progressed through the countryside in good time. When we arrived at Kong Ro's house, the healer shot one glance at Mary and then ordered us to lay her down on the bed at the back of the garage. Mary was made comfortable with a blanket and a pillow. Almost immediately, however, she started having convulsions and her back arched upward. As Mary was moaning in pain, Kong Ro approached her and put lime paste on her wrists and forehead. She then gave her a special medicine, brought by her husband. Kong Ro then retreated to her habitual bed to start to pray for Mary. All we could do was wait for the symptoms to subside, as we waited anxiously on the garage benches. It took Mary about an hour after ingesting the medicine to feel better. It was a long wait, but then she was able to fall sleep for a while. When she woke up, she asked for kwai. I was afraid she would choke on it, but according to the family, the spirit inside Mary wanted to chew kwai. Since Mary was possessed, she would not choke. Mary sat down on the bed and chewed her kwai while observing attentively.

Kong Ro then proceeded to read the cards to understand the reason behind Mary's sickness. She discovered that the woman was possessed by the soul of a deceased Khasi, pregnant when she died. This woman lived a long time ago in a village of Jaintia Hills. She used to drink local liquor,

at a time when girls never drank. She was single and very beautiful. Every man in that village liked her, even married ones. The women, however, really hated her because of her lifestyle and her beauty. According to Kong Ro, maybe she had an affair with a married man, and she got pregnant. When she was about seven or eight months pregnant, the man's wife found out. In their anger, the villagers conspired among themselves. They kidnapped this beautiful young woman and tied her in the jungle. They then stoned her to death. They thought she was dead, but in fact she did not die for about a week. She was still alive, as crows and animals started eating her flesh. She died a very painful death. One, day long after her passing, one of the Diengdoh's aunt and a black magic practitioner went searching for a human bone in the jungle to curse the family. Once they found the bone, they used a doll to symbolize the dead girl. They called up her dead spirit. Once she emerged from her slumber, the dead girl tried to find her village and her house. She found only some old foot paths and flowers planted there. She was a lost spirit. The spirit of the deceased girl was sent to possess Mary by the sorcerers. When they pricked the doll with needles, Mary would then shout out in pain and marks would appear on her body without anyone touching her. Her stomach would get swollen as if she was pregnant. Kong Ro found out that Mary was not alone in being affected. She and her mother were interlinked since the person who did evil to them came from the mother's side. Mother and daughter were bound together by the spirit of the dead. According to Kong Ro, a healing ritual had to be performed for both at the same time. New material for the ritual needed to be gathered. Mary is believed to be sensitive to paranormal energies. She has frequently seen ghosts and spirits. In 2016, she was in communication with a young girl who had died following rape and torture.

We visited Kong Ro again the following day to perform the healing ritual for Mary. Almost everybody was sleeping after 20 minutes of praying by Kong Ro. Thunder was rolling outside. Kong Ro had not dismantled the display from the previous day. She threw rice on the display, handful by handful, and prayed. She yawned. Something was not right, she felt. She asked a female assistant to bring a carpet from the house for the healer lay down on it. She also told us to lie down and sleep. We rested on carpets and beds for at least an hour before Kong Ro decided it was time to start the ritual again.

The healer sent the older brother to buy candles at the nearest shop, a small kiosk on the road selling snacks and everyday items. Once the brother was back, Kong Ro's husband lit the candles, and she prayed over these. She then put them in the bottles without extinguishing them. She prayed on the threads, before asking the brothers to put them in newspapers in the tray to be burned. Kong Ro removed the burning candles from the bottles. Those not burned were added to the tray. Those still burning were prayed over again after which Kong Ro doused the candles in the bowl of water, with the leaves and the rice. At the request of Kong Ro, Mary added a little bit of rice to each bottle and her mother put a bit of rice into a small water bottle, brought from home.

All these steps were completed in the garage, even the burning of the threads. However, in the Khasi traditional religion, gods live in the natural world. They thrive in the jungle and the rivers. The family curse was of spiritual origin and the fight had to be brought to the gods themselves. To complete the healing process for the whole family, a ritual had to be conducted in the jungle. The Diengdoh brothers and Kong Ro's husband prepared a basket and put some bottles from the display in it. They went out to the jungle and left the women, including me, in the garage. While we were waiting for the men to come back, Kong Ro took black strings out, and with the help of a female assistant, started braiding them while praying and reciting the names of members of the family. After the men came back from the jungle, she prayed on a plate where stones, rice and threads were placed. Then she put the stones in the newspaper, tied one of the strings around the mother's belly and made her eat some crude rice. The younger brother had to write down the names of everyone in the family. She tied a thread around his belly as well. She ordered them to make rings with the stones and said that all the adults in the family would have to wear one. She prayed for each brother and sister, then for each of their children. After this, she put the thread back in the newspapers. The ritual was done for the day, but the fight was just beginning, as the Khasi gods were fighting evil in the jungle. The display had to be left there.

To complete the ritual and lift the curse, we went back three weeks later. At Kong Ro's request, the elder brother went to the jungle to check on the bottles placed there in the basket. It seemed the bottles had exploded, indicating that the gods agreed to lift the curse. The ritual to rid the family of its multiple curses was then completed. Over the course of the long hours that we spent in her healing room, Kong Ro offered many explanations for illness and misfortune. Despite focusing on

the woes caused by strained relationships and sins, she did not necessarily reject the link between lifestyle and health. Kong Ro told Susan, one of the Diengdoh sisters, to eat more green vegetables and less meat. However, she did not think that Susan suffered only from jaundice as diagnosed by the doctors. Supernatural explanations were much more important in her interpretation of the misfortunes affecting the family. Sometimes she did not provide the explanation I was expecting. Lisa had been suffering from infertility: she and her husband were unable to conceive a child after several years of marriage. She had gone to many massage therapists and other Khasi healers. None of them were able to help her. Since Lisa was chewing kwai loaded with tobacco and drinking heavily on weekends, I expected Kong Ro to tell her to adopt a healthier lifestyle. However, according to Kong Ro, Lisa was affected by the evil cast on the house. She could not conceive, even if it was in her destiny to have three children.

Curses Sent by a Goddess and a Beheaded Lady

I have tried to show how curses in Meghalaya are family oriented. Khasi society is divided into clans; the family name being also its clan denomination. One cause of evil is when people stop worshipping their clan goddess. For example, the Diengdoh ancestors stopped worshipping their clan goddess and she became angry. The younger brother explained after a visit to Kong Ro:

> My grandmother switched to another title. Phai was supposed to be our original surname. But in that area where my great-grand mom was from, Mynso, there came a plague where people started falling sick. And these Phai, most of the people with this name, they were known to practise evil. They were known to possess *Taro* and evil of that sort. My great-grandmother was a hardworking lady, she didn't want to continue with all this tradition and all that, she changed the name all by herself. And she moved from Jaintia Hills to Ri Bhoi.

According to Kong Ro, that made the goddess very angry, so there is a curse associated from the family from the mother's side. In this case, the curse of the goddess affected the lives of the life partners of the Diengdoh siblings. Three of the sisters lost their husbands prematurely. The fourth one got divorced. The older brother's marriage was unstable, and his wife started to have mental health issues. Members of the family kept getting sick. The curse targeted everyone in the house except the mother. Kong Ro found out that the mother was the only spiritually strong person in the family and would not get affected. However, her children and grandchildren would all suffer and die. Then the mother would be left alone in her old age with no one to look after her.

Despite the woes affecting the Diengdoh, other healers could never figure out the problem. Some of them went to the family home and felt a supernatural presence in the dwelling. They categorized it as evil and tried to chase it away. They did not realize it was the goddess of the house protecting the family. They ended up chasing her. She got angry and made all the members of the family fall sick. This was a stupid mistake according to Kong Ro:

> Imagine how stupid they are, the goddess who was protecting you guys. These stupid healers, they come without knowing anything. They feel her presence instead of finding out whether it is a good or a bad presence. They just chase her out of the house so she gets offended.

The curse of the clan's goddess made the Diengdoh family weaker and unable to fight the evil sent their way by ill-intentioned people. It is a meta-curse, paving the way to all other ones affecting the family.

The Curse of the Beheaded Lady

Sins can be the source of a curse, as the following story will show. Another ancient malediction affecting the family dates to the childhood of the father, Mark, recently deceased. Kong Ro found out about a horrific incident that happened when he was ten years old. His paternal uncle lived close by with his wife and three children: a girl of seven, a four-year-old boy and an eight-month-old baby girl. Mark kept going to that house to play with the other children. The wife loved him as her own child. However, the uncle always beat his wife and abused her. He suspected her of having an affair with his own father. One day, he just said to her: " I'm going to kill you, because you're having an affair with my father." She answered, "Trust me, there's nothing like that, I have three kids with you, why would I do that, and with your father?" He answered: " No, I can't trust you anymore and you're going to die". She answered: " Ok! If you are that powerful and if you feel you have the right to kill me, let me just pray for a while and let me just say some Hail Marys." She sat near her home shrine with her infant daughter. The elder daughter and the son were also standing there with lighted candles, and they were all praying together. After the wife completed her prayers, the husband asked her, "Are you done with the prayer?" She said: "Yes, I'm done." Immediately he took a sword and beheaded her. As the kids were screaming, he beheaded them as well.

He also wanted to kill his own father, but the old man was strong and fought back. He then went to Mark's father's house, the eldest brother in the family, and collapsed. Before he fainted, he said: *It's all over*. The grandfather and grandmother had suspicions about what just happened. However, instead of calling the police, they collected a huge amount of money. When they finally called the police, they gave fifty thousand rupees to the officers to cover the crime. The police still arrested the suspect temporarily and took him away. When people came to collect the bodies and to investigate, Mark wanted to see what was happening and nobody stopped him. The moment the police entered the house, Mark saw the crime scene and was obviously traumatized.

The four victims were never properly buried. The police dug the ground in a private spot and buried the bodies hastily. The grandparents hid the story of the murders, but this event had a lasting impact on Mark. He fled to another region as soon as he received his engineering degree. He met his future wife while staying in Shillong. Eventually they had children. Mark then went back to his family to let them know. His mother collapsed, as she was expecting him to marry a local woman of the same caste. His parents were against this union, but Mark's father finally agreed to the marriage. Mark never went back to live in his native region. These childhood events, however, kept playing in his mind. Later in life, he started to drink and fight with his wife and children. He suffered from epilepsy and mental health issues. His wife took him back to his native region as a therapeutic measure. She tried to discuss the murders with Mark's brothers and sisters. They did not know anything about the tragic events or chose not to speak of it. The grandparents also kept silent. Mark took his wife to the paternal uncle's house where it all happened, and she was able to meet the murderer. She was surprised because he seemed so nice and apparently loved children.

The family was affected by these murders. They needed to atone for the killings but refused to recognize it happened. The other family members saved themselves and their children and threw all blame back onto Mark and his family. Since the house goddess of the Diengdoh was already weak, they were vulnerable to evil. After the family realized that the spirits of the murdered victims were not at peace, they went to church and offered a special Mass for their souls. Yet the pain and the curse still stayed with them. According to the Diengdoh younger brother, the murdered mother would have forgiven if she were the only one killed. It was too difficult, however, for her to forgive the murder of her children. The curse went on to live with Mark. On his deathbed, he gave his

blessings to Anna, because he felt that she was able to take care of the entire household. The curse was then transmitted to her.

If curses can be sent by dead relatives, they can also be the results of strained relationships with family members who are alive and well. Sometimes the ill-wishers are members of the same clan. The Diengdoh mother came from a poor family who could not afford to pay for her education as a young girl. She took care of her brothers and sisters instead of pursuing her studies. However, Mark was an engineer with a proper government job. The younger son explained to me:

> After my dad got married to my mom, he took so much care of her, he gave my mom all the happiness she didn't get in her life. He taught her how to dress well, he taught her how to wear heels, it was like a fairy tale for my mom. And he taught her how to style herself, he gave her all the costly clothes, ornaments and gold jewelry and everything, he kept her like a goddess, he kept her like a queen.

Some of the clan relatives were jealous. On the younger son's first birthday, his mother's sister-in-law came to their house. The mother owned a large gold necklace that the young Diengdoh sisters were playing with. The visiting relative stole the gold jewelry right under the nose of the children but pretended that it was lost. The parents searched for it desperately. Mary finally told her mother that the aunt had taken it. Their father confronted his sister-in-law. She pretended to be innocent. She became bitter and cursed Mark: "You are going to die a terrible death and your children will never have a good life and they will all suffer! Your daughters' lives will be ruined". The aunt then went to a sorcerer to send a curse to the family. A dead human body or a human bone was needed to send a curse to the family. The aunt and the sorcerer found in the jungle the bone of the dad pregnant girl mentioned before. They used the spirit to harm the Diengdoh. The spirit did not want to possessed Mary, but she was forced to do so by the sorcerer. The aunt was fine with the fact that this spirit might destroy her own children as well. She went to the family's compound and buried the human bone there. From then on, everyone in the family started to suffer and fall sick.

After consulting healers, the Diengdoh found out the spirit affecting Mary had been sent by the aunt. When Mary was possessed, she spoke in Jaintia (which she does not know) and in different voices. She was asking for the local liquor, which she never drinks. Her stomach became huge, as

mentioned earlier. Sometimes healers came around to help her. Usually, the spirit would go away after their rituals, but it did not work in this case. The female entity was angrier than ever and tortured Mary even more.

Seeking Healing Again

Since Anna continued to experience some symptoms after their visit to Kong Ro, the family was still seeking answers. Despite Kong Ro's charm and talent, she had become too expensive, and cheaper healers were sought. We went to visit Bah Nebar, a traditional non-converted healer endorsed by the Seng Khasi association. His clinic is in Bara Bazar (a large, busy market) in Shillong. The narrow alley leading to it opens onto a square where farmers sell only tomatoes. On the day we visited, there was mud and tomato juice everywhere. All the women in the market were wearing the *jainsem*, the traditional Khasi dress, and the men, their work clothes. Some people carried typical Khasi baskets on their heads. It was a crowded and dirty place, and the mud made its way into my sandals.

Photo 5: Women at the market wearing the jainsem, Meghalaya, 2016.

The healing session took place in a small attic room, some five feet high, that was reached via several flights of rundown stairs in a dilapidated building. The attic was full of recycled bottles, metal instruments, and other discarded everyday items. The windows had no glass beyond the metalwork. We sat in the waiting room while Bah Nebar was seeing other customers. Then we were admitted in by the healer himself, a man in his sixties. Anna and her younger brother sat beside the healer, on a stool while I sat on a bench. Anna had brought some rice in a plastic bag, and the healer put the grains in a large plate. He then recited prayers before analyzing the configuration of the grains in the plate. The gods revealed to him what we already knew: Anna had been tied to dead souls by the people trying to harm her. The healer joked by saying I should honour Jesus Christ and the Diengdoh, the goddess of their clan. He asked her to come back the next day with specific goods to unbind Anna from the harmful spirits. As we left and started to go downstairs, Anna suddenly stopped in her tracks. Her gaze became empty, and she felt very weak. She sat down in the stairs. Her younger brother and I became worried as the colour vanished from her face. I ran to ask for water from the women who were in a room nearby. After a broken exchange in Khasi, they finally understood my request. One of them went to get a plastic cup with water. They all crowded around us, asking what was wrong. Anna was still unable to stand up. A man pushed through the crowd of women. We found out that he owned a Khasi massage parlour just in front of the steps. He invited Anna to come in and sit down inside until she felt better. She accepted and we waited in the massage clinic. The room was concrete, with three benches facing each other. While she enjoyed her massage, we got some tea and *jingbam* (Khasi snacks) from a woman selling tea. I went in to see how the therapist operated. Anna only removed her *jainsem*. He poured oil on her and massaged her whole body. He blew on her skin and massaged her sinuses, since she had some allergies that day.

When we returned to see Bah Nebar the next day, Anna brought some rice. Before starting the ritual, Bah Nebar told Anna she should not have gone for this massage after the last healing session, since her organs and immune system were weak. Instead, she should have eaten and taken her medicine as instructed. Then he prayed on behalf of Anna. He also blew on her forehead a few times and prepared a bottle of medicine for her, mixing liquid ingredients in it. He made her take some from the cap before giving her the bottle. Anna seemed to wake up a little bit and feel stronger after taking the medicine. She asked him to pray for a case regarding a plot of land in

Nongmyngson. Then the mother asked the healer to look at some infections she had on her leg and hands. He identified them as a kind of disease that needed to be cleaned with herbs. He put oil on her skin and gave her a yellow powder medicine to apply to her hands.

As we have seen in the examples of Kong Ro and Bah Nebar, healing rituals can be elaborate or simple. Not all healers of a given type will use the same symbolic objects or rituals. However, short rituals are usually cheaper. Kong Ro's rituals come at a hefty price. Bah Nebar's rituals are affordable, even for the lower middle class. The cost of Kong Ro's rituals kept escalating and though the Diengdoh were relatively well-off, they decided that it was too expensive to continue. We then turned to simpler rituals that lasted ten to twenty minutes and cost only 100 rupees. As we were questing for healing, we also sought alternative non-Khasi treatment. One of the Diengdoh sisters was still feeling sick despite having visited Kong Ro and Kong Fatima many times. She had also travelled to Chennai for a consultation in a prestigious clinic, but still felt unwell. The family planned to get Art of Life medicines (an herbal brand of medicines). The younger brother of the Diengdoh, the mother, Susan and I went to visit the man selling the medicine in Shillong. His clinic contained only two couches and a table. Wedding pictures of family members were displayed on a shelf. Raj was a Nepali of about 40 years old. He sat beside me on the couch and started asking Susan questions about her health. She explained that she had pain in her knees and body and had been diagnosed with tuberculosis. Raj listened to her carefully. He then took out a diagnostic electronic device, kept in a silver case. It was of rectangular shape, the size of a small television, with a handle and a screen. He put it on the table and started it by pushing the ON button. He gave the handle to Susan, and she held it in her hand. Images of various human body parts started appearing and disappearing on the screen. Finally, after one minute, the scan was finished, and he started analyzing the data for Susan. The results were arranged in tables on the screen, as was a list of all the human body systems (digestive, breathing, etc.) Each time the healer chose one of these systems, the results appeared on the screen. According to the medical device, Susan had circulation problems, and this was causing her continuous pain. Her immune system was very weak, but he did not want to prescribe her medicines before receiving her medical file and transmitting it to doctors in America. She would need to come back the next day to buy the medicines. Then it was the mother's turn. She first showed Raj the sores on her legs, which looked like ulcers. She also had some lesser sores on her hands. She had consulted many

dermatologists and healers, but they could not fix the problem. According to Raj, it could have been a bacterial infection, so she needed to take medication to kill the bacteria. Then the mother held the handle while her own reading was done. According to the results, she was in good shape, except for some circulation issues. She had normal bowel movements. When my turn came, Raj entered my data in the computer before allowing me to finally hold the handle. My results were quite positive, except for my liver, which was apparently toxic. He prescribed one pot of detoxifier for 1000 rupees. The Art of Life medicines were seen as a way to heal from physical ailments that doctors were unable to cure. However, allopathic and herbal remedies were not an option for the psychological problems the family was facing. We had to visit Geeta, the Hindu healer, to remedy to this type of ailment. The day we visited, the Diengdoh mother and the younger son sat in front of the healer. They wanted to consult with Geeta because Anna was maintaining a relationship with people who were extorting money from her through emotional blackmail. These people called every week to ask her to send them more money. They were Muslim men from Silchar, in Assam. Anna had been sending money to them frequently, but the amount remained unknown. These transfers were initially forwarded to them to conclude a business deal. However, their arrangements had not been concluded and the men kept asking for more money. According to the Diengdoh, these men may have been using black magic against Anna.

After we sat down in the small space of Geeta's shrine, the healer took the rice given by the mother and put it in a copper plate. She prayed over the rice and asked questions to the family. The Diengdoh explained the situation: these people kept asking for money from Anna, and she just transferred it to them without any question. Geeta prayed on Anna's clothing. She finally said that these people were dangerous and would kill to get money. We promised to come back later to know more. When we went back, the Diengdoh youngest brother brought rice. They talked about the case of Anna. Things were going better. The people harassing her were calling less and less. Since things were going better, the ritual was quite short. Geeta read the rice and prayed with her beads. Anna was then blessed, even if she was absent and unaware that a ritual was taking place to save her from her tormentors.

We see in the examples of Kong Ro and Geeta how women play an important role in the healing landscape of Meghalaya, either as victims or as healers. This is contrary to many aspects of gender

roles in mainland India (Mishra, 2007). In Meghalaya, women can marry or cohabit with a partner of their own choice except for members of their own clan and immediate members of the father's kin (Kharshiing, 2016). The importance of women in society is centred around the home and the management of the spiritual and material assets of the family. However, socioeconomic changes in Khasi society may put the status of women in jeopardy. Exposure to education and increasing contact with outsiders have contributed to a feeling of dissatisfaction with the matrilineal system. Some segments of the Khasi society see the matrilineal system as not only prejudicial to men but also detrimental to the interest of society (Nongbri, 2010). A faction of Khasi men has actively sought to replace the matrilineal with the patrilineal system. Attempts by the state to codify customary laws and practices through the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill (1997) have given a further impetus to this movement. There is a feeling, especially among the educated Khasi, that their rules of kinship and inheritance are biased in favour of women and are too restrictive (Nongbri, 1988).

Land rights are also undergoing a transition from communal land (*ri raid)* to private land (*ri kythei*) administered through the village councils (McDuie-Ra, 2007; Nathan, 2000; Nongbri, 2003; Nongkinrih, 2002). *Ri Raid* land is community land which is managed and controlled by the concerned community. Every member of the community has the right of use and occupancy of the Ri Raid land without payment of land revenue (Shangpliang, 2020). Original resource management at the village level is highly gendered, with women bearing the major workload in production, utilisation, distribution and conservation activities (Krishna, 2001). Despite this important role, women are not represented in the village councils and changes in land allocations may damage their position in Khasi society (Agarwal, 1994; McDuie-Ra, 2007). Furthermore, despite her status as custodian of tradition, the *Khatduh* does not inherit rights to sell all or part of the land or use it to generate profit-seeking business. The male members of the family control rights to the land (Agarwal, 1994; McDuie-Ra, 2007). At the village level, women have been disempowered by a shift from subsistence cultivation to commercial agriculture. This involves dealing with non-tribal merchants and traders, an activity usually undertaken by men. As women do most of the labour to cultivate common land, privatization has reduced their role in the production process and their position in rural communities (Barbora & W., 2002; McDuie-Ra, 2007).

Khasi women are also excluded from political life. They do not have the right to run for any office in the traditional council (Wahlang, 2015). According to Bah Shabong, men are the bread owners, and they need to be a strong foundation for their household. If the foundation is not strong, then the household is bound to collapse. However, according to many participants, gender roles must be seen in a positive light. Both women and men are perceived as being equal, with different strengths attributed to each. According to Father Francis, from the physical point of view, men are stronger, but women have more faith and love of God. Because of this strong connexion of the women with God, the husband must follow his wife's lead.

Despite this, women are still excluded from the organized form of traditional healing and no female healer was registered on the contact list and schedule stapled on the front door of the clinic in Shillong. Except for the Syiem Sad, I was not able to locate other non-converted female healers. Gender restricts the performance of traditional ritual healing among non-converted Khasi. Furthermore, there seems to be a widespread view among non-converted Khasi that women should not perform traditional rituals. According to Rosanna, men are the ones who should practice healing. Another informant added that traditionally, in the Khasi hills, women did not practice healing. Nowadays the Seng Khasi organization does not interfere if they do. Even if there are no objections from the part of the organization regarding women healers, they are still absent from the Seng Khasi healing structure. This prohibition was also found among the Jaintia. Bei explained that, despite having the gift of healing, she could not perform rituals and had to bring her patients in Jowai if they needed such healing. She could only give herbal medicine, since her forefathers did not allow women to perform traditional rituals.

As I have shown, healing is heavily gendered in Meghalaya. Sanctioned traditional healers are members of the Seng Khasi association. There are also converted Christian healers practicing their own brand of traditional healing: most women interviewed belong to this category of healers. All the female Khasi healers interviewed were Christians, even the ones practicing traditional healing. These women do not have the status of the Syiem Sad because they are not of the Syiem clan, but they are also gifted with the power to heal. Syiem (2010), a Khasi researcher, explains that they often perform rites and call upon the deities in order to cure illness and afflictions, as my research

shows. Many of the female informants of my research correspond to this profile. There are several Khasi women who use playing cards to read a person's problem, similarly to Kong Ro. These women are Christians, but they engage in this kind of healing practice and their prayers address God (though not necessarily the Christian God). They claim that they were born with this gift and their mothers and grandmothers were involved in similar activities. My own research confirms these affirmations from Syiem.

Among converted Christians, female healers are considered as powerful as their male counterparts. They are widely sought for faith and tribal healing. Among women practicing both traditional and faith healing, the gift can be received directly from God. The conditions for receiving such a gift varies. Fatima received hers not through her bloodline but following the hardships during her younger life. She cannot pass her gift to her daughter since God will choose upon whom He bestows gifts upon. This idea of powers not being inherited has also been expressed by Rosa Marboh, another healer. Sometimes their opinion about healing as a gift is nuanced, as in the case of Agatha. She prays for needy people, and she can set people free from satanic influences, but she does not feel like she has a gift. Only a combination of Christian faith and gifted power will then lead a woman to become a healer. If this gift is inherited, the woman will be told about it and prepared from her youth to follow her mother in this. Despite conversion to Christianity, matriliny is expressed through the curative path towards traditional healing. There is also a gendered aspect to patients seeking treatments. According to Akbar, in Islam women are not allowed to come and visit people for healing. If they are sick or have problems, they should send their men to come and inform the healer, who will pray for them.

Quest for Healing: Conclusion

The healing quest of the Diengdoh family illustrates how the Khasi mix ontologies when searching for answers. The different worlds they transit are full of contradictions for the outsider, but not for converted Khasi who are juggling healing practices from at least four different religious traditions. Despite being a devout Catholic family, the Diengdoh never hesitate to consult healers of other faiths or origins. As I showed earlier, they are quite close to Christian faith healers as well, such as Fatima and Agatha. Sometimes, the quest for healing may be compromised. It happened to the

Diengdoh, when certain Christian healers pointed out to their multiplication of healing consultations as the source of evil. These healers see the use of traditional practices as a proof of a weak Christian faith. However, after a short pause, the Diengdoh went back to seeking traditional indigenous healing. They were not the only ones seeking answers from different healers. When we consulted with Hindus, there were almost always some Khasi men or women waiting on the doorstep of the practitioner. At the same time, Hindu Nepali would consult with the Khasi king when they felt they had been affected by *U Thlien*. This seemed rare, however. The multiple ontological worlds in which the Khasi live seem mostly to concern only them. Hindus and Muslims of other origins seem content to visit their own healers. Specific healers may also be consulted for a given ailment, such as *Taro* or *U Thlien*. According to Kong Rynjah, Khasi people do not hold that they are the only ones who have the truth. Traditional Khasi are open to healing performed by Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. This openness is found among both converted and non-converted Khasi. Classical elements of Khasi ontology are still dominant in traditional healing. One hypothesis to explain this juggling of healing traditions is that they do not refer to faith at all. Families or individuals will refer to one faith (Christian, traditional, Muslim, Hindu) as their own and will follow its festivals and rituals. The healing quest seems to be outside of faith. In the next chapter, I will propose an analysis of healing in Meghalaya through an ontological framework.

Chapter 6. An Ecosystem of Evil

In this chapter, I will use theoretical arguments developed by ontological anthropologists to shed new light on my research findings. I will examine the relationships between the Khasi and nature and how they can be situated in an animist ontology. I will also look at how a Khasi person is constituted and what are the elements that form the social relationships of a given individual, before using the ontological approach to deconstruct the concepts of witchcraft, healing, and sickness. In the second part of the chapter, I will apply these new insights to go more deeply into several major themes of this thesis in an ontological approach, and how evil is conceived among Christians. I will then explore how witchcraft can be seen as a contemporary part of the Khasi world.

Part 1: Nature, Culture, and the Khasi world

The Khasi, Nature, and Animism

Since the Khasi believe in spiritual entities and in different gods who shelter in the jungle, observers have been quick to categorize their traditional religion as animism (Bareh, 1985; Gurdon, 1907). Gurdon and Bareh were not wrong in their assumptions regarding Khasi culture and animism. However, their approaches stem from an outdated notion of animism. Since the 1960s, new understandings have emerged that are centred on the dynamic relationships that animists maintain with their environment. These relationships create a continuum between nature and human beings. In comparison, the common Western perspective sees Nature and humans as two separate entities. The older conception of animism has been used to describe the spirituality of many non-Western people, in a generalized, non-localized way. One term and one description, however, cannot be applied to a vast array of people with different practices and ontological view. This rings particularly true when studying Khasi religious life. Before colonization, the Khasi had their own spiritual world, and the British characterized their belief system as “animist”. Since the Khasi worshipped jungle spirits and gods, it may in fact be possible to define the traditional Khasi as animists to a certain degree. The Khasi spiritual world also includes forces taking the form of entities endowed with human-like agency (Lyngdoh, 2016a). These entities live in the natural environment and protect it. Sacrifices and other rites are performed as a sign of gratitude to those

spirits and deities (Khyriemmujat, 2013). Considering all this, Western missionaries, scholars, and anthropologists have categorized Khasi religion as animistic and polytheistic (Kharlukhi, 2015). Khasi intellectuals argue, however, that the Khasi were never animists or polytheists. They worshipped one supreme God, the creator of the world, who was appeased through various names or spirits. According to Kharlukhi (2015) and Mawrie (1982), the different names given to the Supreme Being and the belief in nature spirits did not in any way mean that the Khasi were animistic or polytheistic. The authors explain that different aspects of life are reflected in the many names given to God. In the hierarchical framework they both present, spirits are part of the Supreme Being himself by extension, are inferior deities and should not be identified as God or considered equal to Him. God, however, reigns over both Nature and human beings. Natural phenomena like sunshine and rainfall are all sacred and seen as a manifestation of His power. (Nongbri, 2006). He also manifests Himself in the hills, streams, and forests (Khyriemmujat, 2013). God not only exercises the function of guardian of the universe, but also manifests in the form of "nature spirits" or protective forest (Kharlukhi, 2015). These spirits then represent aspects of God, similarly to Hindu divinities. Entities are governed by the command of God and act according to His will. Furthermore, these spirits have sometimes been deified as lesser gods and are then addressed as *Ki Blei* (the gods) (Khyriemmujat, 2013). In this perspective, the world is full of smaller gods (Mawrie, 1981). These lower entities are more important than the supreme God to understand Khasi witchcraft. All the major curses among the Khasi in Meghalaya are a manifestation of these smaller gods and bear their names. Ka *Taro*, *U Thlien* and Ka *Bih* are gods and goddesses. Even the Tyrut, the spirits of people who died violently, are sometimes considered by the Khasi to be the incarnation of the goddess of evil spirits. When praying to remove the influence of these deities, a person must emphasize that in casting evil, these gods and goddesses have transgressed the bounds of righteous behaviours (Mawrie, 1981). Some smaller devils are also considered to be gods. Fowl and chickens may be sacrificed to appease them. In *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Bareh contends that the Khasi traditional religion was, at the beginning, purely monotheistic. Over the centuries, the introduction of the worship of mountain and river spirits, cult fertility, veneration of ancestors, divination, and other elements polluted Khasi religion with animistic beliefs. Khasi religion, therefore, can no longer be considered to be "pure monotheistic" but is also "animistic" (Bareh, 1985; Kharlukhi, 2015). In fact, the Khasi supreme deity fits in what has been described in anthropology as an otiose god: " A

supreme god who established the order of the universe and is now remote from earthly concerns. As a result, otiose deities are usually almost ignored in favour of lesser gods who take an interest in the everyday affairs of humans″ (O'Neil, 2009).

Relationships with Supernatural Beings

Even today, the Khasi are sometimes considered animists. However, the spiritual world of the Khasi does not correspond to older conceptions of animism. The Khasi generally do not impute life or spirit to inert objects. Their animist ontology is more in tune with the definition of Descola (2014a) in that it focuses on the dynamic relationships between humans and non-humans through the interplay of interiority and exteriority (p. 222). In Khasi ontology, smaller gods and goddesses do not only have a relationship with God: they also have the possibility of interfering with the living. These interactions can be positive or negative but are generally not rewarding. When offended, malevolent spirits can cause a lot of suffering. Spirits come to the attention of the living when someone falls prey to them. For example, people know that *Taro* is present when a victim exhibits symptoms of possession. Even though the Khasi have a relationship with a supreme God, the creator of nature (Mawlong & Mitri, 2015), humans usually have a closer relationship with the smaller supernatural beings than with God, who is extraterrestrial and unreachable, except when people reach Heaven. The smaller gods and entities are part of the earth's ecosystem. While God belongs to the upper realm and does not share culture nor a point of view with humans, the smaller deities have a humanlike culture. There is one human culture but many natures, anchored in the physical differences between beings. These deities have human emotions, such as jealousy and anger. In the case of the Tyrut and other ghosts, they are nostalgic for a life that ended badly or violently. These spirits wish they were still alive, and when they possess human bodies, they will revert to what they were in life and what they enjoyed. I have shown in a previous chapter how Mary started to ask for tobacco to chew when she was possessed by a dead Khasi woman. She did not chew kwai when she was not possessed.

In classical and new animism, nature has humanlike agency. It is also the case of nature in Meghalaya. The Khasi do not see a clear distinction between themselves and the natural world. In fact, nature elements are alive and many of them (deities and ghosts, but also rivers and trees)

show a humanlike agency and the possibility of interacting with humans. Christianity may have impacted these relationships, which have evolved in other directions over time. However, even long-converted Christian families like the Diengdoh know the vast power of the natural world. It commands respect from humans. The gods dwell in the wilderness, outside of human settlements. They are, however, deeply involved in human affairs. When they are worshipped by families and clans, they may become dangerous. In exchange for wealth, these clans may cast the gods' influence on chosen persons and families to harm them. Human agents use the gods' dark energy to cause misfortune to others. They harness the power of the deity to do so. This power becomes a curse that bears the name of the deity.

The mechanisms behind major Khasi curses (influence of a god or entity on a human that will cause harm to another human) show that in Meghalaya this agency can manifest because the boundaries between the natural world (the jungle and all its living and nonliving elements) and the social world of humans are porous. Gods and other supernatural beings such as *puris* are held responsible for what can be described as cultural diseases. The animistic perspective of the Khasi, which survived urbanization and conversion to Christianity, is still widely expressed through these specific ailments identified by the names of gods. However, since Meghalaya is religiously diverse, the way the symptoms of curses are expressed, and the treatment sought may differ from one community to another. For example, the possession by a malevolent ghost among the traditional Khasi may be similar in appearance to Christian possession by the devil or a demon. However, victims will opt for corresponding healing choices. People seeking healing from Catholic priests will generally do so when they believe they are possessed by entities sanctioned by Christian dogma, such as the devil. However, in the case of Mary, the family knew that the answer laid in traditional Khasi culture and so they sought help from Kong Ro. They knew that the evil entity was not part of the Christian world. In this case, it would not have been useful to bring her to Father Jude. It is interesting to note, however, that Father Jude knew about the existence of *Taro* and *U Thlien* and was aware of dangerous Khasi curses.

The concept of animism, however, is not sufficient for understanding all aspects of Khasi religiosity. In some parts of Meghalaya, the guardian spirit of a sacred forest usually appears in the form of a tiger. The human custodians of these forests are the Lyngdoh, members of priestly

clan. Since they share a common responsibility, the tigers and the Lyngdoh have a special relationship. Members of the Lyngdoh clan are not permitted to eat tiger meat as it is considered taboo (Kharmawphlang, 2001). This is a clear sign of totemism, in which there is continuity between both interiority and physicality, across a wide array of beings (Descola, 2014a). The practices of some of these groups may also be categorized as shamanistic, since they are known to communicate with and transform into animals. In the Khasi hills, perspectivism can be applied to some relationships with non-humans but not to other relationships. Some Khasi groups in the Bhoi area of Meghalaya may also be characterized as perspectivists, since their ontology closely mirrors the world of animists explored by Viveiros De Castro in Amazonia. The entities living in close contacts with them may perceive themselves as humans, even if the humans see them as being of a different kind of body. I have already explained how the Supreme God reigns on the natural pantheon of the Khasi, while at the same time standing outside of it. He cannot be considered as being on the same level as the smaller entities. He created humans and non-humans, but it is quite difficult to describe Him. In contrast, smaller deities interact with humans face-to-face: it is even possible for fairies (*puris*) to fall in love with humans. *Puris* are usually beautiful female entities who ensnare men, although women also get possessed. A *puri* is always malignant and is believed to lead a human being to madness and death. If a person is truly enchanted by one they must die so their *Rngiew* can go to an alternate reality to be with their puri (Lyngdoh, 2018). The *puris* have a human appearance and can walk in the human world. Only practiced eyes will recognize them as non-humans. At the same time, their bodies possess different abilities: they can live in trees and rivers without danger.

Totemism and perspectivism, however, only seem to belong to remote Khasi communities. Most Khasi writers tend to place the Khasi traditional religion between animism and monotheism. For the traditional Khasi, a person shares the world with non-human persons. Their interiority is the same; only their exteriority is different. The gods, humans and other supernatural beings live in the same ontological dimension. They see the same world and are conscious of each other as different types of beings. They see the reality of their beings, even if the entities and the gods enjoy human culture, with speech and agency. I do not think, however, that Viveiros De Castro's perspectivism can be strictly applied here. I do not think that the Khasi entities always perceive

themselves as humans. Since they can do spiritual harm to people, they must be conscious of their power and the difference between them and humans.

These animist elements mimic the relational ontology found among indigenous people around the world. Pedersen gives the example of North Asian Animism in Mongolia, where Nature is a super-sociality that weaves together persons of all sorts, be they humans, animals, or spirit entities (Pedersen, 2001). Khasi animism is also visible when studying the relationships between the living and the dead. These relationships are not clear-cut after a person passes. Happiness in the afterlife is achieved if the spirit of the dead person is able to rejoin the ancestors and other deceased clan members (Lyngdoh, 2018). In daily life, there is a participative relationship between the living and the dead, between the human world and the animate and inanimate natural world. In Khasi ontology, the entire non-human world participates in the continuity or destruction of the clan. Since the advent of Christianity, this relationship may have changed, but it did not totally disappear. Both converted and non-converted Khasi develop relationships with a supreme God and with the Khasi traditional entities living in the jungle. Today, in Shillong, people work in offices, go to school, eat in restaurants, go shopping, etc. They live in a global world, surfing the internet on their phones and watching Hindi serials on TV at night. Despite this 21st-century lifestyle, the urban Khasi still manage to develop relationships with spiritual entities, even if they do not spend their time in the jungle. For example, according to recent urban tales, mythological dwarves have left their traditional abode of dales and streams and are now found in the streets of the town; a demonic dog, understood to be a manifestation of *U Thlien*, roams the streets of Shillong (Lyngdoh, 2012). These relationships are developed through the lineage, through tales of sickness and curses, and through the healing rituals of various faiths.

Lineage, Tales, and Personal Experience

I have shown in previous chapters how the Khasi society is still divided into clans. The Khasi follow the matrilineal system where lineage is traced from a primeval ancestress (*Iawbei*) (Lyngdoh, 2016a). Some of these clans are known for secretly worshipping *U Thlien* or to carry *Taro*. Worshipping any deity is a way of conserving a good relationship with the gods and goddesses of the jungle. In the case of *U Thlien*, the relationship acts both as a blessing and as a

curse. For the potential victims, the relationship is developed from childhood by the tales and warnings of adults. They are encouraged to do so through these narratives, even if it is based on fear. They are taught that certain Khasi individuals can be dangerous. Through the narratives of *U Thlien* and accounts of encounters and diseases, people build their knowledge of the dangers of the world. As potential victims, they are keenly aware that their matrilineal descent group is the key factor in their vulnerability. If their clans do not worship, they can become a victim of those who do. For the worshippers, the relationship is a blessed one. It confers wealth and protection against black magic. These relationships can also be built if a non-Khasi marries into a Khasi family. It is an inclusive world, where the outsider will be obligated to choose a new family name to integrate Khasi society. Hasina gave the example of her brother, who married a non-Khasi woman. A clan name was then created for her. A full array of new relationships emerges from entry into the new clan, not only with humans but also with non-human persons. Those who integrate clans that worship *U Thlien* will inherit the curse, or their children will.

In the same manner, new clan members develop a relationship with the family goddess, who is there to protect the family members and ensure their compliance in following the traditional rituals. Relationships with the clan goddess are present between the entities and both Christian and non-Christian Khasi. This relationship can have positive or negative impacts. When a family converts to Christianity or disrespect the goddess of the house by forgetting to honour her correctly, she may get angry and make them suffer. As I have explained earlier, the great-grandmother of the Diengdoh clan renounced her clan's name to be protected from hereditary curses. The goddess of the clan then became angry since this was considered a betrayal of the family. In return, she cursed all its members, starting with the mother as I explained before. She is still an angry presence, sending curses to people and even destroying the Christian objects in the house. She can cause diseases and spread misfortune. The relationship between members of a clan and its goddess is then an ambivalent relationship, bringing both blessings and hardships.

This relationship does not stop with conversion. Most people in Meghalaya are Christian. Officially, they are not recognized as following the traditional Khasi religion. In the case of the Diengdoh family, they are strong Catholic believers. They have been told many times by Catholic priests and healers to stop attending non-Christian healing rituals, since it may be causing harm to

their family. Despite their conversion many generations ago to Christianity, the house goddess still recognizes the family as a traditional Khasi family. Christianity is not obstacle for her to protect or harm them. According to one of the brothers, Hindu gods can also be angry about the conversion of a family to Christianity:

> People, they were Hindus they were the Dravidians. So, my father they were Hindus, and they come from the families of kings who perform rituals Hindu rituals, they had a separate room and a temple in their house, they were kind of like Rajputs, and later they got converted into Christianity, so even from my father's side the gods were fighting.

The conversion of the family of the father to Christianity also caused the patrilineal god to become angry. The situation then gets even more complex. The Diengdoh were originally Hindu or practiced a tribal religion. Over time, both sides of the family converted to Christianity. However, on the mother's side, family members maintained a relationship with these other gods, who are still angry at them for their transgressions.

Gods and entities make humans suffer in two ways. First, they can harm them directly. Sometimes they do have good reasons to do so. The Khasi believe that while God created human beings, he also commanded them to follow a path of righteousness in this world (Khyriemmujat, 2013). God never tolerates any act of deviation from this path and brings suffering and misfortune to the deviant. When such things happen, it is up to the person to find out what she or he did wrong to make amend and seek the forgiveness from God. The reason could be discovered out by performing the sacrifice of a chicken (considered as mediator) or breaking an egg (Khyriemmujat, 2013). Gods and other supernatural beings can also use their influence to do their bad deeds by enticing humans to harm others. This relationship is often hidden from the human perpetrator himself, as he or she may not know she carries a curse. It is sometimes the case with *Taro*. Some people send *Taro* unknowingly when they feel jealous or angry.

Lineage and religion cannot fully explain the cultural transmission of relationships between entities and humans. Some entities such as *U Thlien* and *Taro* are only transmitted through specific Khasi clans. However, it seemed that the Khasi and even non-Khasi have developed relationships with these powerful entities (including gods, ghosts, and other supernatural beings). These bonds are found among people in the countryside and in urban settings. I suggest that people who do not

belong to specific carrying clans develop relationships with these entities through tales of sickness and curses. They learn about Thlien from their parents and family. Furthermore, the power of these entities usually becomes known through human experience. Some people start believing in them and the Khasi curses only when extraordinary events happen directly to them. For example, Father Francis became convinced of the existence of *U Thlien* in the summer of 1991. He was working as a teacher in Marbisu in the Khasi hills. Only a few boys were staying at the school dormitory during the vacation period. A strange man entered the room of the boys at night and started to touch them, but they were able to stop him and capture him.

> That fellow came, he began to touch the boys and all from the face and this and that, and the boys woke up and they found this fellow, and he is not a very strong man, weak man like that, and then the boys: Catch him! Catch him! And then instead of going down to the steps down there, to the ground floor, he entered another room and they caught him there. They tied him up and then I asked him, *Who sent you here?* He said he belongs to a certain family, he tried to do a job for a family in Mawkyrwat, so he stopped in the main road and then he came to our area and then climbed up to the hostel like that. *What do you have in your bag?* It was a dirty bag. He had a knife, an empty bottle, and also scissors. He will take that blood and then put it in the bottle and then he will go to that family to the owner and give that, and then the owner will give him the money. I called the local leader, and then they took him to the police station. The police there they said, *Oh, this fellow has come so many times, people caught him, and he had come here so many times.* They asked, *Why you act like that?* Because I want money, Nga kwah pisa. So, he must get blood to give to that owner and then that owner will give him money, two thousand rupees, three thousand rupees.

This man needed to bring back human blood to the owner to get money in exchange. This form of evil is easily understood and diagnosed. The cause can be pinpointed because of shared cultural codes that assign specific symptoms and behaviours to well-known curses. If one gets sick because of curses, through the power of a god, there is always a remedy for it. Healers can treat these ailments easily. Sickness from unknown forces is more dangerous. These are mobilized by humans in black magic rituals. All the agents in these rituals are humans, even the death rituals, as mentioned in the story of Mary in Chapter 4, who was possessed by the spirit of a dead pregnant woman.

Experiencing *U Thlien* directly is not the only way of developing a relationship with him. Even if she was friends with the son of her neighbours, one Khasi woman I met was warned not to venture into their house since they were suspected of being *menshohnoh.* Another participant heard many

stories about *U Thlien* while growing up. Her mother used to tell her stories about *U Thlien* and the people who keep him in their home. She never experienced it herself, though. She feels, however, that *U Thlien* may be dying, since he decimated all the Khasi clans that were worshipping him.

> They have seen things like many years, especially when I was much younger, that that family has Thlien. You know why? Look at the rituals they have overnight. Look at the rituals they have brought about. Then look at the family because they could not make *U Thlien* happy, so all the rituals have died. There are always deaths happening one after the other in the family because the snake was eating the family members, because they could not give an outsiders' blood.

This is what she grew up hearing and observing. *U Thlien* was very present in her life until she went to college. Lineage, tales, and direct and non-direct experience of curses stemming of supernatural entities create a world within which witchcraft is a reality. There is fear in this world since it is full of invisible energies and intentions that can harm without notices. Religious allegiance however can remove these fears by offering explanations and solutions through healing.

Religious Allegiance

Religious allegiance and the exact nature of relationships maintained with supernatural entities by the Khasi may at first glance seem confusing. How can one be a Christian and at the same time refer to the goddess of the house as an entity protecting the family? There are no evident conflicts in this Khasi discourse. This explains why anger on the part of the goddess of the house seems to confuse the converted Khasi. They do not understand this rage since they keep a balance between Christianity and the traditional spiritual world by compartmentalizing them according to their importance at any given moment. These moments are classified according to religious allegiance. For Christians, religious allegiance is kept to the Christian God. He is the one defining belonging and affiliation. Traditional Khasi follow the steps of their ancestors by worshipping one supreme God and many smaller deities. This allegiance defines in which world the Khasi live, either the Christian or traditional one. They follow Christian religious feasts or traditional festivals.

Theoretically, these two sets of belongings will also determine with which supernatural entities the Khasi can develop a relationship. In Christianity, there is only one God. The Bible acknowledges the existence of the devil and the angels. In Khasi traditional religion, both God and other supernatural entities exist. Humans may have a spiritual relationship with God and an actual

physical relationship with the entities. According to legends, some men, and women even married water *puri* and moved to the waters of rivers and lakes to live with them. My fieldwork among the Khasi revealed that even converted Khasi may keep thriving relationships, positive or negative, with pre-Christian entities. These Khasi are then recognized by God and by the goddess of the house. Conversion to Christianity has not changed the nature of the people seen by and interacting with the entity. My hypothesis is that the core of the Khasi person in Meghalaya has stayed the same. Despite adopting Christian names, rituals and faith, the Khasi have maintained their former ontological selves. Their nature has not changed, and the goddess is still able to recognize and claim them as her own. They frequently cross between the two ontological worlds of the animists and the Christians, but the self and the construction of the person does not change. Even if they transform when they move from another ontological world to another, they carry a fragment of each world. Sometimes the fragment of Christianity vanishes quite quickly, such as when the Khasi visit traditional healers. Sometimes they receive warnings about crossing from one world to another and will stop such visits for a short while.

Their faith in both worlds is such that it cannot be called syncretism. There are not just Christians with some animistic beliefs, or animists with some taint of Christianity in their rituals. Conversion has changed the nature of the world for them, making it a dualistic place that they mostly navigate with ease. They have not moved from one world to another forever. They travel quite expertly between the two, even if sometimes the deities become angry because of this nomadism. Christian and animist ontologies co-exist in the Khasi world. However, they are rarely invoked at the same time and in the same space. In traditional healing, no mention is made of Christianity during rituals. Even when the one God is mentioned, it is not a defining sign of monotheism. The Khasi believed in one God even before colonization. Converted Khasi are thus both Christians and animists.

Nevertheless, I was able to notice that converted Khasi approach to traditional spirituality may not have been religious at all. When I followed a converted family around, I was not always convinced that we were accomplishing religious rituals. The family was pursuing healing and paying to get relief from painful physical symptoms and even more painful memories. They were not participating in public demonstrations of religion and spirituality, such as funerals or wakes. People waiting in line at the clinics of the Nongknia were not visiting the healer to participate in a

ritual. They were seeking answers and relatively quick relief for their problems. Considering this, I would be reluctant to identify healing with religion in Shillong and beyond.

Relationships and Construction of Personhood

Relationships with entities are built through specific Khasi lineages, tales, and personal experiences. These relationships are possible because of the way personhood is constructed. At the same time these relationships influence the components of the person. Among the Khasi, the definition of a human being differs from the common Western idea, where a person is considered an amalgam of body and soul. For the Khasi, there is a third component called *Ka Rngiew*. No one is completely human without *Ka Met* (the body), *Ka Mynsiem* (the soul) and *Ka Rngiew*. *Ka Rngiew* is a power which shapes and determines most of the actions of a person, thoughts, and motivations. The supernatural powers of some humans are associated with it (Kharmawphlang, 2001). *Ka Rngiew* is the most sacred part of a human being which renders a person invulnerable and impervious to the evil eye of others, allowing him or her to overcome misfortunes and succeed (Lyngdoh, 2016a). It can traverse multiple realities. Non-human entities like guardian deities (*Ryngkew* in Khasi) also have a *Rngiew*. Female tiger women (*khruk*), have two *Rngiew*, one that lives in the animal form of the small tiger and one inside the human body. If the personality of a person, her spirit, essence, strength of character, nature, principles, moral fortitude, etc. are in line with Khasi values, then her *Rngiew* is strong and protects her from harm and evil (Lyngdoh, 2018). The three parts of a human being can be affected by relationships with entities. Nevertheless, without the *Rngiew,* it would be difficult for the entities to recruit humans to cause harm to others, or to harm humans themselves. Most supernatural activities happen at this level of Khasi personhood.

The Khasi have both an individual and a relational definition of the person. It is constituted individually of the three parts mentioned above: the body, the soul, and the vital energy of *Ka Rngiew*. Khasi personhood is also built through the belonging to a clan and relationships with different levels of its structure. First, all members of a clan are descendants of one common ancestress (Pakyntein, 2010). The essence of a person was given to them originally by this ancestress, that may have been deified after death. She may have become a river or another sacred

element of the jungle. In this perspective, it is possible to affirm that every Khasi belongs to nature and is part of the sacred.

As they are a tribal indigenous people, personhood among the Khasi is also constructed differently than in mainland India. According to Dumont, the mainland Indian person is a *homo hierarchicus*. An Indian traditionally experience hierarchy in different aspects of daily social life: castes, division of labor, marriage, sharing of food, etc. The person defines herself/himself in relation to others who are of higher or lower status (Dumont, 1966; Robinson, 2014). The mainstream Indian person has been defined as a "dividual," a composite of transferable substances (Marriott & Inden, 1977; Robinson, 2014). Busby, however, denies the fact that Indians are partible persons. She compared the Indian dividual to the Melanesian person for whose analysis the notion of the dividual was borrowed (Strathern, 1990). She calls the Indian person a permeable person rather than a partible person as in the Melanesian case. The Indian person is a bodily whole with the skin as its boundaries. The exchange of substances between people creates relationships rather than, as in the Melanesian case, persons (Busby, 1997; Robinson, 2014).

I have shown that a traditional Khasi person consists of three parts and is partly defined by its relationships with a vast array of entities. This construction, however, has been affected by the mass conversion to Christianity. It has changed the Khasi person and created an ideological barrier between nature and humans. This barrier, however, is constantly transgressed by even the most resolute converts. Sickness and misfortune reanimate these dormant relationships. Christianity encourages the building of an individual and not a dividual person. Persons are then defined by their interiority and not by the relations they create in their lives. In this case, however, the conversion to Christianity has created a person situated between the animist of the past and the Christian of today. People may express their identity in a Western, globalized fashion. Their animist persona, however, may still emerge frequently. Relationships with deities and entities are still maintained and feared. Exchanges between them and humans are built through stories, narratives, and corporal affects. Once entities have crossed the lines and have caused harm and misfortune to humans, these relationships are moderated by healers to ensure that the conflict does not end in the death of the human. Curses and witchcraft reinforce these relationships and bring them back into the lives of Christian Khasi. Even mass conversion has not been able to erase these

positive and negative influences from the social sphere in Meghalaya. Sociability between humans and non-humans still exists and is expressed through witchcraft and healing.

Relationships and Witchcraft

I have described in detail in previous chapters the functioning of Khasi witchcraft. Due to its widespread distribution, witchcraft has become a staple topic in anthropological research. In his classical study of the Azande of colonial Sudan, Evans-Pritchard (1937) distinguished between "witchcraft" and "sorcery" according to their techniques. He defined the former as the innate, inherited ability to cause misfortune or death. By contrast, he referred to sorcery as the performance of rituals, the uttering of spells, and the manipulation of organic substances such as herbs, with the conscious intent of causing harm. Unlike the case of witchcraft, individuals can learn to practice sorcery. It seems quite evident that some of the Khasi curses belong to witchcraft and others to sorcery. *U Thlien*, for example, is a practice related to sorcery. Clans manipulate spells and organic substances to cause harm. In contrast, *Taro* is closer to witchcraft, since it involves people using subconscious powers to bring death or misfortune to others. As I have shown in the discourse of the Khasi informants, sometimes both sorcery and witchcraft are involved in the same process, such as when *Taro* is given voluntarily through food to a victim. Nonetheless, some Khasi curses do not belong to either of these categories. These curses are cast by gods and spirits aiming to harm the intruder in their forest or the family who has disavowed them. It is then necessary to define Khasi witchcraft from the perspective of the Khasi themselves. During my time in the field, the term witchcraft and black magic was always used in English conversation to communicate with me. A good number of Khasi are fluent in English and may have borrowed the English vocabulary to describe the number of curses going around. I feel, however, that a Khasi definition of witchcraft should be elaborated, since many of its elements do not fit the Western definition of the phenomenon.

The practice of witchcraft and sorcery and their effects are the starting point to the search for a Khasi definition. In Meghalaya, there are three types of curses. There are curses originating from the natural world, cast by unhappy forest dwellers such as gods and entities. I will call them the natural curses: someone may be harmed by natural elements with a non-human person agency. Traditional healers may treat those. There are also curses such as *U Thlien*, *Taro* and *Bih*, who

have received the names of gods and goddesses but are put in place by human agents. Furthermore, there are also bindings done by sorcerers through black magic practices. These three types of curses entail binding dark forces to a human being to cause him harm. However, it is difficult to regroup them in one overarching concept. These categories of curses do not belong to the same system and are not related even in discourse. Furthermore, the word witchcraft does not seem to exist in Khasi. In Khasi, curses are simply named, and each has a specific cause and treatment. Even if some of these curses are related in the mythological sense (*U Thlien* being the brother of the goddess *Taro*), they do not form a cohesive whole and cannot be integrated in one conceptual framework. There may be an explanation behind this division. For example, traditionally, the only way to treat Thlien was to go to the Syiem kings for healing (see previous chapters). The burning of a strand of hair from an afflicted person would chase the evil away. *Taro* is of Jaintia origin and has also been treated by Khasi healers, but it was not part of a previous local ontology among the Khasi. I propose the term *binding of evil* instead of witchcraft. It groups all the manipulation of energy with the intention of doing harm in one category. It is also a better translation of the Khasi terminology, which defines them as *Ksuid* (evil). Binding would refer here to curses, the evil ties between a human and an evil force. This binding sometimes emerges from the relationships mentioned above. Through these relationships, both humans and entities have obligations. The people in a relationship with an entity such as the goddess of the house have to respect and honour her as requested by the traditional Khasi religion. If they neglect to do so, she may harm them and their family. When these relationships go sour, binding will become harmful and will cause what has been called witchcraft or sorcery.

By becoming the victim of a curse, a person continues within the parameters of the relationship that she or he has developed with the evil entities since her birth. I have demonstrated earlier how people forge a relationship of fear and suspicion with the gods, goddesses, and entities responsible for so much harm in the Khasi world. This leads them eventually to the only possible outcome: becoming cursed themselves. I argue that this binding starts taking place well before the fateful symptoms of illness or misfortune. The binding starts with stories and warnings in early childhood. The rope around potential victims become a real threat as people age and integrate Khasi cultural norms and values. When a young child is cursed, he or she is diagnosed by his parents or entourage. However, adults can self-diagnose and recognize the events that may have led them to harm. They

will identify the moment they became tied to a curse. To do so, they will have integrated the shared narratives of the malediction and Khasi values. Without acknowledging these values, it would be difficult to understand where curses come from. *U Thlien*, *Taro* and *Bih* have been associated with greed and jealousy. The narrative serves as a moral sanction against economic exploitation and the accumulation of wealth and property (Nongbri, 2006). In a tribal society, these are frowned upon and discouraged. In cases where people may have transgressed the rules of the jungle deities, e.g., by smoking or littering in a sacred grove, they will be able to identify this transgression by themselves or it will be pointed out by the healer. The transgression will consolidate the intangible relationship into one that has a physical potential in the world. The healer will need to unbind this relationship in order to transform it again in a harmless story. Fear, however, cannot be forgotten.

Healers then have a responsibility towards victims to establish dominance over the entities. They must be strong enough to unbind the victim from the curse without becoming themselves victims to evil. Through their intercession, they establish communication with different entities. The King prays the supreme god while burning the hair of the victim of *U Thlien*. He asks the Divine to help him unbind the curse and the person. Traditional Seng Khasi healers will unbind curses caused by fighting and family issues. Kong Ro addresses the gods to ask for their help. Despite not addressing the cursing entities themselves, healers may feel their anger and their resentment if they are not careful. The gods and goddesses will be the force behind the healing from a curse, since they need to agree to this unbinding. However, the humanity of the healer makes him or her vulnerable to retaliation from evil forces. In some cases, the relationships of healers with dark entities are murky. Some of them may play a double role and may also be asked to send curses to people. This role is not publicized and is kept secret. They become the absent sorcerer. With the numbers of curses being cast in Meghalaya, one cannot doubt that some people are hired to cast curses and accomplish black magic rituals for clients. Since healers develop a relationship with gods, customers and evil entities, they are the best placed to know how to play with dark forces. Nonetheless, these sorcerers can easily become the victims of all three. The gods may take offence at their actions and punish them. In the case of *U Thlien*, some people accused of worshipping the snake have met a cruel fate at the hands of angry mobs. *U Thlien* may also punish them if they do not provide him with enough blood. Eventually sorcerers will succumb to their own curses, since healers are said to be able to send back the malediction to the original owners.

Part 2: Witchcraft and Healing: A Contemporary Ecosystem of Evil

In this section, I will show how witchcraft and healing interact with each other to form an ecosystem of evil. An ecosystem is a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. The biological elements in this ecosystem of evil are the visible humans, the invisible humans, and the entities. In this system, the visible humans are the victims, the healers and the people gravitating around them. The entourage of a victim may be considered as the validator of the whole ecosystem. Family members and friends will provide cultural explanations for the victims as will the healers. These people can be seen, and their physical presence is the proof of their existence. The non-visible humans are the sorcerers and black magic practitioners. They may be the street vendor selling poisoned kwai to innocent customers; the lovely lady at the Kong shop who feeds you rice and chicken; or even someone in your own family. They have all the appearances of people who could be the potential victims of witchcraft themselves. However, in their invisible role, they are the sorcerers who are making the state of Meghalaya such a dangerous place. Anybody can be a sorcerer and become responsible for curses flying around. It does not mean that everybody is sending curses on purpose. The invisible sorcerer may have no awareness of the misfortune he or she has sent in your direction. Jealousy, envy or even lust can be sent as a curse to someone unknowingly. They are then invisible to themselves and to their victims.

I called these interactions an ecosystem because evil binding and healing complete each other. People would die without traditional healing. Traditional healing survives because of the existence of witchcraft since doctors are unable to treat these diseases. Without spiritual healers, many diseases would not be treatable. Furthermore, this ecosystem is porous and easily adapts to new elements. People of different faiths and ethnicity have developed a common understanding about the origin of diseases. These interpretations first emerged in Khasi precolonial culture. They explained why some people would be susceptible to be cursed and not others. Despite traditional religion being animist and Christianity being a monotheist faith, diseases and healing explanations share common elements of interpretation. One resemblance between Christianity and Khasi

traditional religion is the idea that discord, sins, and immoral behaviour can lead to sickness. In the following section, I will look at the different interpretations of sickness in Meghalaya.

Interpretation of Sickness Among Traditional Khasi

Before colonization, their traditional religion was shared by Khasi across different kingdoms. Rituals, however, were family-oriented and private. Religious office and power were held by specific family members and Khasi traditional religion did not have an elaborate structure. For example, the *Khatduh*, the youngest daughter, was the keeper of religion. She arranged the necessary elements for the family rituals and her brother or maternal uncle served as a priest, who actually performed all the rituals, including sacrifices and prayers (Kharlukhi, 2015; Snaitang, 1993). Even today, Khasi traditional religion is strongly oriented in favour of family rituals. One member of the Seng Khasi organization explained:

> Our church is at home. Mother, father, and uncle they have the temple at home. This is Seng Khasi, this is not a church, this is not the church, Seng Khasi we unite and then assemble to say it's the teachings of the residents. It's like institutions, its institutions that when we find God we find at home, mother, father, and uncle, and all the children just sit together.

Traditionally, religion was then a set of practices maintained to keep good relationships with the divine. The positive nature of these relationships was also maintained by people exhibiting good moral behaviour. By respecting the principles of God and respecting nature, people could expect to live harmonious lives and keep sickness away. Today, Khasi traditional religion has been reimagined. Large public rituals are organized by the Seng Khasi and by royalty. Despite the emergence of these public rituals, healing has remained a private affair. This may be linked to the good moral behaviour attributed to healthy Khasi. People may be afraid to become the target of gossip if their entourage learn of their problems. Traditional Khasi believe that calm and peace can help in remaining healthy (Syiem, 2010). Family discord can then lead to sickness and diseases. In such a case, a traditional healer is needed to identify the problem and intercede with the gods to fix the issue. Family members are also encouraged to fix the problem among themselves.

Reasons other than family fighting may lead to sickness. In an ideal world, the commandments guiding a righteous life should ensure health and wealth and strengthen *Ka Rngiew*. Someone with

straight morals may never fall sick, even if targeted by curses. According to Kong Rynjah, a leading Khasi intellectual, strong people should not fear them: nobody will be able to cast evil towards them. Furthermore, traditional Khasi should not be afraid of curses since they can ask for divine intervention. As she explained:

> You go to the forest, you call, will not be afraid of anything, because he's there, God is everywhere. That is why tradition Khasi people don't have any church, they do not have places of worship, anywhere, everywhere we are it is a place of worship. It is a place where we call for God's guidance. If we feel something, we call for his guidance, his divine guidance which we cannot see, but I can feel it.

Leading an immoral lifestyle can also lead to sickness and misfortune. People selling alcohol may become ill because they are responsible for spoiling the lives of their customers. Poorer people may succumb to greed and start worshipping entities. They may also fall sick if they did not pay back a debt and feel guilty about it. Evil then is first born out of the darkness of the human soul. According to this interpretation, its weakness makes people vulnerable to become both a practitioner and a victim of witchcraft. Diseases are caused by social evils, such as jealousy, greed, and bad habits.

This weakness makes people vulnerable to witchcraft, through the intervention of supernatural entities. Disease is also attributed to the jealousy or anger of non-human supernatural creatures and human ghosts. These entities operate in two ways: they may punish humans and make them fall sick by attacking a person directly, or they can also seduce humans to be worshipped by him or her. The worshipper will then need to send curses or even murder to the chosen victim. This will be done in the name of greed, since some gods such as *Taro* and *U Thlien* bless their worshippers with wealth and good fortune. Disrespecting nature can also lead to sickness. Humans can be affected if they perform forbidden acts in sacred places or if they offend the guardian spirits of the jungles and the rivers. The third way of being affected by spiritual entities is when sickness is caused by human souls who suffered a terrible death. People who have committed suicide or died in accidents may not be in peace after their passing. They loiter around their former house and continue to haunt it. They bind themselves to the occupying family and bring bad luck and illness to the living.

Interpretation of Sickness Among Christian Khasi

Non-healers from the traditional and Christian worlds share a similar interpretation regarding the origin of sicknesses and diseases. However, Christians are torn between the ontological explanations provided by biomedicine, those of Christianity, and those of traditional culture. Quite similarly to their consulting clients, faith healers mostly recognize that some symptoms are caused by physical and psychological ailments and not by spiritual disease. However, they feel that the distinction between disease caused by mental illness and those resulting from curses is quite difficult to make. Even during the same event, opinions may diverge on the cause of disease. One day, Sister Agatha visited a girl[20] who had fits and was kicking everyone trying to touch her. The old Catholic priest tending to her thought it was a psychological disease, but Sister Agatha knew it was not:

> How I differentiate a person; for example, a possessed person from a psychologically affected person: a psychologically affected person will never be afraid of you, she will talk to you normally, she speaks to you and nothing happens, you say pray, let us pray, and she prays but she will not react to any of these sacramental ideas? No reaction towards what is sacramental.

She still feels, however, that it is difficult to make a distinction between spiritual, psychological, and physical illness. At one time, she was called to attend to another girl who people thought was possessed, but who had in fact worms in her brain! The tribal Christian healers like Agatha follow the same classification of diseases as do other tribal people. The vows they have taken to become monks, priests or nuns have not changed all their ontological views regarding diseases and sickness. They may attribute some symptoms to a lack of faith in God or a diminished love of God; people can also become sick if their relationship with God and Jesus is not strong enough or, worse, absent. God sometimes puts diseases in people because they are running away from Him. While trying to find comfort and healing, they will seek to mend their relationship with Him. In sum, maintaining a good relationship with God is important to stay healthy. Christianity is not only a way of fighting evil, but also of avoiding sickness. Once someone is sick, they must make the right choices in order not to worsen their situation. If people do not sin anymore after falling sick, they

[20] See full story in Appendix 1.1.

will recover. Even in the case of physical disease, certain people will not get healed by doctors unless and until they come to God. According to Bah Nongstoing, a Protestant pastor:

> Even as they sit maybe in the church, even in the house everywhere, we could recognize that they are in bondage, you know chained, they are bound to so many problems so therefore they are not free. That's why Jesus said when the Son of God, when the Son set you free you will be free; indeed, only when we have a close relationship with Jesus can heal us; healing of the soul is very important.

God is not the only Christian figure who can make people fall sick. Satan and demons can also cause diseases. If this is the case, the doctors cannot help the victims. Tribal Christian faith healers believe in the power of God, but they also openly recognize the existence of local curses and witchcraft practices. This mixing of ontological views is seen in cases of possession. It is a common theme in the ecosystem of evil. Though it may have different causes, it is treatable by healers of all faiths and ethnicities.

Faith Healing and Biomedicine

Christian faith healers and their clients recognize the existence of viruses and bacteria and their possible impact on health. In the contemporary Khasi hills, biomedicine has become as important as traditional medicine. The Khasi often consult a doctor in a clinic or hospital before visiting a healer. However, when biomedicine fails, the family of a sick person may start suspecting spiritual wrongdoing. They may then turn to traditional medicine and seek the help of a variety of practitioners until a cure is found. Traditional healing is highly important for treating these diseases, as they need culturally appropriate responses. According to Kong Rynjah:

> When something like this happens in a family or when certain illnesses or certain events happen, that is how you cope with it. Whether you go for this medical science, the power of healing with them or side by side, you have to do your own traditional ways. Because you know that in your modern science they say, there are no effects without a cause.

It often happens that, at the first onset of symptoms, the disease is self-diagnosed as a curse. People will go directly to a traditional healer if they suspect that their symptoms are linked to witchcraft. A Khasi woman explained:

> If I'm sick like having diarrhea and all, I'll just go to the doctor, but if I feel that there is something which is not right, we Khasi believe that we need to pray. To make your soul, your spirit strong, you need to go to somebody who can do the puja for you. Other sickness like diarrhea, we don't go but yes there are some like you know when we were small, my mother used to take us to these people who used to do puja.

Christian Khasi seeking healing will go on a therapeutic quest that may take them to healers of various faiths and genders. Many healers recognize that people should visit the appropriate type of healer, as long as it is not spiritual healing. For example, Christian tribal healers do not shun herbal healers of different faiths. They consider these healers as being able to offer help for specific physical diseases. According to Sister Agatha:

> For different types of sicknesses, different types of illness people go to the healers… So, it differs on what type of sickness you are having, so we should also find out the proper doctor the proper healer for me, with regard to my particular sickness. There is no generalization for this healing process.

They also consider different options for their own health. If he is sick, Father Leo will pray first before going to the doctor. He used to have migraines, and doctors were never able to cure his suffering. As he was preaching one day, his symptoms disappeared and never came back. He also lost his voice and found it again through prayers and trust in God:

> Then I when went to America for mission preaching because the whole day I must preach, one after another, non-stop, maybe five six Masses especially on a Sunday. Then I lost my voice completely. I could not speak anymore when I came back. When I went to the doctor, the doctor asked me: Father, this is finished for you, you will never be able to speak anymore, you must go for the operation. I trust in God, I pray then, I take some medicines that the sisters are giving me. I don't stop preaching, I go on preaching.

For the traditional Khasi, since physical illness can be caused by a spiritual curse or wrongdoing, healing must be done through divine intervention, besides medication and other healing aids.

During her lifetime, Fatiha[21] was the victim of at least two major evil curses. Both times, she visited the hospital and then a traditional healer. A few years ago, somebody left live fish on the doorstep of her office. She saw the fish were still moving, despite being out of water for an unknown period time. At that moment she never thought that it was part of an evil plan against

[21] Pseudonym.

her. She stepped over the fish and went to work. She fell ill after a few days. She was hospitalized for almost a month and doctors could not do much for her. Then Fatiha went to a traditional healer, who reminded her about the live fish. The healer was able to discover the truth about the fish by reading her deck of cards. Fatiha got better, but people wishing her harm continued to cast curses in her direction. She was cursed a second time, during my fieldwork in Shillong in 2016. She fell ill and went to the hospital. The doctors gave her painkillers but could not find the source of her symptoms. She was getting bigger and bigger rashes all over her body, but the medical tests did not detect anything wrong. She started to wonder if she was again the victim of a curse. She went to the same healer, who said that it was not a curse, but a case of black magic. The healer indicated that somebody was trying to make her less functional, since there was a lot of jealousy about the growth of her career in the NGO sector. The healer performed one ritual; then Seng Khasi healers came to orchestrate a rite for prosperity on behalf of her health. The Seng Khasi priest again said that it was black magic, and it had nothing to do with *U Thlien* or *Taro*. This story shows that biomedicine is the first choice for obvious physical symptoms among the educated middle-class. Nevertheless, in the cases when modern medicine cannot provide a solution to their suffering, faith will then guide them in their next therapeutic choice.

Interpretation of Disease Among Non-Tribal Faith Healers

Non-tribal faith healers are less likely to attribute disease to curse and witchcraft. Since they share the same faith, their holistic approach to sickness is similar to the one of the tribal faith healers. According to the priests in the Healing Centre in Umroï, the lack of love for God and committing sins may be the cause of sickness. People may also fall sick if they worship the devil. Not all diseases, however, are caused by spiritual weakness and curses. In the view of Father Jude, repressed feelings and rejections can create diseases: rejection leads to addiction and then sickness. Falling sick can also be your own fault:

> Because you see now you go to malaria-prone areas, and you don't use mosquito nets. Now any emotions that are coming to you cause negative emotions. And it can appear in different ways maybe through the body it can be sickness. Or in the mind it can become disorder or depression.

These faith healers of Kerala have also partly adopted the local curses into their framework despite their non-tribal origin. Since witchcraft is widespread in India, religious from the south of the country did not find it difficult to adopt local explanations for sickness and misfortune. It is not only traditional Khasi who believe in the harm caused by dark forces. I found that even Catholic priests and nuns as well as lay Christians of deep religious conviction believed that evil spirits could harm people physically and cause diseases and ailments. Father Jude is convinced that witchcraft exists. He gave a few examples, such as a curse involving a kind of pork commonly found in the Khasi hills. The meat is taken to a witch, who then casts a spell on it. It is then thrown on the doorstep of someone to curse him and not even dogs will touch it. This curse can also be cast with eggs and rice. Father Francis told this story about the origin of spiritual sickness:

> One lady came today. I went to her village last year to bless a marriage. The mother said, *Father, my girl is very sick, just come and pray, what kind of sickness we don't know. She went to wash clothes in the river and when she came back, she was unconscious.* In the village, there are many rivers where there are these devils. I did not believe that it is like that, but I saw her weak and then when I went to pray, and she became unconscious. I took holy water that I threw on her face two, three times, then I said, *In the name of Jesus Christ, if there is a devil, I chase you, devil, I tie you and throw you at the feet of Jesus, and Jesus will do whatever he wants with you*. And then I knock, I knock at this girl you know. *I knock in the name of Jesus. Please be healthy*. And then she opened her eyes. *Do you recognize me*? Sometime those who have got the devil… They will cheat you know. The devil is a cheater. She said, *Yes. Who am I? Tell me the truth. I know you are a father, no… You are lying, do you know that I'm really a father*? Then she turned a little, she turned a little more, then I gave a slap, two-three times. Then, thank God, afterward she became all right.

This example shows that healers of tribal origin do not see a contradiction between their faith and the traditional ontological world. These healers acknowledge both the power of God to cause disease and the curses cause by jungle entities. Tribal faith healers also mix ontological interpretations in delivering treatments. As the example above show, Father Francis performed a Christian exorcism for a victim of a Khasi traditional curse. Furthermore, as a Catholic healer, Fatima does not see any conflict between her Christian faith and the existence of spirits able to possess and create sickness in human beings. She happily and successfully mixes the two interpretations and treats people possessed by these entities. Once she chases them off, these spirits go back to their native habitat in the jungle or the rivers. However, this ecosystem does not include

everyone in Meghalaya. In other parts of the state, in the Garo hills for example, Christians do not mix ontologies while seeking treatments. Maaker (2009) explains about the converted Garo:

> Garo Christians do not have recourse to animist rituals and have to use alternative means for diagnosis and treatment. Allopathy is explicitly associated with the Christian realm (animists tend to refer to it as "Jesuni sam," "medicines of Jesus"), but no one believes that it can offer a remedy for the illness caused by skals (witches). For Christians, the preferred measure to counteract skals is prayer, particularly in the forms of collective prayer meetings (p. 151).

It would be premature to presume that all Christian tribal groups in Meghalaya except for the Khasi choose prayers over traditional healers. However, I have observed that the Catholic Khasi were more open to such practices. Khasi and tribal friends from other Christian confessions seemed less prone to discuss and use tribal healing.

My analysis, inspired by ontological anthropology, shows how the Khasi have constructed their relationships with supernatural beings. Their animist persona allows the Christians to continue to navigate their relationships with these beings. It also allows them to be cursed, since lineage, storytelling and personal experiences prepare their body and minds for such an occurrence. I suggest that shared interpretations among different religious and ethnic communities ensure the survival of an ecosystem of evil in Meghalaya. Since people perceive diseases in the same light, curses are shared across identity boundaries.

Another interpretation is that clients of healers and the healers themselves may have divergent opinions about the healing process. I have already cast doubts about relationship between religion and healing among the laity in Meghalaya. For the healers, the line between faith and healing is more difficult to trace. Christian faith healers, both of tribal and non-tribal origin, have implied during the research that faith in Jesus and God lead to physical and spiritual healing: they are the source of healing. The healer is just a body through which the curative energy is circulating: the power of healing comes from the sacred rituals of the Eucharist and confession (as the sacrament of reconciliation, confession chases away the devil completely). Faith healers can use other powerful tools as well to heal the sick with the help of God, such as the rosary, holy water, and blessed palm leaves. During the healing Mass, the priests anoint people with oil since it is prescribed in the Bible. They also practice the laying on of hands. When they do, they may

experience visions, what Father Philip calls: "… going into supernatural dimensions." These tools and rituals are not reserved for healing Christians in the Khasi hills. I observed a contradiction in the discourse of the different faith healers. They mostly pointed out that, to heal, people must also have faith. However, though faith healers do not trust traditional and other healers for spiritual healing, they do tend to accept non-Khasi and non-Christians as clients. The Christian God does not see a difference between the different bodies offered to his healing touch. Bah Nongstoing practices healing for Muslims and Hindus who do not see a contradiction in receiving Christian healing. Like the goddess, who does not differentiate between the converted and non-converted Khasi, God and Jesus in Meghalaya see everyone as equals regarding healing. I then wonder if a specific faith is required to receive Christian healing in Meghalaya. I have demonstrated that religion and healing have an ambiguous relationship. People will not always choose a healer from their own religious background who practices according to their traditions. In the later stages of the healing quest, seeking healing becomes a pragmatic way of putting an end to suffering rather than an expression of religious belief. Furthermore, the knowledge system regarding witchcraft has little to do with religious faith.

Part 3: Reflecting on Modernity and Witchcraft

As Christian converts, most Khasi inhabit two ontological realities. Christians, who now represent more than 90% of the population, live in a world made more complex by the mixing of a foreign religion and the original Khasi ontology. Both worlds are perceived as part of reality, and Christians know that their God and the indigenous spirits co-exist. Converted lay Khasi and tribal Christian healers rarely expressed doubts about the efficiency of Christian healing and its counterpart of evil forces able to inflict harm on people. Christian tribal healers recognize that faith, or believing, can provoke both sickness and disease. If the Khasi can be cured when they believe in Jesus, believing in witchcraft can have also physical consequences, as Father Leo explained:

> Suppose you are sick, and you believe that Jesus will heal you, then Jesus will heal you because you believe and your whole life whole mentality, whole physically mentally, everything I tell you it is here on the belief, what you believe is what you will be. If you are a Christian, you are a Christian; if you are a pagan, you are a pagan. The pagan people, they believe in lot of those spirits.

Curses are real for most of the participants, regardless of their religion and ethnic background. Some informants, however, were only convinced of the existence of such evil practices after they witnessed certain incidents. Festus, the brother of Agatha, did not believe in *Taro* until he was confronted with it in a spectacular event, when the spirit of a grandmother possessed one of her grandchildren.[22] One man came to him for help, telling him his daughter was suffering from *Taro*. Father Festus told him he did not believe in *Taro*. He still went to visit, however. When he got to the village, the possessed woman was shouting: "Don't enter! I am frightened of you! " She was shouting in Jaintia, a dialect that she did not normally speak. Father Festus went inside the building where she was waiting and started to talk to her. The spirit had come to visit some relatives, but when she saw that girl, she decided she wanted to enter her. He convinced her to leave; she said she would leave by taking a truck. Father Festus took her to the truck station and blessed the trucks. The spirit then left on one of those. The possessed woman collapsed and was then freed.

Father Festus needed proof before believing. In this case, it was the possessed person speaking in a language she did not know. The propensity to believe in local witchcraft may also have a utilitarian goal for tribal and non-tribal Catholic religious in Meghalaya. According to Father Leo, the widespread narrative about magic makes it easy for people to get converted to Christianity, which he describes as the only path to stop these evil practices. It is not only the healers who see Christianity as a way out of witchcraft practices. People worshipping *U Thlien* or keeping *Taro* sometimes seek to get rid of their evil practices by converting to Christianity. However, according to some healers, a new faith is not the answer to everything. Agatha compares Christianity to a refugee camp for *menshohnohs* (those worshipping *U Thlien*). She explains that those worshippers of *U Thlien* are pretending to be Christians. They donate a lot of money to charitable foundations and hide behind the power of the Church, while at heart they are anti-Christian. According to this healer, some converts may stop worshipping *U Thlien*, but 90% will go back to their old practices. Father Phillippe adds that if their intentions are not pure, false converts cannot deceive God:

> The thing is that when people come to know about Jesus more, they can feel innately the good. Everyone has got their own mechanism, innate human mechanisms to detect what is evil and what is good. The moment you listen to Christ, the moment you listen to the Gospel, somehow your heart is getting tuned to that you know with the good, you feel that it is good from deep within you. You cannot be roleplaying for your child if

[22] See full story in Appendix 2.1.

> you have a baby because the baby will always understand whether we are playing or whether we are genuine.

Even if they do believe in traditional curses, Christian faith healers do not see traditional healing as the correct answer to heal the victims of curses and the perpetrators. In their opinion, traditional healers are a negative phenomenon in Khasi society. People practicing these rituals can get spiritual ailments, since they are using the blood of animals for healing. Such sacrifice is a sin against Jesus, who shed his own blood to save humans. One healer illustrated his point through this story. A man came to see him. He had taken some medicine, but he was not healed. The sick man then went and met a traditional healer, who gave him a vegetable and told him to plant it around his house. However, nobody could touch the planted vegetable. If someone plucked it out, the patient would die. The man was afraid for his own life. He brought the vegetable to the Christian healer, who told him not to believe in these evil practices, and only in Jesus Christ. He healed the man and then trampled on the vegetable.

This story shows that the therapeutic quest followed by so many in Meghalaya is condemned by most faith healers. Fatima holds that God will reveal it to her when a patient has offered sacrifices to a pagan entity. Usually, traditional healers give the patients something to wear, such as an amulet. Kong Fatima does not tolerate this and will ask the patient to remove the ornament. Another example comes from Agatha. She points out that only Christians who are weak in their faith will follow the traditional ways when falling prey to spiritual harm. From her point of view, seeking a Hindu healer for prayers is wrong unless he only gives herbal medicines.

> For example, I'm having a toothache and my doctor is a Hindu, it doesn't matter if he treats me with Western medicine. It is not wrong for me to go to a Hindu healer, if he heals me with the help of any other medicine but not if he offers sacrifice to his (…) No, it is a sin in a sense that, I will not get all right for sure.

Faith healers recognize the widespread use of curses in Meghalaya, but they do not agree with people visiting traditional healers to resolve their problems. Despite this, tribal Christian healers may send sick patients to traditional healers if this is the last option left, such as when Agatha sent a sick student to the Syiem Sad in Smits, and the girl arrived just in time to be blessed by the queen. She could have died on the way.[23]

[23] See the full story in Appendix 1.

Despite believing in witchcraft, the Umroï Fathers also expressed ambivalence regarding traditional healers in Meghalaya. Many people come to Father Jude after first visiting traditional healers. They bring him expensive amulets (up to thousands of rupees) sold to them by these healers. He advises them not to use anything but the prayers of the Catholic Church. Father Jude fears these talismans are useless to ward off evil: only God has the power to bring prosperity and healing and the symptoms of people using traditional healing can worsen instead of getting better. Father Philip tells this story about a woman who came to him for help:

> She used to keep these stones inside, like pebbles, inside the pillow. She believed her headache would go away. This lady is keeping this stone, she had not gone for any sacrifice. No puja or sacrifice nothing, simply a stone. Her headache was reduced, disappearing. But she was getting an allergy on the leg.

Using traditional healing made this woman even sicker. Only Christian faith healing is then sanctioned by the Catholic religious. It is interesting to note that they remain firm believers in curses, but not in traditional healing. For tribal faith healers, ordination as a priest or taking vows to be a nun do not fracture the relationships with entities. It is only in the possibility of healing that they differ from other human agents in the ecosystem of evil. They all identify healing as part of their mission, and they may feel they have the prerogative of delivering spiritual healing to Christians. They also emphasize how Jesus and God are the source of healing. Humans leading healing rituals are just pretending to cure diseases, in their view. Their ordination or religious vows have changed the possibilities of their ontological selves. They are still able to travel like lay Khasi between their animist self and their Christian one for the purpose of believing in curses. Nevertheless, in their opinion, people should not travel between Christian and animist worlds to receive healing. The reality of witchcraft is not questioned by the religious of tribal origin. Modernity and conversion to Christianity have not erased its existence. Spiritual healing is then vital to fight these evil forces.

I have already shown how the Khasi have embraced modernity and globalization. Shillong is a cosmopolitan city. Despite this, spiritual healing is widely practiced. The contrast between a cosmopolitan lifestyle and the reality of witchcraft poses an interesting challenge to the anthropologists. Modernity has become associated with rationality and a world free of spiritual

beliefs. In Quebec, where I am from, religion is often perceived as backward and irrelevant. This also applies to all kinds of paranormal activities. However, to engage with informants during this research, I had to develop a better way to understand witchcraft. As Engelke (2002) said: "The field is the place where the problem of belief arises most powerfully for the anthropologist of religion" (p. 5). This problem arose in the first weeks of my fieldwork. I already believed that some people could possess a gift to cure others. However, I had never questioned my position regarding witchcraft. I first undertook to study healing in a region where such research is sparse. I had not heard of *U Thlien* before my fieldwork. When I first heard about *U Thlien*, I was intrigued by the story, but I was not thinking that this story was real. Even if the narrative was repeated and again, it did not make it easier to believe. The answer may lie in the way the narrative is heard and interpreted. For the Western researcher, it may be difficult to hear and believe in the testimonies. In my case, I would say that my knowledge of witchcraft was built through the relationships I developed during fieldwork. Stories were shared and sometimes co-experienced, it became difficult to refute the truth in what the informants and the people I interacted with every day were saying. *U Thlien* became a fact of life for me as well. Physical proof of the existence of *U Thlien* and its worshippers, such as the Nepali woman showing me the strange square of hair missing on the head of her child, were also part of this quest for the truth. I was never a witness to worship of the snake, but I learned about it through the retelling of stories by trusted friends and acquaintances.

The participation of these people in modernity and contemporary life was never questioned. Geschiere (1997) argues that contemporary ideas and practices of witchcraft are a response to modern life than traditional practices. He also argues that the consequences of modernity, such as rising inequalities, are partly the cause of the expansion of witchcraft beliefs. He demonstrates how politics and witchcraft are closely intertwined in Africa. It is difficult to say if the Khasi are more afraid of *U Thlien* than they were before. The narrative is first a mythological story, told to countless generations of children. It is also a cautionary tale against abusing nature and its bounty. Most people accused of worshiping the Snake possess suspicious wealth. Inequality is relatively new among the Khasi, who formed an egalitarian tribal society before colonial times. However, even in the 1900s, Major Gurdon wrote about the myth of *U Thlien*; the story he recounts is similar to the one circulating in Meghalaya today (Gurdon, 1907). Modernity has had little effect on the

narrative. Some elements have evolved to include contemporary realities, such as new migrants to the state. In the current world, forces of globalisation such as migration and social media have been integrated into *U Thlien* ecosystem.

In Africa, authorities try to contain witchcraft and are said to use it themselves (Geschiere, 1997). In Meghalaya, witchcraft is a hidden act, so people using or practicing it are invisible. Authorities, such as legislators, do not take denunciations of witchcraft acts seriously nor even denunciations of death threats related to witchcraft. According to them, it should not be part of a modern society. Furthermore, the authorities are not known users of witchcraft. Witchcraft itself does not seem to be involved in politics. People practicing witchcraft do so for personal gain. If some use witchcraft to gain political influence, it is not generally known among the Khasi. For example, witchcraft is not seen as the probable cause of the loss of an important football match. Rather, practicing witchcraft is kept secret and victims experience it in a relatively private manner. People do not share openly why they are visiting a healer.

It is in healing, the other side of the ecosystem of evil, where politics can be found. Traditional healing as practiced by the royal family is a tool for legitimizing the political power of the Syiem. Their power to heal comes from God. The king is seen as possessing a divine gift, which he can use to heal victims of Thlien. He is considered a symbol of the fight against evil. Even if they practice less healing than before, the Syiem still receive people at least one day a week in their compound. As demonstrated by the story told by Agatha about the cursed young villager, this power is also associated with the queen, the mother of the king. Healing thus goes hand in hand with the royal title. Traditionally, members of the royal family were the only ones been given this power directly from the supreme entity. Other rituals are also used even today to legitimize the spiritual power of the Syiem, such as yearly dances and festivals, during which animals such as goats are sacrificed by the king.

Seng Khasi practices also illustrate the importance of politics in healing. The Seng Khasi organization was founded to protect indigenous culture, threatened by British colonization. The Seng Khasi helped crystallize Khasi identity by identifying which aspects of the traditional culture should be kept alive. At first, it was mostly a literary association, publishing books and manifests

in Khasi language. It evolved into an organization offering activities for people to rally around. These include many spiritual rituals. Before the 20th century, Khasi religion was family oriented. Some religious and healing rituals were held by specialists outside of the family, but most were used to appeased family deities and fight family discord causing sickness. Seeing the power of the Christian churches to mobilize and assemble people, the Seng Khasi moved to create their own institution based on these observations. They organized traditional healing practice so as to mimic the biomedical system. Nowadays, members are invited to assist at regular prayer meetings. The organization itself can be considered political. The president of the Seng Khasi has a close relationship with the king, and they appear together at public rituals. Since traditional healing is also part of their activities and is actively promoted, healing then becomes a political process centred on identity.

Khasi identity has been globalized and localized at the same time. The Khasi live in a globalized world, and many urbanites in Shillong follow a cosmopolitan lifestyle, speaking English even among themselves, going to coffee shops, restaurants, and watching American films at the cinema. The educational system links them to the outside world, since the most prestigious private schools use English as a medium. Christianity also created a bridge between the Khasi and the West, promoting belonging to a vast community of faithful worldwide. Local identity has been compromised by colonialism, globalization, and these new practices. However, it has also been strengthened as the Seng Khasi implanted new practices to rescue parts of the traditional culture. Christianity and modernity have not erased witchcraft and curses in Meghalaya since healing cannot exist without them. Curses are still sent by sorcerers and evil entities. When they fall sick, people continue to seek healing from a variety of sources. Discourse about curses and witchcraft now spreads faster because of media and social media. Rumours about *U Thlien* are printed in local newspapers.

Social media usage in India has been linked to lynching all around the country, where visitors to some localities are accused of various crimes and attacked by mobs. The combination of social media and the free movement of people has caused misunderstandings and has led to the deaths of people even in Meghalaya. In early 2020, nine young men from Madanrting in the Shillong outskirts went to a village for a picnic. They were attacked by a group of villagers suspecting them

to be *menshohnoh* and one of the young men succumbed to his injuries. This illustrates how the narrative of *U Thlien* is still entrenched in the reality of the Khasi in Meghalaya. Curses born out of a myth are not just a story. They are part of the reality of living in Meghalaya. They can affect people from every walk of life, from every origin and religious background. Afflicted individuals can access different healers by using the commodities of modern life. Traditional tribal healers receive calls for appointments on their cellphones and speed from one patient to the next by car. People can visit healers far away in the countryside through modern forms of transportation. Some of these healers speak fluent English and have visited Europe, North America or other continents. The story of a giant snake eating the life force of people is recognized as a mythological narrative, and yet remains a living part of contemporary Khasi culture.

Globalization has brought an increase in transnational movement around the world. In India, liberalization of the economy while integration in the global market has led to internal migration from villages to cities in search of economic opportunities. Many migrants also moved to Meghalaya. As they settle in, they adopted the Khasi healing ecosystem, despite being Hindu or Muslim, and despite speaking languages other than Khasi. They can be the victims of Khasi curses, and they can be cured by Khasi healers. Hindu or Muslim healers can also cure these curses, since the Khasi medical or healing system has also jumped the ethnic lines among the healers. In fact, in the state of Meghalaya, the healing trajectories that people follow reflect the multicultural multi-religious melting pot of the regional and state capital, Shillong. The medical system in Meghalaya is a microcosm of India, with the bonus of being situated in a tribal state where people can seek local traditional healers. Medical systems in Meghalaya are all linked to one of India's major religions: tribal cosmology, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. The Khasi seek to find a balance between traditional practices and a globalized world. Some traditional institutions have been weakened by the implantation of a foreign political system. However, most of the original political structure has survived colonialism. The King still has hereditary power, following the matrilineal characteristics of traditional culture. Despite the usually harmonious mixing of traditional and contemporary elements, there are sometimes tragic consequences, as in the case of the young men attacked by villagers in 2020.

While globalization, conversion to Christianity, and the urbanization of the state have changed Khasi lifestyle, they have not changed the gendered approach to healing. Traditional healing sanctioned by the Seng Khasi is still only practiced by men. Women wishing to practice it must do so without the approval of the organization. This situation shows the ambiguous status of women in Meghalaya. Despite being promoted as generally free and equal to men, Khasi women are excluded from the political sphere from the village to the state level. Furthermore, their social standing is threatened by socio-economic changes. Witchcraft accusations are not, however, a gendered act in Meghalaya, while this is often the case in the rest of India. Witch hunting is practiced in some form or the other in different parts of the country. Middle-aged and elderly single women in tribal as well as non-tribal communities are denounced as witches, leading to social stigma, displacement, economic boycott, torture and even murder (Chakraborty & Borah, 2013). In Meghalaya, outside the healing quest, gender does not affect witchcraft. The gender of sorcerers, of *U Thlien* worshippers, and of others who use dark energies to harm others reflects the socio-cultural context. The narratives woven by the interactions between victims, their families and healers create an explanatory background for the symptoms. Gender, however, is not the main point in these stories. Women accused of witchcraft in Meghalaya are not singled out because of their gender: their role is linked to other factors, such as social discord, social inequalities, and family disputes. It is embedded in a discourse where gender is of minimal importance, except for its role in creating the story told by the healer and accepted by the victim.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the traditional and Christian Khasi are defining an ontological world where witchcraft is real. People in general do not question the existence of such an evil. I have sought to validate their discourse by removing any hypothetical language. Khasi ontology today is a mix of Khasi traditional culture and Christianity. Despite the mass conversion of the tribe in the last century or so, this ontology still acknowledges the existence of many non-human persons. These living beings think and have human emotions. Even if their evilness may lead them to harm us, this is only motivated by real human emotions, such as greed, jealousy, love, and anger. The mixing of ontology goes beyond life: even for Christian families, victims who died by violence require the special ritual of *Mait Tyrut,* that is performed in the event of an unnatural or violent

death. In the approach to animism that I have presented here, the Khasi can be considered as being both animists and Christians, depending on the circumstances. Even in urban settings, they still experience a deep connection with nature through their relationships with the jungle entities. These relationships establish obligations on both sides. Humans must act in moral ways and avoid disturbing nature; gods and goddesses must protect humans. Nowadays this contract is often broken. Christians sometimes do not worship their gods and goddesses as they should. They also encroach on nature and behave badly in sacred places. Gods and goddesses then avenge themselves by sending curses or diseases to humans. The relationships established with these entities can be negative or positive: they can bring blessings or disease. Even among Christians, these relationships are still established in traditional ways: lineage (names of clans), religious allegiance, and through tales and personal experiences. These relationships form the basis of a Khasi persona for whom witchcraft is more than a possibility, it is part of the reality of the world. Since witchcraft is a reality, there must be processes in place to fight its evil consequences. When people have been cursed and cannot be healed by modern medicine, they may go through a quest for healing. For converted Khasi families, seeking traditional healing is a way of mixing ontologies without guilt, since it is not necessarily considered as a religious act. This is also the case when Christians go to indigenous festivals for fun and merrymaking. Religious meaning is found in the relatively new tenets of Christianity. However, ritual healing brings back and keeps alive the values of traditional Khasi society, such as the respect for family deities. For the Christian family visiting a traditional healer, there is no confrontation between the two systems of values. Believing in the Christian God, in Jesus, and in the Virgin Mary does not preclude believing in indigenous deities. One might think that going to traditional healers to solve health problems related to indigenous curses would be reserved for non-converted Khasi. However, Christian faith healers including both Catholic religious and lay healers, also claim to be able to heal these curses. The choice by Christians to visit non-converted traditional healers shows that boundaries of different worlds in Meghalaya are still porous.

Some aspects of Khasi traditional ontology mimic Judaeo-Christian system, such as the supremacy of one God. However, in Khasi traditional spirituality, there is also a multitude of smaller entities who inhabit the jungles of the state. Furthermore, Khasi traditional religion was a private, family-oriented affair, while Christianity brought a collective aspect to spirituality. During the century it

took to convert most of the population of the state to Christianity, it created a feeling of community across clan divisions. When they set out to save Khasi traditional spirituality from disappearing, the members of the Seng Khasi copied Christianity structure. By creating a communal spirit, they hoped to limit further conversions in the Khasi hills. They also developed a structure for the traditional healing system, copying biomedical practices of locating healing in clinics and scheduling appointments. These clinics do not provide answers to physical diseases, explained through the lens of pathogens, viruses and physical illnesses. Rather, the healers in these clinics provide culturally meaningful solutions to illness based on relationships and family affairs. This approach shows that the Khasi understanding of health is based on a mental and spiritual perspective. People can fall sick if: 1) they lead an immoral lifestyle, or if they succumb to antisocial feelings such as greed and jealousy; 2) if they use evil forces against other people; 3) if they become the innocent victims of curses or malevolent non-human entities. As I have pointed out, however, most of these entities use humans to do their bad deeds. On some occasions, they curse humans trespassing in the jungle. The souls of humans may also be used as weapons as well by evil practitioners.

The work of healers is fundamental for keeping the population of Meghalaya healthy. In traditional Khasi discourse, people are often responsible for their own sickness. Traditional healers must interact with these people, who sometimes have sent curses to others. They may also work on mending the dysfunctional relationships that have caused misfortune and sickness. If someone has been cursed because of hate and jealousy, they may be able to heal the relationship between the cursed and the one who cast the curse. Practitioners can also reverse the bonds that tie victims to the perpetrators of evil. Evil will then go back to the senders, and they will suffer the same fate as their victim (for example, they will become possessed by *Taro*). Since their work is based on mending these relationships, traditional healers are not always the first stop on the healing quest. Nowadays, the initial step will often be to consult a doctor. If biomedical treatments fail, people will turn to healers belonging to their own faith. Among the Khasi, if this second step fails, they may start consulting healers of any religious background, such as tribal healers, Hindus and even Muslims. This faith in multiple healing traditions mirrors the general attitude towards curses and evil forces. Christianity has not erased the relationships between spiritual entities and the Khasi. This mixing of ontologies reflects the definition of religion for the Khasi. For Christians, the

traditional elements of the Khasi healing system are not religious. If animism is not considered religious, then the Christian God will not be offended when his converts participate in non-Christian healing rituals or when they express faith in deities living in the jungle. If witchcraft is not religious, God will also not be offended by the adherence to such practices. It can be argued that the narrative of *U Thlien* and other Khasi curses are stronger than any ethnic or religious background. People will seek Khasi healing to fight the curses even if they are not Khasi. This narrative is so strongly anchored in Meghalaya that even Western anthropologists find it hard not to believe in it. Some people need proof before believing, but even educated Khasi express fear and apprehension regarding curses.

Nonetheless, Christian faith healers do not approve of victims using traditional healers to fight the evil of witchcraft. In their point of view, it is a sin, and it can be dangerous for people to attend such rituals and to listen to traditional healers. Faith healers may send patients to traditional healers, but only in last resort. Faith healers have a missionary perspective, and will ban people from visiting traditional healers, while at the same time receiving patients from all religious background. They mimic the Christian God, who accepts everyone in their quest for healing. This mixing of ontologies has been influenced by a rapidly changing global context. It has brought people with different religious and ethnic backgrounds together to form an inclusive ecosystem of evil, where everyone can be cursed but also where everyone can also be healed.

Conclusion: An Ecosystem of Evil in the 21st Century

The objective of this thesis was to understand how the Khasi construct the reality of witchcraft and curses. I also investigated how the ontological turn could shed new insight on witchcraft. Since sorcerers are invisible in Khasi society, and the victims of witchcraft do not talk openly about their troubles, I focused the data collection on healers. Some of these healers became key informants. By asking them to bless the research and cure me or my interpreter of curses, I gained rich insight on how they construct their discourse on witchcraft. By observing the healing rituals of Kong Ro day after day in April and May 2016, I witnessed the power of witchcraft and healing in Meghalaya. Furthermore, by studying witchcraft in a Christianized tribal society, I was able to understand the day-to-day interactions between the animist and Christian ontological worlds. The tales shared with me by Sister Agatha and her brother Festus helped me shape a new understanding of the relationships between Christianity and Khasi traditions. I soon realized that Khasi curses had been incorporated into the reality of healers and victims of many faiths and ethnic backgrounds. The cosmopolitan society formed in Shillong by the Khasi, other tribal groups, and immigrants from other regions and other countries allowed me to better understand how witchcraft could have become a cross-cultural phenomenon. As for the victims of witchcraft, I interacted mainly with one extended family that had been subjected to various evil attacks. It is through them that I understood the relationships they maintained with the natural world, keeping alive animist traditions despite their conversion to Christianity. These pre-Christian ontological elements still informed their relationships with spiritual entities, good or bad, and the construction of their personhood. Converted Khasi have achieved a balance between the two worlds. They still consider symbolic healing as truthful and effective. Without it, there would not be any possibility of healing from witchcraft attacks. Witchcraft thus keeps traditional healing alive. Together, these two components form an ecosystem of evil.

This ecosystem is shared across ethnic and religious lines, and the construction of the narrative is consistent from one group to another. It is kept alive not only thanks to the patronage of Christians but also by the formalization of the system by non-converted Khasi. Identity politics emerged early among the Khasi scholars and intellectuals. Cultural revival movements were created almost 150 years ago. They still exist today and are now considered to be the last rampart against the

demographic changes brought upon the state by internal (i.e., from *Bih*ar) and external migration (i.e., from Bangladesh). However, despite some violent events in the 1980s and the 1990s, Meghalaya is mostly a peaceful state with well-integrated minorities. I was able to observe this process of integration during fieldwork. Dozens of healers of many faiths are at work in the capital, seeking to cure those who have fallen victim to evil. They heal people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds. These identities appear to be of limited influence on the choice of a healer by the clients. Such a choice can be related to other constraints, such as geographical and financial constraints and the reputation of the healer. For example, if a patient seeks to consult with the faith healers of the Umroï Centre, he must travel an hour by car to the outskirts of the state. People may first seek healing from the options closest to them. When I visited traditional healing clinics in the countryside, I noticed that the clients waiting their turn were Khasi villagers. Financial matters may also have an impact on the choice of a healer. Some healers require a donation of a hundred rupees. Others will fix prices according to the length and strength of the ritual, charging thousands of rupees. These healers obviously cater to upmarket clients. Reputation will also play a role in choosing a practitioner. When someone becomes a healer, clients will validate his effectiveness in treating different health issues. Word of mouth travels around Meghalaya and brings a steady flow of clients. The healer's reputation can be damaged, however, if he or she becomes greedy and starts charging too much for their services.

What Is Witchcraft?

My analysis of witchcraft was based on the approaches and methods suggested by the ontological turn in anthropology. Anthropologists have struggled with the possibility that curses are a real phenomenon. Witchcraft discourses are generally analyzed as a way of speaking about power, inequalities, and social woes. The ontological turn seeks new ways to further the anthropological project, by suggesting we stop using the language of representations in our analysis. It is not always clear what should replace representations. It is suggested that we step into the world of our informants and describe it through their eyes and idioms. Anthropologists have criticized this formulation, since they consider it as already being part of the project of the discipline. Using the ontological approach to study witchcraft makes it much clearer to understand how it can transform our work. First, I had to understand how witchcraft had been analyzed since the emergence of

anthropology. I explained in Chapter 2 how witchcraft belief systems have been analyzed through the functionalist, structural functionalist, and symbolist approaches (Moro, 2018b). From Tyler to Gluckman, I have shown how anthropologists favoured representations in their analysis of witchcraft, i.e., seeing witchcraft as representing something else. For the functionalists of the first part of the 20th century, magic (and witchcraft) was still part of the mentality of less evolved societies. In the following years, witchcraft was seen to keep social control on individuals that could stir trouble, such as women from other villages living in with their husband in his hometown. The belief in witchcraft was perceived as a social regulator. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Comaroffs and Geschiere interpreted the proliferation of witchcraft in Africa has a result of the failure of efforts toward modernization and as a response to the crisis of modernity and development (Mildnerova, 2016). Geschiere (1997) warned against the objectification of witchcraft as a simple discourse. According to him, it should be treated as something real, without neglecting the panic and destruction such beliefs have caused in some African societies. The point is to take seriously the discourse on witchcraft—both the fear and the excitement it contains. We should not try to reason it away by reducing it to other terms. Furthermore, he adds:

> If the belief in the efficacy of witchcraft is so prevalent in society, it is very likely that at least some individuals will try to take advantage of it. It is plausible that there are indeed wizards, men (or women) who act according to these beliefs to harm their loved ones and to arm themselves with additional powers. The next question is therefore whether the methods used are effective. But it is again difficult to answer unequivocally. Rumours refer, for example, also to the use of poisonous substances, the effectiveness of which can hardly be doubted (p. 20).

Geshiere however still largely dwells on representations, when addressing the question of the reality of witchcraft. He describes it as manifestations of a precarious and always questioned equilibrium between tendencies of equalizing in African societies and accumulating wealth. Following Geschiere's insistence on the possible reality of witchcraft, a few researchers rejected the reduction of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery to something other than what the participants said they were actually about (Moro, 2018). As Geschiere (1997) points out, anthropologists need to overcome the tendency to simply oppose reality and fantasy. Methodologically, we need to relate the discourse, the rumours, and explanations to specific contexts and to identify moments when these notions are translated into concrete actions (p. 22).

Following the ontological turn, some anthropologists applied its premises to the study of witchcraft. Kapferer (1997; 2002) and Bubandt (2015) both developed new approaches, moving away from the functionalist and structural paradigms and rejecting the notion that witchcraft was a set of irrational beliefs. Bubandt focused on how witchcraft was not part of a cohesive system among the Buli people in Melanesia, but instead brought confusion and fear. The Buli hoped that Christianity would mean the end to the terror of witchcraft. Instead, modernity found new ways of mingling with witchcraft, that continued to thrive among the Buli. Kapferer (1997) rationalized magic and witchcraft, through the point of view of the subjects. Instead of explaining away the phenomenon of witchcraft, Kapferer suggests that practices of witchcraft may yield deep insights into processes of human action and consciousness. However, he did not suggest that witchcraft was real. The healing process that took place inside the victims during curing rituals was a psychosocial manifestation of the power of the human soul.

Despite the centrality of the concept of belief in anthropology, the ontological turn rejects such a notion. The ontological commitment proposed by Risjord (2020) is a step forward toward a better analysis of the concept of witchcraft, without exploring it through the notion of belief. Risjord refers to previous philosophical arguments on sense and meaning to define the notion of ontological commitment. He explains it through the exploration of *extension* and *intension*. According to Chalmers (2002), the simplest aspect of an expression's meaning is its *extension*. An *intension* is a function from possibilities to extensions. This function takes a given possibility and associates it with an extension relative to that possibility. Holbraad and Pederson (2017) explain these concepts by referring to Viveiros De Castro's work:

> If I ask you what a jaguar is and you point one out to me by showing me, (…) you are giving me the meaning of 'jaguar' in terms of its extension. The intension of an expression, by contrast, comprises the criteria (…) for determining its extension. So, if instead of showing me a picture you tell me (…) that a jaguar is a large feline predator that lives in the Americas, you will be giving me the intension of the term. So, extensions pertain to the transcendent relationships between representations and the things they represent, while intensions pertain to the immanent relations between concepts that define each other's meanings. (…) Viveiros de Castro's method of controlled equivocation, then, posits translations between native and anthropological conceptualizations as a matter of modulating intensions rather than fixing extensions (p. 188).

Following this line of thoughts, Risjord (2020) concludes that: "It is not just the translation of one language into another, but the translation of an alien field of concepts. Sometimes, these differ in their commitments about what sort of things exist" (p. 593).

In this thesis, the ontological commitment of the Khasi distinguishes my witchcraft-free world from their universe. Since I was not raised to be cursed by sorcerers and evil entities, I cannot simply enter the ontological world of the Khasi without much effort and negotiation with myself. Immigrants to the state have entered this world, but they were born in Meghalaya or have lived there for many years. Furthermore, ontological worlds in India overlap. Witchcraft exists in many of these worlds, and it is easier for these immigrants to enter the Khasi universe. It can be argued that this ontological commitment is stronger than any ethnic or religious background. People will seek Khasi healing to fight the curses even if they are not Khasi.

Further steps were needed once I had concluded that the ontological approach was the most appropriate way to analyze witchcraft among the Khasi. I had to use the methods proposed by the ontological turn to analyze my own work. This led me to deconstruct the concept of witchcraft and to rebuild it according to the methods created by Hollbraad and Strathern (1990). The aim of their method is to take things encountered during fieldwork as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else (Henare et al., 2007). I applied this approach to my study of witchcraft. I stopped questioning its reality and its consequences on the lives of the Khasi. By using Viveiros de Castro's method of controlled equivocation, I found an interpretation of witchcraft that seemed to reflect the views of my informants: the binding of evil.

The Khasi proficiency in English meant that I could easily have fallen in the trap of thinking we referred to a similar concept when talking about witchcraft. After months of fieldwork, I learned enough of the Khasi language to understand witchcraft was usually translated by *Ksuid* (evil). It is usually committed by a non-human entity. However, it could also be sent after a human and non-human have agreed to cause harm to an individual. Khasi witchcraft is an evil emerging from strained relationships with non-human entities. These relationships became tainted after human errors, such as stealing fruit from a sacred forest. Witchcraft could also be the results of strained

relationships between humans, such as when *Taro* is sent out of jealousy or love, or a powerful and successful relationship between humans and entities. The best example is *U Thlien*: people become victims to the snake because specific clans have kept feeding it blood for centuries.

The work of Strathern on the construction of personhood in 1990s was vital for me to understand why the Khasi were so susceptible becoming victims of witchcraft. The third component of the Khasi personhood, called *Ka Rngiew*, is at the heart of the relationships the Khasi build with entities. However, the non-Khasi being cursed and falling victims to witchcraft do not have this notion. I argue that people do not necessarily need to have a three-part Khasi personhood to be affected by the curses. They may also build relationships with the entities by growing up in Shillong and hearing the narratives of the Khasi about the curses. Like the Khasi notion of the person, the world of the Khasi contains elements unique to their ontological world. Some intangible elements are shared among other cultural groups in the world, such as the Christian elements: God, faith in the Virgin Mary, and the belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

What may confound the casual visitor about the Khasi are the Christian symbols present everywhere and the Western lifestyle in Shillong. The occupation of physical space and the elements in it seem to indicate that the Khasi live in a Western ethos. This, however, would be a mistake. The world of the Khasi is one where the influences of the West mix with the traditions of the precolonial times and the influence of the Christian ethos. Circumstances will decide when each is the most appropriate. Despite being deeply Christian, the Diengdoh would not refuse a traditional ritual if it promises to bring them peace. In their world, gods are entities they can build relationships with. These relationships are real: there are physical proofs of these social bindings going astray, such as marks on the body of the victims of *U Thlien* and people becoming sick and dying in strange ways. Dangerous supernatural entities are real. Proof of their existence is also found in the body and in stories shared among friends and relatives.

The work of Descola on animism sheds light on how Christianity and animism can be part of the same ontological world. In *The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle,* Descola (1997) sought to understand the relationships the Achuar Indians had with their environment and what was considered alive or not, and the differences between humans and non-humans. Achuar

spirituality posed a challenge, Descola argues, to earlier definitions of animism. Similarly, I concluded early in my fieldwork that traditional Khasi were animists. However, their spiritual world did not fit in the old definition of animism. In this older concept, animism was considered as a system of beliefs that attributes souls and living energy to inert things (Ingold, 2006). The first anthropologist to use the term, Tylor, observed that primitive people attributed life and personality to animal, vegetable, and mineral alike (Bird-David, 1999). However, animism is not a way of believing about the world but a condition of being in the world. It is characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux (Ingold, 2006). Accordingly, the Khasi attribute a soul to the natural elements, such as rivers. They, however, do not seem to attribute souls to much of the inanimate objects. They build relationships with entities living in their natural environment, such as gods and spirits, but not with nonliving things such as rocks. It is not that these inanimate objects (such as trees and rivers) are not important. However, it is recognized that the Khasi cannot build relationships with them, but only with the entities protecting these objects. Following Ingold's (2006) definition of animism as: "… the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence " (p. 68), I showed that the original (non-converted Khasi) are animists, since their world is inhabited by a variety of humans and non-human persons, all linked in wide web of relationships. The conception of personhood in animistic societies raises questions about the supposed universal validity of the concept of nature, because they invariably show that non-human entities are often regarded as social persons (Brightman et al., 2014).

It is more difficult to see how contemporary Christian Khasi fit into Descola's definition of animism. As Christians, they should not entertain ideas about gods and entities, at least in theory. However, I have shown that these traditions are still important even among Christians. The core of their identity is still animist, and they go back to this core during periods of misfortune and hardship. They are Christians or animists, depending on the situation they are facing. They are claimed by entities from two worlds: the Christian God and the Khasi gods. The concept of new animism as developed by Ingold (2006) and Descola (1997) also helped me to better establish how both Christians and animists could be affected by curses and witchcraft. Christians, like animists, are vulnerable to these attacks because their core has not changed. Furthermore, these

curses have no ethnic or religious boundaries. Only the perpetrators of *U Thlien* have been identified as belonging uniquely to the Khasi tribe. People from every religious and ethnic group are prepared from childhood to fall victim to a curse. They develop a relationship of fear with these dangerous entities. At the same time, these relationships are also relationships of belonging, since members of Khasi clans are tied to the goddess of their lineage.

What is Healing?

Healing is interpreted differently according to the ontological world people in living in. For people living in relational ontologies like the Khasi, they exist because of their relationships with other human and non-human persons. These relationships also need healing when they are strained. As relational beings, they need help to heal their bindings to people and entities. The Khasi seek healing from doctors if they feel they have a physical disease. On all other occasions they will seek symbolic healing. Biomedicine has little power to heal another category of Khasi disease: social illnesses. Families often ask healers to mend their relationships. Healing for the Christians can be physical and spiritual. The conversion of their ancestors to the new religion did not stop their visits to the traditional practitioner, even non-converted ones. Nonetheless, Christian faith healers do not approve of converted Khasi consulting traditional healers to fight evil. In their point of view, these visits are a sin. They feel it may be dangerous for people to attend such rituals and to listen to the advice of traditional healers. Faith healers ban people from visiting traditional healers, while at the same time receiving patients from all religious backgrounds themselves. They mimic the Christian God, who accepts everyone in their quest for healing but bans them from exploring other faiths.

Healers work to mend a variety of relationships. They are sometimes asked to heal relationship strains that happened in previous generations. The story of Kong Ro trying to appease an angry ancestress killed by her husband is a prime example of this. The threads of connection with this aunt were damaged by her murder since the rest of the family refused to acknowledge the gravity of the events. Only the father of the Diengdoh family remembered and suffered from these forgotten events. Healers also work on mending relationships with entities when humans have offended them by not honouring them properly or by damaging the jungle. In this case, the objective of healing is to restore a positive binding between humans and non-humans. However,

not all relationships can be mended. The ones imposed on people through certain curses and witchcraft cannot simply be healed. They need to be removed for the victims to resume a healthy life. This unbinding is done in different ways according to the healer religion and ethnic identity. Hindus will invoke the power of gods and goddesses such as Kali and conduct rituals to ask for their intervention. The Christian faith healers pray to God and anoint their patients with oil after reading verses from the Bible. Khasi traditional healers ask help from the Khasi god or gods.

By following in the footsteps of ontological anthropologists, I was then able to understand the definition of witchcraft and healing in the Khasi ontological world. These definitions emerge from the Khasi personhood and the relationship the Khasi maintained with non-human entities. They construct an ontological world where it is possible to be cursed by evil entities and to be healed by a practitioner through his or her relationships with gods and goddesses. This reality is constructed and validated both by the healers and their patients. They mostly share a common understanding of what exists in the world. The rituals performed by Kong Ro showed how she constructed and validated the reality of her clients. Despite being a Christian going to church every Sunday, in her healing room she reverted back to animism. Colonialism and Christianity had little impact on the truth in the cold, humid garage where she carries out healing rituals. In that space, we travelled in time to the era before the introduction of the new Christian faith and the adoption of biomedicine. The gods came to speak with Kong Ro to give or deny their blessings. They provided answers to anguish or refused to respond for hours while we waited. Their power became visible and tangible through the manipulation of symbols, such as matches, water, and threads. The gods made their will known by moving the matches in the water jugs. In this place, the Khasi were truly their animist selves. Their *Rngiew* can be healed by the power of Kong Ro and the entities she interacts with.

Despite their faith in spiritual healing, the Khasi I met with did not deny the power of biomedicine. The Diengdoh would often seek biomedical help even if the explanation behind their misfortune was a spiritual attack. In fact, I realized long after fieldwork that they were not seeking physical healing from spiritual healers. They were seeking to remove the evil curses attached to them, something doctors could not do. They still, however, sought the help of physicians to appease their physical symptoms until the rituals had lessened or removed the curses. When the symptoms would

not disappear, they conclude that the curses were still active. This bricolage between biomedicine and spiritual healing explains why both are considered important for the Khasi. I cannot say if this is the case where biomedicine is not readily available. Some parts of Meghalaya are quite remote, and villagers may have no other options than consult spiritual healers or herbalists.

Exploring Other Conceptual Frameworks in the Study of Witchcraft

I could have explored what I found in fieldwork through other theoretical frameworks. As I have mentioned, I could have adopted a postcolonial stance to explain Khasi witchcraft by showing how modernity has exacerbated these *beliefs*. Nonetheless, I felt from the beginning that it would not do justice to the importance of witchcraft among the population of Shillong and Meghalaya. It is, of course, important to acknowledge that I could have explained witchcraft through other approaches, such as a post-secular or a phenomenological framework. The ontological turn is a methodology at the same time as an approach and could well be the first step toward post-secular anthropology. In the history of the discipline, anthropologists have engaged with the ontologies of their informants mainly through two modes: methodological atheism and methodological agnosticism. In a recent publication, Meintel (2019) discusses these two modes. She notes that, in the case of methodological atheism, the reality of the informants is denied; in methodological agnosticism, it is either ignored or cast aside. According to these two modes of approaching faith, anthropologists should see the faith and beliefs of their interlocutors (methodological atheism) as false or should refrain from engaging with the religious experiences that they may be invited to study (methodological agnosticism) (p. 68). In contrast, post-secular anthropology makes room for the researcher to enter their informants' religious experience. Post-secular anthropology offers the possibility of creating a dialogue between theology and anthropology. Furthermore, it permits anthropologists with religious faith to study their religious experience within a theological framework. In order to better approach this third mode, Merz and Merz (2017) suggests using the concept of ontological penumbra. The ontological penumbra is a space where secular and the religious can meet. It is a reflexive space of dialogue, encounter, and engagement, where "the other" includes both human and non-human entities who, in turn, need to be recognized as counterparts. Post-secular anthropology is open to the real possibility of the existence of gods, spirits, and other non-human entities and thus offers a new opportunity to reframe our

understanding of witchcraft. Fountain (2013) proposed an anthropology beyond the secular, which involves both critical reflection on the secularity of the discipline and a willingness to experiment with new ways of doing anthropology *with/in* theology (p. 311). In the context of my research work, this is of great interest since many important Khasi writers and researchers are or were in fact members of the clergy. Secondary and tertiary education in Shillong is still in large part managed by religious congregations in private schools. Many indigenous students studied in these schools and then became scholars of their own world. For example, Barnes L. Mawrie is a Salesian Catholic priest who has done research on Khasi culture and religion. Mawrie studied one of the most important institutions of Khasi traditional society: the maternal uncle. In his book *From Maternal Uncle to Father: an Anthropological Study on Changing Patriarchy Among the Khasi*, he digs deeper in the social changes brought both by colonization and Christianity (Mawrie, 2013). Other Khasi scholars belonging to religious orders also chose the path of scholarship. Many became social scientists and studied tribal religion through the lens of their own theology. These scholars never doubted their Christian faith while trying to make sense of the religion of their ancestors. They accepted curses and witchcraft as part of a reality that needed to disappear in order to bring peace to the state of Meghalaya. Khasi scholars were in fact practicing post-secular anthropology before it even became a concept.

Khasi scholars who are not members of the clergy show a similar approach to witchcraft. On the Indian repository of theses[24] it is possible to find a great volume of work written by Khasi students reflecting on their own culture. They have studied every aspect of life in the Khasi Hills, including religion. These theses became a great resource for my own work, as I was struggling to find firsthand material. Furthermore, one of my informants was a young master's graduate from the department of anthropology at the NEHU (Northeastern Hills University, in the outskirts of Shillong). Despite completing her master's thesis about U *Thlien*, she never expressed doubts about the existence of the bloodthirsty snake. It was new for me: serious scholars who acknowledge the existence of evil creatures feeding on humans. One professor spoke with me at length about his research in a remote area of Meghalaya, where people famously transform into tigers or panthers. I must conclude then that post-secular anthropology offers an alternative approach for anthropologists of different faiths. However, it offers little direction for those who do not profess

[24] Find this repository here: https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/

any faith but still want to find a new approach to the supernatural. Since I am not openly a Christian believer and tend generally to be agnostic, I did not need to merge my own Christian beliefs with those of the Khasi. However, I did have to overcome a tendency toward methodological agnosticism. I had to stop looking at the phenomenon I was experiencing through the lens of objectivity, to enter the world of my informants.

I could also have chosen a phenomenological approach. Through this theoretical framework, anthropologists question their own cultural and theoretical heritages when trying to understand more accurately and more fully a diverse number of cultural and experiential phenomena (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011). The phenomenological approach has also crystallized attention on to the body as a subject of interest (Csordas, 1990). It does not seek to establish the validity of personal experience but instead articulates the lived experience of the phenomenon through a description of how it appears to the research participants (Ivey & Myers, 2008).

The phenomenological approach may have been interesting to study witchcraft in Meghalaya, since the reality of sorcery is built up through language and discourse (West, 2008). It could have compelled me to analyze sorcery practices as actual exercises in constructing, rather than merely representing, social realities. Some of my reflections through this thesis are closely related to a phenomenological approach. I explore the emergence of the knowledge about witchcraft among children born in Meghalaya and among immigrants to the state and conclude that this knowledge was transmitted through stories and narratives. It became real experiences when people were cursed and felt it through their sickened bodies. The phenomenological approach could have been useful to understand how different people experience witchcraft, and how these supernatural beliefs are perceived in their lived realities (Petrus & Bogopa, 2007). The present work has focused on the reality-building of the Khasi and their neighbours through the ontological approach. However, future studies could easily adopt a phenomenological approach and focus on the lived experience of victims of witchcraft and curses.

Narratives about curses and witchcraft in Meghalaya are also a clear warning against the destruction of the environment. According to Khasi mythology, the first devil convinced the Khasi to cut the tree linking them to God. In retaliation, He removed the golden ladder between him and

human beings, who then lost their ecological conscience. People began to look at natural elements no longer as essential for their survival but as mere objects (Snaitang, 2012). The narrative of *U Thlien* also shows how the trust between men and nature has been broken. *U Thlien* was the guardian of the jungle. Suddenly man came and started to dig for iron, so the snake got angry and began to eat people. A significant element in the myth is the presence of iron. This mineral helps humans in making tools, but it can also cause social and ecological destruction (Nongbri, 2006). Both tales are warning against destroying nature. I have shown how healers will often point out a possible transgression against the natural environment as the reason for sickness or misfortune. However, for many reasons, I did not focus on the ecological aspects of Khasi witchcraft in this thesis. I do not deny that there are warnings about environmental destruction in the narratives of Thlien and in the current discourse of healers. Analyzing curses and witchcraft through an ecological discourse could lead to the conclusion that the explanation behind those are representations of ecological anxiety. Instead, I wanted to point out how the dangers of witchcraft are real in Meghalaya and can lead to damage in the lives of people and even to their deaths.

The Dangers of Witchcraft

At the start of my fieldwork, I did not recognize the dangers of curses and witchcraft. In other words, I did not commit to the ontological world of the Khasi. I was not born in India and I did not grow up in Shillong. However, after only two weeks of fieldwork I was swept into an unknown world. This universe was full of evil entities spreading diseases and misfortunes. In the Khasi world, there were also invisible snakes coming alive at night to drink human blood. At first, I could not bring myself to believe in these narratives. Despite this, ontological commitment was imposed on me by the participants in the research. When I started to question the informants about *U Thlien* and other curses, people assumed I believed they were real. I now think it never crossed their minds that I could doubt about the existence of Khasi witchcraft. At some point, Kong Ro remarked that I was in her garage to learn her ways to help others. She mentioned it would be hard for me to practice healing in Canada, since I would need to pray over chewing gum once back in my country. Despite my initial disbelief, I slowly started to commit to the ontological world of the Khasi. My first step in that direction was when I decided to ask healers to perform healing rituals to bless the research process. During many months, I experimented healing rituals through my own body. After

an initial interview with a new healer, I would frequently ask if we could come back for a healing session either for myself, to bless the research or to heal a member of my adoptive family.

Without this ontological commitment, it would have been difficult to build trust with the participants. My attitude toward the possibility of evil and witchcraft made it easier to develop collaborative relationships and friendship with the participants. I did not face major challenges in engaging conversations about witchcraft. I did not feel, as Parish (2005) asserts, that

> Simply by talking about witchcraft, even to assert its absence, is to engender the anxiety and mistrust of others and so intensify the very conditions in which witchcraft thrives (p. 106).

Informants were more than happy to talk openly about curses and black magic. I received only one warning from participants was that I should not reveal the names of the clans worshipping *U Thlien*. Despite the general enthusiasm for talking about this topic, the fear was real. The amount of damage that witchcraft can inflict is not to be underestimated. Witchcraft and curses are still taboo and dangerous. Mentioning the names of clans practicing witchcraft can bring harm to the informant. Furthermore, healers can also fall victim to spiritual harm. One practitioner I interviewed for this research died in 2019. She was only thirty years old and passed away suddenly. Retribution from evil forces is suspected in her untimely death. Healers will continue to battle these forces long after the rituals they perform, as evil entities tend to seek revenge.

I then became a witness to both the devastating effects of curses and to the solution proposed by the healers. Without realizing it at the time, I may have put my closest friends at risk. My own research assistant was already vulnerable to witchcraft since his family had been hit with deadly curses well before my arrival in Meghalaya. Fortunately, as far as I know, no harm came to my informants from my research. In fact, it gave my adoptive family an excuse for me to seek treatment from many healers. They found new practitioners or became acquainted with ones they knew of whom they had not previously consulted. For example, they had known about Kong Ro through a mutual acquaintance, but they had never visited her for healing. In our case, the danger became at some point not spiritual, but financial. Some healers began to ask astronomical amounts of money to continue the healing rituals. Rituals are not free in Meghalaya, except for the prayers requested by a priest or nun. They cost anything from 100 rupees to several thousand, depending

on the healer and the task requested. Since the family and I often shared the costs, at some point we had to draw the line and quit working with some of these healers.

Through this research, I entered the world(s) of the healers and their cursed patients. Through their ontological commitment, people recognize that witchcraft is real and dangerous. It can cause great pain and suffering to both accused and victims. Suspected devil worshippers have been burnt alive while victims have died in a painful manner. Given this reality, deciding to study witchcraft should never be taken lightly. It is possible as an anthropologist to get through the experience without any harm. Since most of us do not commit to an ontology where curses are a possibility, the probability for being spiritually harmed is low. However, our informants and research assistants may be at risk. Roxburgh (2019) shared a story on how she failed to adequately account for the spiritual care and safety of her research assistants. As a result, both fell prey to witchcraft attacks and experienced extreme spiritual insecurity. Her experience in the field brings out interesting ethical questions. Studying witchcraft also means being confronted to the possibility of real, often deadly violence. News reports in India tell of violence linked to witchcraft accusations (Wesch, 2007). For example, Father Festus told me about one of his closest friends who had a good business venture. A child was missing, and the villagers of his locality blamed him for the disappearance. They suspected the man had something to do with the crime since they found a slipper near his house. The shoe was similar to the ones wore by the child. The friend was attacked and killed by a mob.

These stories about real events brought me to question my relativist approach to witchcraft. Cultural relativism remains a fundamental principle in anthropology. It tells us that if we are willing to suspend our judgments, explore the issue firsthand, and try to understand the rich contexts of a phenomenon, we can build our appreciation of otherness (Wesch, 2007). However, when we are confronted with the violence surrounding witchcraft, all these concepts become somewhat surreal. Cultural relativism is easy in a neutral situation. When danger is lurking for people around us, our involvement in the lives of our friends and adoptive families may become the cause of a deep self-questioning. Witchcraft can indeed become a dangerous reality, and not only an object of curiosity for anthropology. Witchcraft is at once a fascinating topic and one that can bring out the worst in people. Despite this, studying witchcraft in Meghalaya was enlightening.

The ontological approach gave me the freedom to go beyond previous paradigms on witchcraft. A further step to complete the redefinition of witchcraft would be to discuss my definition with the Khasi themselves.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Stories of *U Thlien* by Sister Agatha

1.1. The Cursed Child

"So that child was just in standard six. One morning she came to me, and she said, *Sister Agatha see I am swollen up, I am swollen up, and she cried. I don't know why I am swollen up like this. Sister Agatha, please I will go home I think am going to die and all.* She got scared, poor child, you wake up in the morning and you find yourself like that, it is very sad. I did not know what to do and then I told her: *Okay, tell them thought maybe anaemia, maybe no blood maybe something like that*. I never thought of that menshohnoh *U Thlien*, so then I sent her home… She stayed home two weeks. One fine morning, her elder sister came running to the convent: *Sister Agatha, please come, Rita is dying. My sister is dying, for three days she is not talking anymore, she is facing the corner only, turned to the same position, the corner dark place, she is facing that corner and she does not eat, drink, or talk, for three days.* You see that is one of the signs of Satan's possession. The person's intestine will be weak, they will die just like that… We went there, I did not know that that child had that. I asked: *Did you take her to the hospital*? *We took her, sister, but no sickness was diagnosed. Then what did you do next?* The parents were just sitting down there and crying, everybody was sitting and crying, waiting for her to die. When I got there, the people who did this were also there, both husband and wife, and you know that particular family were the one who gave the job to the child's father. For me I started believing when I experience all this, before I never believed, to tell you the truth, *nongshohnoh* and all that, I didn't believe. But after this experience then how will you say that you will not believe? When we got there, I found the house full of people, then I said: *please excuse me all of you if you can get out, I would like to pray for her with sister and her parents and her sisters only, other people please get out.* A particular person told me: *Sister Agatha it is of no use, so many times, so many people we have come across this kind of sickness, we know more than you, they are senior, quite elderly, so from experience this of no use, whatever you do also this child we are only waiting for her to die.* Then I said: *it's all right, she will die in my hands, I am her superior, I am her mother, because her mother is far away and she is under our care, so why have you to worry so much about this? Kong, Bah, please get out of*

here. They wanted to delay, delay, delay, and she was dying, this child was dying already, she could not breathe anymore. I brought palm leaves and holy water. I said: *Rita, turn to this side*! Then she did not answer, then I said: Did *you hear, I said turn this side*! The mother scolded me: *Sister Agatha, she cannot talk anymore, she's dying, how she can talk to you?* Then I sent the mother away, then the father who was just like a mad man. I did not know that those two had given magic to these two parents, so that the parents would not take the child for treatment. I told them to take her, and they did not, so then I realized that they are just like not conscious. So, at the end I allowed only her elder sister to remain. She is very courageous. We moved the bed to this side, and she turned to this side. I said: *you see, she is dying? A dying person cannot turn, so she is not dying*. Now I knew that I was not talking to Rita, I was talking to somebody else, my enemies, the enemy of my lord Jesus Christ. So, I took the holy water and said: *In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, in the name of the holy Spirit, I command you to get out from here, under the holy palm, palm leaves, blessed palm leaves holy water.* She woke up like this and she started crying. When she cried her mother and father entered. Those two who did it (the neighbours) they knew because the pain went to them. They just jumped and they ran home. Because when I did that with the holy water, they are the ones who got it, no and they also happened to be Presbyterian. I said: *Kong heh* [older sister in Khasi], *Go and boil an egg, half boil, not completely.* Because you know, the sign of the devil's possession is that they will not eat eggs.

The devil spoke: *Don't you know that I offer sacrifice with eggs? How can I eat sacrifice?* So, I said to that Kong heh: *We'll make her eat this rice. We will give her rice, country rice. One week you did not eat, no? Six days, so we will make you eat three plates of rice. For the six days that you did not eat.* She ate and ate, the power of the devil, challenging me. Then she asked*: Give some more you think I cannot eat? Give!* Then I give her rice and red tea. Rita liked red tea, so we made her drank that red tea and the child got strength, her own strength and the devil was losing its power. After that *I said, Now, if you want to, you want to get some more then you continue to be with her, if you do not want anymore, you fear this, you get out from here*. She said: *No, no, please do not give me anymore.* And just she went and reach the door and she collapsed, then she came back, and she talked to me in a normal way.

Rita was having a double possession, one possession was from Satan, and the other one was from

U Thlien. So, I chased away the Satan, but that *U Thlien*, that one can be chased only by that Smit, there is one *Syiem*, no? I suspected that already because she was swelling. Normally *U Thlien* does not attack like that, it spoke to me normally. It does not do all those things normally, It behaves normally and you will not know it is sucking the blood of the victim. I told them I said: *Kong heh, tomorrow we will take her to Smit, then she will be alright*. But her family said: *Sister Agatha you know these people said no need, no use.* I said: *Why are you listening to those people, you should listen to me.* That family, anyway they got very angry at me, I call the men from around there I said: *Bah, this is the time that we have to practice our spirit, Khasi spirit, Khasi spirit is communion, loving each other, that social life.* So, they carried her in the basket, and all through the way she was grumbling, and she was speaking ill of me, in front of all those people. She said: *See Mei Pa, when I reach Shillong, you must take me to the market, you must buy for me a watch, you must buy for me a new dress.* They are poor people, so I gave them money. And Rita said: *Sister gave you money, so she is good, she will not scold you, so you come we will go to the market first.* But I told this girl: *I said, Kong heh do not obey her, if she told you anything do not obey, you just go straight to Smit, you do not listen to her, let her say what she wants.* So, they went, and she got angry because they did not take her to the market. When they reached Smit, God was there because we were all praying for her as she was journeying. Then luckily the Syiem *Mei Iem*, she was outside, and she saw them coming. This elder sister came down, she thought of the way she was catching this child, so when she arrived there, she makes her sat there in the vehicle, and she did not trust the parents. This child came down from the vehicle and she could not walk, she could not understand what had happened, she just could not walk. She was very soft and had no strength at all. She was crawling like this towards to the Syiem. The Syiem came, and she gave her water to drink, she prayed over the water to God. As she drank the, the water then she got the strength, then the girl said: *Mei Iem, thank you very much, I did not know what happened. It was by the power if the evil one that make her like that to delay*. So, the Syiem came immediately, she went to the taxis, she went there, she said: *Oh no need for you to come down, I'll pray for you from here only, for that you can get out after my prayer you can, you will get fresh air*. She prayed for her and she took her hair, she just took her hair like and then she looked and then she said: *Because of something divine, because of the divine intervention, you are still alive. You were supposed to die last night*. *If you had been late for another hour, she would have died.* She would have died, and these people who worship the devil, the devil in different forms. Then she gave her medicine to

drain that power, just the power of God, so she got that one and then she got alright and until now she is okay, she is married now, got children".

1.2 The Power of the Sisters

"I came across one particular child. This family was Presbyterian, and the father was touched by the ways the Catholic church speaks of charity for the poor. Love your neighbour, forgive your neighbour. Even if the neighbour does some harm, the Catholic normally say I forgive you. That man happened to be one of the leaders of the Presbyterian church. So, he became Catholic with the whole family. His own brother was angry and he sent an evil spirit to possess his brother's daughter. Because we do believe in the presence of the Devil in the Catholic Church. If we do religious studies like your studies about healing, we cannot bypass the Bible, we cannot bypass the church teachings, for us the base of healing in Christianity is the Bible and the Church teachings. What does the bible say about healing? And Jesus says: *Chase the evil one, I give you the power to chase the devil!* The Devil is there, but Jesus gives us the power to chase away that, the devil has no power over us.

That particular child got it, she was hardly in class nine, more or less thirteen or fourteen years old. One evening, I could hear someone shouting at the door. Normally we don't get up but that day I said: *Come we'll go!* The father of that girl said: *If any off you has the gift from god to pray for the sick; please come and pray for my daughter*! I told the sisters: *Come let us go there were five of us, I said after all we should, we are religious, we should, we have the power.* All of us have the gift. The sisters were a little bit scared at the beginning because of that type of sickness. Then the father said: she is there in the church with father. She was with one of the fathers from south India. But among those charismatics, very few believe in all these things about us, the Khasi people. Here, it's very common, this possession by the Devil is very common. *Taro* is different than this evil spirit. So, the Satan, this is really Satan, entering a person. So that particular child got a demon inside her. She was with that old priest, and her father was sitting. She was standing next to him, and the priest was praying. She was praying with him.

There are also sisters whom the Devil is scared also. In that particular situation, the devil was scared only of me. When I was in Mawlai, one day we had that *Taro* and this *Ksuid*. In that

convent, the Devil was scared of three sisters. We were twelve sisters, but the devil was scared of three of us. The other sisters are very holy sisters. They are praying very well, much more than me, they are much holier than me, they are much better than me. I don't know why, it doesn't mean that he is scared of me because I am holy or because I am you know, not like that, I believe in maybe something divine.

That girl like she had fits and she used to kick everyone… She went to stand next to the priest. I told the father: *okay pa, don't be afraid, we will deal with her*! Then I told this old priest, Isaac: *Go to sleep because you are already tired, I will lead her to prayer*! He told me: *Sister Agatha, she is suffering from psychological sickness*! I said: *Yes father, it's alright we'll pray for her!* But I knew for sure that it was not a psychological problem. I touched her and she said: *Don't touch me, because you have a fire*! I wanted to take her to pray in the convent, but she did not want to. *I will not step in that convent*, she said, *my enemy!* Then I said: *Okay, you are our enemy, but we are not our enemy.* I called her name and said*: We are not enemy of this one but as for you who is possessing her, we are enemies!* She said: *Don't speak because when you speak, I am scared, I feel scared just like the knife cutting me like that*! We went there [the convent]. I said: *now, you have to enter into the house of God!* And I took her to the chapel. *No please*, she said, *no please!* Her voice and her ways changed, and she said: *Let us sit in this parlor here*. I said: *Now we go to the church, your enemy is there, if you are so strong you face him*. *Why are you afraid of him? Now you challenge him both of you and see who will win.* Then the sisters came, they got courage and we literally carried her to the church, closed the door all five of us are there. Then she said: *But I'm not afraid of this, I'm afraid only of you.* I said: *Okay, I'm not afraid of you after all, okay if you are not afraid of them you tell me now, who are you? Tell me your name! I will not tell*, she said! I said: *Okay you sleep here tomorrow also you'll stay here tomorrow as well, and we will bring food for you!* She said: *No, no, one week I didn't eat!* She didn't eat for one week, how she could live? It's the power of the devil.

Appendix 2: *Taro* Story by Father Festus

2.1 The Visiting Spirit

One fellow call me: *Father, this woman is suffering from Taro*. *Eh Taro,* I said, *I don't believe in Taro*. Because normally I pray and then they disappear. I thought some evil or some psychological and everything. I went. That lady was shouting: *Don't enter, I am frightened of you*! And that too in Pnar language, my language. When I went inside, I asked the people: *Is this lady a Pnar?* That lady answered: *Yes, I am a Pnar and you too you are a Pnar* ![25] My surprise was that she had the voice of an old lady, but she was young. It was not the real lady is talking, because I knew the one who got sick, and she knew only Khasi. I was then talking and talking and just trying to make her speak out. She named my father's name also, then I said: *Then okay you know where I live, and I don't live in my village. So, what language do you want to speak?* She said: *No, I cannot speak other languages except the language that God gave me.* There was a lot quarrelling and fighting, then finally then I said: *If you are not going then I will throw holy water over you*. But she got frightened, she said: *I'm frightened to look at your face. Besides that, you are carrying Jesus!* I took the Blessed Sacrament, so it was frightened of Jesus because she is a bad spirit and not a good one. So, I said: *Okay you get out go back to your place, go back to your village.* And then I asked her: *How did you come*? She said, *I came by truck*, so I said, *Okay, now also you go back by truck*, she said*: Okay let us go down to the road*. And that poor lady who could not even get up walked without anybody's help, walked up to the road that was already sprinkled with the holy water. One truck passed by and I said: *With this truck you have to go*. She said: *No, I cannot go I don't know I am frightened to go alone*. I said: *You came alone.* She said: *No, no, my children came to drop me here*. It seemed they came to see their sister-in-law, so they left but the spirit accompanying them remains there. At the end, another truck came, and she said: *I knew them, but they are going different direction*, then I said: *You are only cheating, you are only playing the fool we have no time to wait for you*. I sprinkled holy water. She was crying on the road. Then the bus came, and I said: *By this one you have to enter by all means otherwise I will not forgive you*. Then: *Oh, that bus I saw some people from Jowai.* And then she said*: Okay by-bye* and that woman collapsed there and then. I left. In the evening the same people came to see me again, they said: *Father she came back, she did not go, she went down only halfway.* Then after that again I was fighting with

[25] The lady was speaking in Jaintia (*Pnar)* but was a Khasi. She did not know the Jaintia language.

her but finally she said, no, I got down because my children are coming. So, her children came, and she left with them. Wherever the people that she visits are suffering they have to call those grandchildren. When they come, they just say, Okay, if it is our grandmother let us go home." [26]

Annex 3: Stories of Faith

3.1 Divine Job Counselling by Sister Anita

A lady's husband left her. She was jobless, but her children were studying in college, and they needed to pay for the hostel. She came to me and cried. When I prayed and I touched over her, Jesus told me: *Tell her to go and sell fish, dry fish.* Then I told her: *Jesus is telling you are going to be very rich; go and sell dry fish*! She said: *I don't know dry fish, I know only tung tap*[27]. I said: *But start buying, learn the names of the dry fish and then you will become a big malik*. Now five trucks a year come into her house to unload the dry fish and she becomes a rich lady with five to sixty lakhs of dry fish a year. She is living a wonderful life, but she will never forget that it is Jesus who gave her the job. As Jesus speaks to me, I always get the inspiration to tell the people. Jesus told me: *Tell them, they'll be getting a taxi!* That lady said: *Sister, don't say that because I'm poor and I have got no money. I give it to some people, but my money is lost*. One fine day someone came to her house and knocked at the door and said, *See, I stole your money long time ago. When I went for confession, a priest told me to give it back to you and you will be blessed!* That man possessed five houses, after that confession he bought a taxi for this lady. He said: *Take this taxi and earn!* "

3.2 The Kidnapped Boy by Sister Anita

"A Hindu family came to see me. Their son had disappeared. Through the vision that the Lord has given to me, I saw that boy clearly, even if I never knew that family. Then Jesus told me the announcement several times almost in every prayer. Some I would say out loud and some I would keep to myself. Whatever he asked me to do, I would do. Then he told me tell that this boy will be coming home after a week. *Sister Anita, is he still alive?* His family was asking me. I answered:

[26] The possession was not over, since the spirit was coming back each time her children from another town were visiting!
[27] Chutney made of dry fish.

Right now, I am seeing him that he is suffering he is feeling hungry, and he is tortured by people! Then that time I called out his name, Vijay. The family was praying the gods of the Hindu. I called out the name of Vijay out loud and then I said, *Angel Raphael please bring back the boy home, in the name of Jesus may the boy reach here!* As Jesus was telling me, after a week so it happened. One fine day, the boy came out from his unconscious state and he saw two people with guns. They wanted to take his kidneys and throw his flesh to the sea. He said: *I want to go for toilet and I'm so hungry!* To get hungry is not good for the kidneys: they may get spoiled. So, they rushed, and they told him: yes! Many times, he went to the toilet. There was a small hole, he called out the name of Jesus, he called out the name of the gods. Then somebody told him to come, and he put his head outside. Somehow Angel Raphael pulled him out. Outside he rushed out, climbed into a train and he got out. He saw somebody and asked for help. The person asked him: *Where are you from? I'm from Shillong. Oh I'm from Assam we are northeast!* Then people were able to call, and the boy said: *I'm in Chennai, I want to come back home*! His father cried. They brought the child back to Assam to his parents. When they came back after two days, they called me, *Sister, thank you, the boy came back as you have said!* I said: *I never said, Jesus said, don't give the credit to me, I'm nothing I'm only a rotten body, you'll be afraid of me after my death but know that Jesus is doing all these, He is my power!* When I went to meet them again, the whole lot of Hindu people they came to worship me, just like their gods. I said: *Don't do this!* Then I told the boy, *Sit down son*! Then Jesus told me take out his shirt. On his shoulder, there was black mark left by sedatives. He also had black color where they touched him with the cigarette. They tested whether he was alive, so that they may get his organs. Then we prayed the thanksgiving prayer and all of them joined with tears."

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