

AN INTERVIEW WITH A GODDESS: POSSESSION RITES AS REGULATORS OF JUSTICE AMONG THE PNAR OF NORTHEASTERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on primary fieldwork carried out between 2012 and 2017 in Chyrmang, Jaintia Hills. Among the Pnar of Jaintia Hills, Northeastern India, the practice of *hiar blai* or divine possession is significantly embedded in the everyday lives of the community members. I argue that possession rites mediate and regulate social norm and clan justice, through the intercession of the gods and goddesses in the village. The reflexive nature of fieldwork process sought to demonstrate the non-absolute positionality of the researcher, and informants and attempted to find ways how to articulate informant's voices while at the same time protecting their identities.

Introduction

The Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya, Northeastern India, are home to the Pnar ethnic community, many of whom follow “indigenous”¹ religious practices within a framework that has historically integrated some facets of Hindu and Christian traditions. Within this Pnar system of ritual, possession of the human body by localized deities plays a significant role in divination, healing, and the construction of belief² worlds and perspectives in daily lives. For six years, I have conducted research on possession by certain deities in the village of Chyrmang: the twin gods Ram/Lakhon and the powerful river goddess K—. ³ This article documents rituals associated

¹ In this paper, I utilize the term “indigenous” to refer to community-specific ritual and practices of the Pnar.

² While one is not scholarly capable of “measuring” beliefs, *per se*, it is possible to analyze and interpret expressions of belief alongside their manifestations. Henceforth, I use the word “belief” in this manner, meaning “a creative expression,” as it is used in the term “belief narrative” in the discipline of folkloristics by scholars such as Kaarina Koski (2008) and Reet Hiimäe (2016).

³ Out of respect, I do not print the full name of the goddess throughout. I was asked to not “carry” her name outside of the village boundaries.

with these possessions, which have never before been reported in academic media, and analyzes them in the context of the goddess K— and her narrative history. In the case study presented here, the possession of a Pnar medium by goddess K— elucidates a longstanding feud within the Khasi community, in which the summoning of a supernatural power has brought about personal and familial misfortune. More broadly, Pnar goddess possession can be viewed as a regulator of community behavior and clan loyalty, linking modern-day Pnar peoples to their origins in indigenous religious interactions with the non-human. An indigenous concept of justice is embedded in the consequences of norm infringement as it is experienced by individual Pnar clan members. Justice is “served” through the creation of cultural space, the articulation of performance rites, and the perpetuation of fear directed at deities, who often exact vengeance.

Contextualizing the Pnar

The Pnar constitute a distinct Austroasiatic ethnic community of about 400,000 people within the broader Khasi population of the state of Meghalaya. Although the Pnar, like other Khasi groups, speak a language that belongs to the Mon Khmer language family, it is distinct and not necessarily comprehensible to other Khasi.⁴ The Pnar are also sometimes known as “Synteng” or “Jaintia,” and even though they self-identify as “Pnar,” their land is called the Jaintia Hills. Scattered populations can additionally be found in neighbouring Assam (India) and Bangladesh. The Pnar follow a matrilineal system; descent is typically traced to a female progenitor of the clan, and it continues through the female line.⁵ The youngest daughter holds the social right to be identified as the heir of all family-owned possessions and is considered to be the custodian of family property; it is her responsibility to protect it for posterity.

The case study presented here focuses on a Pnar Catholic family. Among the Pnar, the dominant religion in modern times is in fact Christianity, primarily Catholicism and Presbyterianism. Among the Khasi, tensions are often high between the two groups; these pressures affect the daily lives of church members. However, in Pnar communities, hostility also exists between Christian converts and non-converts, those who still practice the indigenous Pnar clan- and community-oriented belief

⁴ It is for this reason that I am unfamiliar with the Pnar language and was required to use a translator.

⁵ In the case of the goddess K—, she takes her father’s clan name because her mother was non-Pnar.

system known as *Niam Tre*⁶ (“root/original religion” in the vernacular dialect). These disputes can manifest in instances of violence directed against those members who are non-Christians (see *The Shillong Times* 2011; 2014; 2016); yet, borders between religious traditions are disputed and/or understood in a variety of ways, fluidly: expressions of belief are not fixed (in terms of both ideas and practice), and crossover between religious traditions is found. For instance, a Presbyterian family told me that they do not mind going to a traditional healer as long as there is no blood sacrifice involved (Wahiajer Village, Jaintia Hills, 2011–2012). Similarly, Nesley, a traditional Taro⁷ possession healer in the same village, identifies as a Presbyterian Christian as well as a practitioner of this particular form of healing. She uses both charms and prayer in order to heal, and she provides amulets and protective instruments to those in need. The Church is aware that she heals people possessed by the indigenous entity Taro, but she is still allowed to practice healing and remain in the Presbyterian Christian community. This is because her healing practices do not involve Pnar traditional deities and she mainly uses “prayer” to heal. This form of healing is acceptable to the Church, although Nesley never clarified in the interviews with me which deities she prays to. I encountered a similar case in Nartiang (2013): the healer, who also treated Taro possession, belonged to the traditional religion⁸ but his Pnar clients were of all faiths. Thus, for Christian Pnars, the boundaries between what constitutes “Christian practice” and what does

⁶ I think that the word *niam* is a borrowing from the Bengali “Niyom” which means “customs” and this term might have been influenced by historical Bengali contact with the Pnar. Khasi and Pnar today have adapted this word to represent religion as is contemporarily understood. In 1898 when the Seng Khasi was founded, it originally began as a socio-cultural organization for the protection and preservation of the Khasi ritual practices. A name was required to identify Khasi belief and ritual practices, hence *Niam Tynrai* was chosen. Khasi “religion” as it is today remains clan and community oriented, except in Shillong and Jowai towns where it has been formalized and modelled according to the frames of Christianity.

⁷ Taro is a female Pnar entity who possesses persons who have taken money from its “keeper” or “owner.” Taro possession is characterized by symptoms that may range from violent convulsions to mild illness; possessions often involve talking in different male/female speech registers. The most characteristic affliction that Taro brings about is the rotation of the victim’s head 180 degrees back and, in this case, only a powerful Taro healer can intervene.

⁸ I choose to name the Pnar indigenous religious practices as “religion” because I think naming them as such invests these practices, followed by a minority population, with more agency.

not is dependent on context; such designations are fluid and permeable. Healers of indigenous ailments may themselves be Christian, and Christians may still fall victim to traditional Pnar possessions⁹ and seek help from indigenous practitioners.

In addition to Christianity, the Pnar 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 Pnar people then adopted. As a result, contemporary Pnar community traditions have integrated some aspects of Hinduism. For instance, Durga Puja, a Hindu celebration, is observed with great ceremony in Nartiang—the historical summer capital of the Jaintia Kingdom—and is dedicated to the Pnar goddess Jainteshwari, who is today commonly identified with Durga by the Pnar. Similarly, in Jaintiapur, the Hindu goddess Kali is worshipped alongside indigenous Pnar counterparts. In Pnar rituals and practices there is a significant presence of Hindu deities, including Ram, Lakhon (Laksman), Konka (Ganga), Durka (Durga) and Sitala (the smallpox goddess). In sum, both Christianity and Hinduism have impacted the religious framework of the Pnar peoples; indigenous practices that have been affected by Hinduism (and Catholicism)¹⁰ are the focus of this paper.

This article illustrates the role of possession in preserving and enforcing clan norms. It does so by documenting possession by the river goddess K—. Possession among the Pnar manifests in different ways ranging from quiet sickness to raging convulsions. The typical cultural marker of malevolent possession is said to be the turning of the head 180 degrees around and its freezing in this position. But sometimes, this symptom can occur when an individual has transgressed against a god/dess. Pnar mediums, who may be male or female, can be possessed by deities such as the twin gods Ram–Lakhon or Durka–Konka. Thakur,¹¹ the Pnar equivalent of the Hindu disease goddess Sitala, is

⁹ A Catholic woman (thirty years) in Southern Jaintia Hills was afflicted by Taro. Her family requested help from the local Church, and her nephew also made a prayer request in the Facebook group of Catholics in Meghalaya (*Ka Balang Katholik ha Ri Khasi Jaintia* [the Catholic Church in Khasi Jaintia Hills]) on 11.03.17. After a week, this lady expired. Her nephew uploaded photos onto Facebook which was how I came to know about it.

¹⁰ While the family that I worked with is Catholic, this paper focuses on the indigenous parts of the Pnar religion that they follow. These indigenous aspects themselves include Hindu elements.

¹¹ The popular Hindu disease goddess Sitala is named Thakur in Pnar. An individual who falls ill with smallpox is said to be visited by Thakur or *mih blai* (“manifestation of the goddess”) or *wan blai* (“coming of the goddess”) in the

associated with the parallel deity Budchap in possession narratives, and both are often affiliated with water goddesses. Goddess possessions can be either fearsome or benign. It is worth stressing as well that a great number of deities are site-specific; it is the pervasive influence of this multitude of unique deities that makes it difficult to define Khasi or Pnar religion as hegemonic or systematic. Procedures for the propitiation of each deity vary, and narratives about them often conflict with one another. Blai Sungia manifests himself in Tuber Village and is warmly referred to as *woh san* (“eldest grandfather”). In Ialong village, the Myntdu river goddess manifests herself through the phenomenon called *mih Myntdu* (“manifestation of Myntdu”). In the village of Pasyih, a woman of the Dkhar clan is the chosen medium for the goddess called Ka Bang. Additionally, there was traditionally one water goddess per village who possessed a person who lived there in order that the goddess could “come into the world of men”¹² to address “human” problems. It is my search for, and location of, one such river goddess that is described in this paper. Her possession reveals the place of the individual within the clan structure and reinforces clan history.

In Search of a Goddess

In 2002, long before my fieldwork began, a young Pnar woman named Aisuk,¹³ whom I had known from childhood, began a search for her origins, which were connected with the worship and mediumship of the river goddess K—. The line of inquiry that she initiated ultimately led to me, too, having an interview with the goddess K—. Aisuk’s family had been affected for many years by a “curse” that transcended generations. It began when an ancestor of her family—the great-grandmother of her father, Starwel—abandoned the worship of the river goddess in the village of Chyrmang, after this goddess had aided this woman, known as Mon. Aisuk’s family stopped propitiating goddess K— after moving to the urban center of Shillong. However, this angered the river goddess K—, who then began to afflict the family’s children, their children, and so on, up until Aisuk’s generation. The family is Catholic, but nonetheless they retain belief in many aspects of indigenous Pnar

Pnar language—also, *wa ioh thakur* (“to get *Thakur*”). Despite illness, it is seen as a privilege to receive such a divine visitation (See also Gurdon 1914, 108).

¹² As described to me during my fieldwork (2012, 2013, 2014, 2016).

¹³ In order to protect personal privacy, most names in the narrative that follows are pseudonyms. I am very close to the family involved and in order to make a narrative from my experiences, I have also had to alter slightly the characters included in the telling of it.

religion, such as in this river goddess.¹⁴ I present below a translation of an account by Starwel that I transcribed:

It was long ago, members of our clan, you know how it was, our T—¹⁵ Clan, few of our families, moved from Nongtalang village to Chyrmang in Jaintia Hills. It was from here that our family migrated to Shillong in search of better opportunities. But they tell a story about a faction of our family, about what happened long ago in Chyrmang and how it affects us even today. We don't talk about it; we are afraid. It was said long ago that our ancestor, a woman from our clan, held the responsibility of worshipping a deity—I will not name it here, for I am afraid to even speak her name. Once, our T— ancestor visited the weekly market at Musiang. As she was making her purchases, she encountered a woman whom she met only on the market days and with whom she shared only a cursory relationship. This woman had a grudge against our ancestress—where our ancestress went in the market she followed. Our ancestress selected a kilo of vegetables from a vendor at the market, and just as she was about to put it inside her bag, this woman came to the vendor and said, 'give me that portion, I will pay more.' And the vendor practically took the vegetables he was about to give to our ancestress and gave it to the other woman. Our ancestress said nothing at this obvious slight. But, this other woman was relentless and she followed our ancestress to every shop she went [to] and repeated the slight. You see, it was an attempt to disrespect and dishonour, and, you know, us Pnar, we believe very strongly in respect and honour.

Our ancestress said nothing; she did not even acknowledge the woman or repudiate her. Instead, she went back to Chyrmang, her village, and she took a goat and went to the bank of this river, this River K—, and she sacrificed the goat and she pleaded for justice from the Deity. That evening, the husband of the woman who had dishonoured our ancestress, died. Next morning, her son died, and, evening, it was her daughter. It was then that this woman realized what had happened. She came to our ancestress to beg for forgiveness and our ancestress relented. She went to the River and gave thanks and she said, 'it is enough.' The deaths then stopped in the other woman's family.

You see, when our great-grandmother left Chyrmang to come to Shillong, she gave up the worship of this deity without the proper rites or rituals, and, after [our great-grandmother's death], grandmother Mon dishonoured K— by eating beef.¹⁶ She suffered greatly; her neck turned

¹⁴ As is common in Northeast Indian Christianity, Catholicism allows for the integration of some indigenous practices, whereas Protestant groups tend to push for the exclusion of them.

¹⁵ The name of the clan associated with this deity is also here redacted.

¹⁶ Eating beef is considered taboo in indigenous Pnar religion, and, in this case,

around a hundred and eighty degrees. The ritual performer was able to heal her, but since then, we have paid the price of the dishonour. Our family is broken and there [are] always bad deaths, misfortunes, and sickness. This is the reason.

Aisuk and I both heard Starwel tell this narrative. It later turned out to be a valuable source of information which allowed Aisuk ultimately to make peace with the river goddess. It became clearer to me that the great-grandmother of my informant, Mon, had stopped veneration and denied mediumship of the river goddess and left Chyrmang because she was chosen to be the next vessel of this deity K—. She was frightened and did not want to be the river goddess's vessel; therefore, she fled. The repercussions of Aisuk's great-great-grandmother's actions continued to plague her family. In 2005, Starwel, his wife, Aisuk, and her sister sat around the fire and invoked the goddess's name. They pledged that they would keep the beef taboo that is crucial to maintaining and showing reverence to the goddess K—, in an attempt to make reparations for the wrong his ancestress had committed. That year, each of them—individually and as a family—experienced many changes which were beneficial and rewarding. Starwel lost his job, but received another more prestigious one. Aisuk won a scholarship to study in a foreign country¹⁷ and her older sister also found a very good job that year.¹⁸ Since Aisuk's mother does not belong to the T— clan, she did not experience any special changes. But she does maintain the beef taboo.

Years later, in January 2011, when I began my fieldwork on possession in the Jaintia Hills, I became interested in possessions by malevolent, disease-causing entities, such as those pertaining to Taro, as well as in possession by deities. This was partly because of Aisuk's experience with her clan goddess and partly because of the “discourse” of fear that surrounds research on topics that pertain to the supernatural.¹⁹ But I quickly discovered that pursuing fieldwork on malevolent Taro possession was problematic; I was regarded with suspicion in the villages, and people did not wish to speak openly about this topic. However, engaging with people on the topic of goddess possession gave them the impression

would be an affront to the goddess K— (as would be eating potato).

¹⁷ No one else in Aisuk's family or extended clan has ever been outside of India to pursue studies. As such, this is considered prestigious in her clan and community.

¹⁸ Aisuk's older sister now has a prestigious job in Europe.

¹⁹ One way of explaining the lack of existing research on the phenomenon of the goddess possession, or malevolent Taro possession, may be the mental, emotional, and geographical distance that city dwellers have from the rural Pnar experience.

that I was a petitioner, looking for help, or that I was doing research for a book. In other words, divine possession was easier to find information about.

Because of my friendship with Aisuk, I was interested in examining her family situation and the narrative Starwel told us. Thus, when I decided to look further into narratives surrounding the river goddess K—, who had so greatly affected Aisuk's family lineage, my interest was not entirely academic. However, as I began to realize the role that the river goddess plays in Pnar society, I understood that this could serve as a research project as well. Therefore, in January 2012, I asked people in Shillong where I might find the village of Chyrmang, where the great-grandmother's invocation of K— had originally occurred. I came to know that Chyrmang village is located close to Syntu Ksiar (Golden Flower²⁰), a popular picnic spot on the banks of the River Myntdu. But at the time the road to Chyrmang was very bad; Aisuk and I hired a jeep with special gears to drive us there, and Aisuk's aunt came with us to act as translator. When we reached Chyrmang, it was desolate and deserted; the villagers had all gone to Iaw Musiang, the weekly market. This fact struck us: in Starwel's original narrative, the ancestress had encountered the jealous woman at this same market, Iaw Musiang. Aisuk told me that until that moment she had been uncertain about the veracity of the narrative told by her father.

We approached a house that belonged to Aisuk's clan members²¹ to enquire about K—. The people there confirmed that there was indeed a woman, known as Lut T—, who was responsible for venerating the river goddess K—. (From the time when Aisuk's great-grandmother Mon had fled the village, the goddess had lived only in the experience of sacred places and narratives connected with Her within the community until Lut T— had taken on the responsibility of acting as a medium.) The Chyrmang villagers instructed us to go to Lut T— on another day, if we wanted to meet her. Aisuk confided in me at the time that she had recurring dreams about the river goddess wherein the goddess manifested herself to Aisuk.

²⁰ Syntu Ksiar is historically significant for the Pnar. In 1862, it was the site of the public hanging of the Pnar freedom fighter, Kiang Nangbah.

²¹ The Pnar (and Khasi) social construction of clan is such that clan members often do not know of one another. This is why, when a boy and girl decide that they want to marry, the first order of business is to find out if there is any relationship between the clans at all. If a connection is found, the ties between the boy and girl are immediately severed. If a couple from the same clan happen to marry, then they are ostracized and people are fearful of getting infected by *sang* (mortal sin), so such a couple is avoided by the community.

We were both very eager and apprehensive the next time that we returned to Chyrmang. We were accompanied by Starwel and Nancy,²² who acted as a translator for the day. We were told that Lut T— was washing clothes in the nearby stream. We found Lut, who was pregnant at the time, by the water. I approached her and asked Nancy if she (Nancy) could tell Lut that I was a researcher, enquiring if I could speak with her. (At that moment, I did not introduce Aisuk or explain her family's connection to the river goddess.) Additionally, I added with my researcher's "prerogative" that I would like to go to the place sacred to the river goddess and perhaps even take a photograph. However, all my translator told Lut was that I would "like to see the river goddess and to take and picture of Her."²³ Lut flushed and spoke to me harshly, saying, as I remember it, "Do you want to die?"²⁴—We were taken aback. But seeing our reaction, Lut relented a little, explaining—and I paraphrase: "You have no idea what this goddess is about and you come from the city with your foolish requests not knowing anything about this. This will lead to your death!" She walked away from me.

Aisuk and I ran after her but she paid us no heed. Aisuk was worried that she would lose her one chance to correct the "curse" on her family. Aisuk asked Starwel, who had accompanied us to Chyrmang but waited in the jeep while we went to look for Lut, to intercede on our behalf. In keeping with the respect typically shown to the elderly among the Pnar, Lut agreed to speak with us. In a verandah at her neighbour's house, we had our first interview with Lut T—. Aisuk and Starwel told Lut that they were clan members and recounted the narrative about the abandonment of the propitiation and veneration of goddess K—. Starwel asked Lut what she thought had happened to the instruments and ritual articles that his great-grandmother had used. Lut replied that after such a long time, it would be hard to locate them.²⁵

²² Nancy is Aisuk's aunt's housekeeper (in Wahiajer village). Because Aisuk's aunt was unwilling to go with us (she is a strict Presbyterian), she sent Nancy with us.

²³ I do not understand the Pnar language, but it was only later that Nancy explained to us what she had asked. Lut's initial reply was simple enough that I understood it.

²⁴ Part of her response could additionally be because she was pregnant. In Khasi belief, taking a photo of a pregnant woman is considered undesirable because it would harm the unborn fetus.

²⁵ When Starwel's great-grandmother had abandoned the worship of the river goddess, she abandoned all valuable materials and artifacts connected with worship.

During this conversation, I learned that when Lut was first becoming a medium three years previously (in 2009), she had become very ill for two years with what was later identified to be illness²⁶ connected with her being chosen as a medium. She eventually had gone to seek the advice of a deity in the neighbouring village, manifested through the medium of possession in another female. This other goddess²⁷ told Lut that she had been chosen to become the vehicle of the river deity K—. The evidence of this conferred position was a lock of Lut's hair that was long and different from the rest of her hair. Once she accepted the responsibility of being the medium of K—, she became well. Lut now mediates the goddess through possession each morning between nine and ten o'clock, but otherwise leads a normal life, raising four children and participating in the community. When we enquired further about her mediumship, she told Aisuk and me that we should come and speak with the deities themselves; she herself, she said, had no knowledge. Aisuk was happy, because she had the opportunity to correct her family's previous shortcomings; I was happy because I was finally going to understand the cultural context of what she had grown up with. Somehow, Aisuk's fear that she used to associate with the river deity did not seem so overwhelming anymore. For her, the clan narrative became a way to reconnect with her Pnar origins. And although Aisuk did not know Lut until the moment when she met her in Chyrmang, she said she felt very connected to the river goddess, whom, had her ancestor Mon not fled, she (Aisuk) would now hold the role of mediating.²⁸

At the appointed time a few days later, we went to witness Lut's possession by the twin deities Ram–Lakhon. Many other people had come to seek the help of the gods in curing their illnesses. We were strictly instructed not to take any videos or photographs. We patiently sat down and waited for the possession to occur.²⁹ Lut cleaned herself and undid her

²⁶ There is no specific Pnar word which I have found during my fieldwork which refers to such illness.

²⁷ Lut was not willing to impart the name of the village, the deity, or the woman who had informed her that she (Lut) was chosen to become a medium.

²⁸ If Aisuk's great great-grandmother had not abandoned worship of the river goddess, it would have been Aisuk's rightful inheritance to become the goddess K—'s vessel. And although inheritance of such "gifts" are passed though the maternal line, since Aisuk's mother was non-Pnar, and Aisuk took her father's clan name, the possibility of inheriting this mediumship is made possible.

²⁹ On this particular occasion, Aisuk and I were accompanied by her driver who parked the car. (We found an easier road to Chyrmang which, while still difficult, did not require the use of a jeep.) The driver fell asleep inside the car, which was

hair. She went into a hut that was constructed specially for the purpose of facilitating her possession. She bound her head with a ritual cloth, covered herself with another ritual cloth, and lay down on a mat, falling into *thiah blai* (“godsleep”).³⁰ Then the people gathered there entreated and pleaded in ritual language with the deities Ram and Lakhon, begging them to come into this world of men to help them with human troubles.

The onset of Lut’s possession was indicated by her humming a melody. Then she sat up quite suddenly, as if startled. At this moment, she had become possessed by Ram and Lakhon. The two deities then answered the first question asked by a villager using Lut’s body as a vehicle; Lut, now Ram–Lakhon, examined the betel leaves that symbolized the petitioner’s *nusip* (“fate”). Another petitioner had come with her child to seek help. Her baby was ill and crying all the time and the woman could not understand why. The gods Ram–Lakhon asked if the woman had violated taboo and had eaten potato in the previous days, and the answer was affirmative.³¹

Aisuk was next in the queue. Ram and Lakhon scrutinized the betel leaf which she had kept on the ceremonial brass plate and then they turned to her directly and asked, “What do you want to know?” Nancy translated this for us. Aisuk asked Ram–Lakhon straightforwardly about the misfortunes of her family and their cause. Ram and Lakhon, speaking through Lut T—, told Aisuk that there was *ka lait ka let* (“shortcoming”) on the part of her clan, stemming from an offense that had been committed. It was this “shortcoming” that continued to afflict her family. Ram–Lakhon gently told her that she should drink the ritual water and that they would go back home with her to see her safely back.

Aisuk broached the subject of the river goddess with Lut T—. Lut told her that it was possible to talk with the goddess, but she would have to bring ritual artifacts. Additionally, she had to ask Ram–Lakhon for permission and enquire whether they would agree to escort goddess K— into the world to speak with her. It would be two years before we were able to meet the river goddess K—. In January 2013, we returned to Chyrmang,

parked in front of the entrance to Lut’s family house. At some point, he came to us visibly shaken, while we were waiting for the possession to take place and told us, that he had dreamed that he was sleeping in the car. Two deities woke him up and told him to move the car as it would obstruct their passage to Lut. He woke up and just moved the car somewhere else.

³⁰ When Lut goes into *thiah blai* or godsleep, her limbs begin to hurt and she is unaware of her surroundings.

³¹ I understood that taboo food was an important aspect of possession rituals across the Jaintia Hills.

bringing with us the requested ritual items: dry fish, a banana, a basket, betel nut, and ten rupees. This visit was motivated by my research interests and I requested Aisuk to come along. Since neither of us had a special request we wanted to ask of the deity, we understood that we were not required to bring a goat and two chickens to sacrifice. We also were accompanied by a different translator,³² Ma Pde, who kindly agreed to help us. Starwel also came with us.

As before, the summoning of the deities took place in full view of other people who had come that day to seek the help of Ram-Lakhon. We were prohibited from making any video recordings or taking any pictures. The event was held at noon, and even though the twin deities had already mediated the problems of the people who had arrived to seek help on that day, our presence—that of obvious strangers—in the village of Chyrmang, caused the petitioners to stay back and watch the whole performance, awaiting goddess K—. We witnessed the possession in the ceremonially dedicated room;³³ the audience remained outside. After Ram-Lakhon had ministered to the problems of all the people there, the deities looked at Aisuk and said, “Don’t be afraid of any form the Mother takes.”

While she was still possessed by Ram-Lakhon, Lut T— went into another *thiah blai* (or godsleep) and the onset of the possession was once more marked by the medium’s humming of a tune, deeper and more compelling than the melody which indicated the coming of the lesser deities. The tune was moving and reverberated through the immediate confines of the room. This time when she awoke, there was a perceptible change in the ambience of light, atmosphere, and personality. Her voice altered from a feminine register to a masculine one. She began to talk. The goddess was angry that we had summoned her without the respectful sacrifice of two goats.

Below I recreate and translate³⁴ the conversation with the river goddess K—.

³² In 2013, our translator was forty-three years old. He held a position in the state government and was recommended by a mutual friend of Aisuk and me.

³³ No leather, beef or sandals are allowed inside this room. There is no electric connection in it either. Entrance into this room for outsiders is strictly for formal purposes. Although I was prohibited from taking any pictures or any video, I was not told that a voice recorder was not allowed. In accordance with the goddess’s wishes, I have not shared this recording or played it for an audience. Later Starwel told me that although I could use the audio to listen by myself, I could not ever play the recording for anyone else. My translator helped me make this translation which I reproduce below. I was allowed to reproduce the narratives that the goddess told me by Lut.

³⁴ I had initial concerns about presenting this sacred conversation, which has been transcribed and translated, because of the goddess’s wishes that I do not popularize her. However, after talking to several scholars and Pnar elders, I was advised that these words of the goddess are not truly “presented” because they have been relocated from the original Pnar language to English. Hence, these

*Translator*³⁵ (to Ram–Lakhan): We want to ask and enquire about the origins and roots of K—,³⁶ from where did she come from, for the purpose of study by her (referring to me). So, we want to ask whatever you can tell us of the goddess’s origins. And during *hiar blai*,³⁷ does the deity come only through female or male also, as a medium?

*Ram–Lakhan: Heit!*³⁸ The goddess comes through the person whoever bears the name³⁹ irrespective of male or female. It can come through both male and female.

Translator: (begins a sentence but is cut off by Ram–Lakhan)

Ram–Lakhan: (Starting the appeal) A thousand thanks and respectful appeals to K— from we who are like children and babies compared to You, to kindly deliver and speak to us in your own words about this. [...] So, we’ll proceed now, ok! So now, before we start, we will appeal and pray, ok, so that so we’ll proceed now ... (breathing deeply) Shhh! (breathing in) Hmm . . .

*K—: Heit sale!*⁴⁰ Who is that to calls on me? *Heit!* In whose name have I been summoned⁴¹?

Translator: The name is —

words only approximate the meaning of her speech, without articulating the sounds of the goddess themselves. The only words that I left unchanged are the exclamation “*heit*” and the curse “*sale*.”

³⁵ As a Pnar, he was fully aware of the *hiar blai* (“goddess descent”) practice in that region and he was able to soothe the angry goddess by immediately appealing to her role as mother. This translator speaks both Pnar and Khasi and he was the one who spoke directly to the Goddess on Aisuk’s and my behalf and translated our questions from Khasi into Pnar. The only instruction that we gave him beforehand was that he ask the river deity about her origins.

³⁶ “*Beipun*” (“eldest-mother;” the elder sister of the mother; it could mean “grandmother”) was sometimes used to affectionately refer to the goddess K—; there is often a focus on the maternal element of the goddess and many Pnar are unwilling to call out her true name.

³⁷ *Hiar blai* means “goddess descent; descent.”

³⁸ This is an exclamation of irritation or annoyance.

³⁹ Or, “whom the name selects.”

⁴⁰ “*Sale*” is a curse word. In the Hindi language, it means “I am fucking your sister.” Here, it is used by the goddess as a way to curse and express extreme annoyance and anger towards me and Aisuk, the researcher and petitioner. Cursing in polite and solemn situations among the Pnar is culturally considered inexcusable. However, the goddess transgresses human norms.

⁴¹ At this point, Aisuk seemed flushed and frightened.

K—: So what do you want to ask of me? Why do you bother me (getting angry)—what do you want from me? *Sale!*

Translator: Please don't be angry or mad—be calm—we come in peace, Mother (supplicates himself in front of the goddess).

K—: *Heit!* Why do you trouble me, I, who cannot read or write—or what you talk of? What do you want? Tell me bluntly, what do you ask of me?

Translator: We have heard about you and the good deeds that are done by you in this locality and in the community, so there is some writing or documenting that we wish to carry [out] about your name and honour.

K—: *Heit!* O humans (people) of this world. How dare you carry my name, my words, and my sayings outside of where I am. I forbid you to do so, I who am the head and order here, you understand! I will tell you about me but I forbid you to record it. I will tell you only this, oh, children and grandchildren! And you can also go and see where I had come from but you cannot record it with film!

(starts to sing)

Ah, branches and descendents! Ah, people of this world!

Ah, about me you want to tell stories!

Heit Sale! What is your intention? Tell me! So, you want to write and speak about me? To tell stories, *etc.* If you want me to speak to you in my language, then you have to give me (a sacrifice); if you don't give me then I will not tell you. If you dare, then you can carry my word and story. If you're asking about the mother of goddess K— to tell of her origins and history then I am not willing to tell you . . . But if you're willing to please me with what I ask then . . . *Heit!* People of this world.

Look, I will tell you this: that my origins are from the clan Dkhar⁴² and my father comes from the Nongtalang clan. Our mother had left me and my little sister with what she had and what she was able to give. When we would go to the fields and to the earth, some people would take us along when they went out fishing and gathering, and I, the eldest, was left behind and left alone. When these people would offer rice and eatables to my little sister the deity, I would also eat and consume along with her [...]

⁴² The mother of the goddess is Sarojini Dkhar; her father was Pda T—. The goddess told us that she belonged to the T— clan, and I wondered about the fact that in a matrilineal system, the goddess should have belonged to her mother's clan. I then realised that Sarojini was Dkhar, which means "outsider" or "non-Pnar", and if a Khasi man marries a Dkhar woman, she must institute a new clan, which explains why the goddess belongs to her father's clan.

My father was hacked to pieces⁴³ by people and was lost and gone, and my mother roamed the land, where she drank the river, drank the water.

So only this I will tell you. If you want to know about the origins, then will you dare to give me the things that I consume?

Translator: Regarding that, we will have to think first! O mother! We wanted to ...

K—: *Heit!* Oh children! So you have not thought about it? Your own offerings, your own givings.

So I will not tell you anymore about my beginnings and origins. I have told you so.

If you want to go and see my place where I'm from you can do so but you are not able and not allowed to record it or take pictures. I, who have seen and knows the world. Me and the goddess Syntu Ksiar (the River Kupli⁴⁴) grew up together. We, together as deities and queens.

Translator: Oh Deity, that's why we come to you first to ask and enquire. We will never try anything without your consent and permission. Until today we haven't tried anything without consulting you first.

K—: Oh children, I have told you about my origins, that I come from the Dkhar clan, but the community and people would despise and ill-treat us. We didn't get any food or water and our mother was not able to provide for us, for she was chased by the people of this world. So, I and my sister moved and we went to stay and settle in the forest and waters. When the

⁴³ Here the goddess refers to the myth that her father, Pda T—, was the originator of paddy cultivation among the Pnar. For the crime of distributing the paddy seeds, he was hacked to death by his employer. From the dead body of Pda grew the Dienglieng tree, which is still today a taboo tree, the wood of which cannot be used for building, cremations, or cultivation by members of the T— clan. The next time we summoned the goddess, we were able to ascertain that in her narrative, Pda T— was hacked to pieces by the female clan elder of the Shylla clan in whose fields he worked because he, Pda, had collected the rice grains which had stuck to his hair, and distributed these grains to the members of the community, thus beginning rice cultivation on earth. For this, he was punished with death.

⁴⁴ Kupli is a significant goddess in the worldview of the Pnar. Although I have searched for literary references and asked residents of Jowai about the family of Kupli, I have as of yet found no additional record of the relationship between goddess K— and the Kupli goddess. Later, Lut and her mother mentioned to us that Kupli and K— both originated from the Thlumui River, which is where, in Pnar mythology, Loh Ryndi caught his divine wife, Lih Dakha. Their children founded the chieftainship of Sutnga. A very good variant of the tale of Loh Ryndi has been written by H. H. Mohrmen and is available online at <http://hhmohrmen.blogspot.com/2008/11/legends-folktales-and-festivals.html>.

sins and misdeeds are taken by the River I take them here and my sister takes them downstream. [...] So now you will no longer hold me here, now because I have to return back to my home and children. I will give you some water⁴⁵ for your journey.

After this the goddess blessed us and stroked our heads, saying that if our deepest wishes came true, then we would have to come back and make the sacrifice. She also blessed our translator. After the possession was over, our translator overheard Lut ask her mother, who was nearby, “*Bei*, what happened? Did She (the goddess) come, was She angry?”

After the possession was over, Aisuk was overwhelmed; Starwel, less so. I was glad to have witnessed such a possession. Starwel, Aisuk and I agreed that we would make a sacrifice of a goat and two chickens at the next possible opportunity, regardless of whether our wishes came true. Immediately after this event, we all went to our translator’s house in Jowai, the headquarters of the Jaintia Hills. We sat down and the translator kindly explained to all of us what the goddess had said and also the ramifications of her demand. He warned us that if, after the river goddess had blessed us, we received what we had wished for, it was imperative that we make the goat sacrifice.

As it happened, Aisuk’s deepest wish came true, as did mine. But it was only in the summer of 2016 that the three of us—Starwel, Aisuk, and I—returned to arrange for the sacrifice that had been requested. As women, Aisuk, Lut, and I were not permitted to be present for this sacrifice or for the ritual that preceded it, because only men were allowed.⁴⁶ On the designated day—coordinated so that it would not occur on the same day as ritual possession—the sacrifice of one goat and two chickens was carried out in the sacred place of the goddess, near the sacred forest, the location of which we were not told. The ritual was carried out by a ritual performer from Chyrmang and the actual goat sacrifice was performed by Lut’s husband. Three men and two boys who I didn’t have the chance to meet, also accompanied them to the ritual at the sacred forest. Although Aisuk’s family bore the brunt of the cost, I contributed as well, as I, too, had been involved and consequently received blessings from her. Although kinship relations have not been restored with other factions of the clan, Aisuk’s family is now content

⁴⁵ *Um kshiar um rupa*: “water of silver, water of gold; healing, blessed water.”

⁴⁶ The location of the sacrifice is called the *khloo lyngdoh* (“ritual specialist/sacred forest”), where all sacred rites and rituals are performed. Although a woman might hold the skill to perform different rites, she is still not allowed into the *khloo lyngdoh* while a ritual is taking place.

that they have attempted to correct their ancestor's betrayal of K—. As for me, I have since returned several times to the village of Chyrmang to conduct further fieldwork with Lut T—, and I have witnessed more possessions by Ram–Lakhon.

The Pnar Deities as Regulators of Community and Clan

Aisuk's narrative helps to introduce the question, what constitutes supernatural justice among the Pnar?⁴⁷ In Aisuk's narrative, the woman who slights the ancestress by buying her vegetables first is punished by the goddess K— through the death of her family members. After this occurs, the ancestress returns to K—, whom she has summoned, and says, "It is enough." However, the killing of her husband and children stands out as a very harsh consequence of buying vegetables away from someone else. There are two parts to the narrative: the first part, wherein the dishonor and its retribution take place; and the second, wherein the consequences of abandoning the river goddess are elucidated. The first section is projected into the distant past and informs us of the severe justice that the river goddess can serve. The narrative seems to have a warning function, which is then immediately connected to the consequences of narrative: if a slight against the clan occurs, there is reparation by immediate death. This is different from the way that other deities exact reparation; many other gods and goddesses only bring about illness or slow death.

It becomes clear that the ideas of honour and dishonour are central to Pnar life; the idea of "dishonouring" someone can lead to group death. Further, a supernatural intermediary is used to bring about these deaths. In the Pnar context honour is linked to fulfilling the responsibilities towards the clan; dishonour is linked to transgressing or neglecting them. "Know your clansmen/know your clanswomen" is one of the three guidelines which are stressed in the Pnar traditional religion.⁴⁸ This suggests that deities among the Pnar can be viewed as regulators of community justice, those who are appealed to when human slights have occurred. Writing on possession rituals in the Central Himalayas, William Sax discusses rituals that include healing, spirit possession

⁴⁷ Scheid has recorded that among the Adi of Arunachal Pradesh, social justice can be the result of possession; for example, in cases when the "spirit" that manifests through possession is a recently dead community member who is attempting to avenge his or her murder who then names his or her killer (2015).

⁴⁸ The other two are, "know man, know God" and "man has come in to this world in order to earn righteousness." These three precepts have been emphasized by the Seng Khasi (among the Khasi) and the Seiñ Raij (among the Pnar). These groups were instituted to preserve the traditional religion in the face of Christian conversion.

and “court-like proceedings.” Although he does not speak of the Pnar, we can identify some similarities in the Pnar manner of addressing divinities in a legalistic and structured manner so that it takes the form of an argument (2015).⁴⁹ It would not be inconceivable for there to be an ordered defense against K— should she continue to bring misfortune on Aisuk’s family.

Ordinarily, the everyday administration of “justice” in villages among the Pnar is mainly performed by the *doloi*—a chief. Human transgressions against non-human entities receive more nuanced expressions. This is reminiscent of the reply that Ram-Lakhon made to Aisuk’s question regarding the misfortunes in her family and clan. In some contexts, the Khasi and Pnar understand cause and effect in a particular way. This is referred to in Pnar ritual language as *ka wa lait ka wa let, ka wom toh ka wom hoi* (“what has been left out, what is not right”). According to this saying, everything that happens in human life has a cause, and this cause has to be divined, which is one reason why goddess possession sometimes takes place: in order to determine the causes of misfortune and to make reparations for human shortcomings. Another function of goddess possession is to mediate conflict and resolve inter-familial or intra-group hostility (see also Pirta and Ranta 2007, on social conflicts and possession).

In Pnar indigenous traditions, the understanding of “justice” is central, which is the reason that there are so many propitiatory and purificatory rituals present in their rituals. There is no word in Pnar language which translates directly into the Western notion of justice. Legal proceedings are *bishar* which also has the connotation of judgement. And yet I have chosen to use this etic concept because it approximates Pnar ideas of how the world works, and how every illness, blessing, death and human situations have a cause. The world is out of “order” when a “norm” is broken.⁵⁰ This *daw* (“cause”) is varyingly used according to context⁵¹. When a cause is divined, (or interpreted) then the ritual performer gives the cause up for judgement, or *bishar* to the supreme being. And *hok*, is said to prevail, if order is restored. Therefore, the use of the term *hok* is contextual, because it also means “righteousness,” “right living,” “truth,” and “justice.” In the

⁴⁹ See Sax 2009 for an exploration of justice and supernatural events in the Central Himalayas.

⁵⁰ There is no written code for conduct for how one should behave within the clan. Rules are unwritten and enforced through the continuity of tradition.

⁵¹ Such as if a person does not get a job, then his “cause” was “soft” or *jem daw*; if the cause of misfortune within the family is divined to be a cause which originates from within the family itself, it is *daw iing*. If the cause has to be divined, then it is called *iit daw* (“searching for a cause”).

context of Aisuk's family transgressions, Aisuk explained to me after the sacrifice, that their family's wrong had been righted, and norms were reestablished within her faction of the clan.

Further illustrating the deities' commitment to the maintenance of communal order is goddess K—'s reluctance to help a petitioner who "kept" Taro. Taro is known for increasing wealth but her "keeper" can send her out to attack and possess others in the community. In June 2016, during fieldwork in Chyrmang, I witnessed another possession of Lut T— by Ram-Lakhon in which the deities were, as before, interacting with petitioners and responding to their troubles. A woman accompanied by her two children petitioned the gods, calling Ram by his name, asking him why her children were ill, and why allopathic medicines were not helping. She inquired why her husband had left her for another woman, as he had been a good provider for their family. Ram-Lakhon surveyed the betel leaves representing them carefully. They said that they blessed them and gave them (the petitioners) some sacred water to take with them. All this occurred swiftly within a few minutes; Ram-Lakhon hardly spent any time with the woman and her children. After the possession was over, Lut explained to me (through my translator on this day, Kong Heh),⁵² that Ram-Lakhon wanted nothing to do with the woman in question because she "reared" the malevolent Taro. The misfortune, Lut said, had come when the woman failed to feed Taro, and, in turn, Taro had begun to devour her family. Ram-Lakhon were reluctant to mediate a solution for this woman. This narrative again exemplifies that deities (such as Ram-Lakhon and the river goddesses) work to maintain and promote a sense of balance in the village. Taro is seen as a destructive force in the community, and, thus, deities will not assist her "keepers." Through river goddess K—'s swift actions to avenge the ancestress of the T— clan, the "causal" mentality reinforced by possession narratives, and the reluctance of deities to aid those who interact with negative entities (such as Taro), it becomes clear that the deities function as regulators of clan and community norm. In this way, much of the social "justice" within Pnar society can be traced to the mediums themselves.

This notion of justice among the Pnar is connected to another, more complex question: in the Pnar worldview, what is the responsibility of humans towards gods? What is understood to be the actions of site-specific deities when they are abandoned? (For example, the river goddess K— was left behind and her worship ceased when Mon and the fam-

⁵² I found Kong Heh through my driver Justin who I have been working with for some years. Kong Heh is his neighbor and runs a small grocery store.

ily moved to Shillong.) It is perhaps possible to view the “curse” on Aisuk’s family as a kind of cultural remembering, wherein the “abandoned” spirit is yet remembered through narratives of misfortune, told and re-told throughout the generations. This articulates the sustainability of indigenous networks—even in the urban centre of Shillong, the river goddess of Chyrmang still ties the family to its origins, to the promises that they made to the supernatural, and to the responsibilities of mediumship that the ancestress Mon chose to escape. This situates the river goddess K— as a perpetuator of clan loyalty, across geographic boundaries and over time.

There was a significant amount of intense fear experienced by my informant’s family with regards to the river goddess K— because fear seems to be a regulator of cognitive perceptions and religious behavior. Scared of her name, the clan’s ties to her existence, and the wrath that they believed that the ancestress’ error continued to bring upon them, they attempted to negotiate with the deity as best they could, from the city and alongside their Catholic religion. The river goddess K— acts as a link between the life of a converted, modern Pnar household and their indigenous history in a more “traditional” setting. The origin of fear among my informant’s family is past transgressions and the vengeance that this might bring upon them. “Causality” is central to these reminders: a clan’s past is not considered “history,” but rather is still pertinent to the modern day. Goddess possession regulates social ties, reminds the modern generation of clan loyalty, and ties contemporary Pnar families to their historical community and religious responsibilities.

Fear is a communicative modality and representative of social control. Working through and discerning the multiple levels of information that are present in my fieldwork data, I became aware of a recurring theme. There seem to be multiple articulations of the goddess’s reluctance to popularize herself outside of the limits of the cultural space in which she has chosen to manifest herself. In the goddess’s own words, through the reticence of Aisuk and her family to invoke the sacred name, and in the words of the village members of Chyrmang, *ka eh bha* (“she is harsh”).

In the Pnar worldview, it is possible to enlist the help of a goddess or god for remedy only if the petitioner can argue on the basis of *ka hok* (“righteousness” or “truth”). Usually, it is the *lyngdoh* (“ritual performer”) who mediates between man and the supreme being, *U Blai*. Sadik Lyngdoh has written about the arguments that can be posed against the negative entities who affect human lives (1985, 29–49). This line of questioning is central to Khasi and Pnar understandings

of the human/non-human relationships.⁵³ It is possible to convince the supreme being of the righteousness of the petitioner's request if his or her actions fulfill the conditions of being *hok* ("righteous" or "true"). *Ka daw* ("cause") is divined and *ka lait ka let* ("shortcomings") are found out.⁵⁴ This requires a significant amount of rhetoric and stylistic devices in ritualized language. When Mon's ancestor went to petition the river goddess to repair the slight against her family honour, she appealed in the very same way: by positioning her request as fulfilling the condition of being according to the code of morality which is known and followed by every Khasi and Pnar. She did not use a mediator but presented her case in front of the goddess, who became judge and juror and who arbitrated that the other woman had to be punished in order to exact retribution. Years later, when Mon and her descendants abandoned the river deity, K— did not punish her erring "children" by killing them but rather by afflicting them with adversity and perpetual misfortune.

Concluding Thoughts

Encounters with the gods and goddesses are embodied through experience. This article sought to understand the place of the individual in the greater subset of family, clan, and community. Divine regulation of Pnar action as an upholder and protector of Pnar kinship is reiterated throughout the narrative: we learn the consequences brought about by a slight against a family protected by the river goddess, the consequences of this same family abandoning her, the resultant "return" of this prodigal family to the village of origin and the subsequent preservation of clan cohesiveness. The experiences of adversity and misfortune also serve to unwittingly preserve the "remembering" of the goddess. This ensures that clan links are maintained through time.

Another point which could be reflected upon is how reflexivity in the framework of this article also contributed to the acknowledgement of ambiguous positionalities of the fieldworker. The role of "friend" and "researcher" were categories that were often not mutually exclusive. Relations during the carrying out of this fieldwork were negotiated according to contexts. It is thus never an absolute position of research. I struggled with the difficulty of finding ways to articulate the voice of informants while at the same time protecting identities.

⁵³ See also, Lyngdoh 2016, 18–23.

⁵⁴ Pnar believe that human beings are not perfect in "being human" or in the "nature of humanity" (*Ha ka long briew, ka man briew*) and so there will always be shortcomings.

The articulation of the Pnar possession practice, the narrative of Aisuk's family, and the ways in which deities can impact different families are important because they give voice to a community that is commonly overlooked in scholarship. The Pnar are usually included into the subset of the Khasi community, and, as such the distinct motifs of their indigenous cultural expressions remain inaudible. This paper aimed to contribute a meaningful case study of one particular form of goddess possession, important not only for the lack of previous work on this topic, but because it reveals the nuanced connections between these possessions and clan, kinship rules, and how they are upheld.

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