

NEWS IN BRIEF

MARGARET LYNGDOH DEFENDED A DISSERTATION ON KHASI VERNACULAR BELIEF WORLDS

Lyngdoh, Margaret. *Transformation, Tradition, and Lived Realities: Vernacular Belief Worlds of the Khasis of Northeastern India*. Dissertationes Folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 23. Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2016. 168 pages.

On April 25th, 2016, Margaret Lyngdoh defended her dissertation titled *Transformation, Tradition, and Lived Realities: Vernacular Belief Worlds of the Khasis of Northeastern India* at the University of Tartu Institute of Cultural Research and Arts. Lyngdoh is the first folklore scholar from India who has received a doctoral degree in Estonia. She completed her six years of PhD studies at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore under the supervision of Professor Ülo Valk.

The dissertation consists of four peer-reviewed articles on various manifestations of Khasi vernacular beliefs, which have been published, or accepted for publishing, in acknowledged scholarly journals (*Asian Ethnology*, *Internationales Asienforum*, and *Anthropos*) or by an internationally recognized publisher (Equinox). Lyngdoh's case studies are equipped with a thorough introduction, which provides the necessary contextual framework for Khasi ethnic and religious matters, including complicated relationships between Khasi Christianities and indigenous religions, as well as methodological and theoretical considerations to present central keywords of the dissertation. These include fieldwork context and concepts of the supernatural, genre, tradition, vernacular, and transformation, the latter being the most important keyword that penetrates all parts of the thesis.

The research articles published within Margaret Lyngdoh's thesis are based on fresh fieldwork data that has been documented by the author. Her field trips were carried out partly in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, India, but in most cases in various remote areas of Khasi and Jantia Hills, which are hard to access due to natural conditions and the lack of infrastructure. Through her long-term fieldwork Lyngdoh has created a bulky corpus of new empirical data on supernatural folklore, thus documenting traditions of Khasi sub-communities, many of which have not been studied earlier. This new set of data is compared in her studies with descriptions of earlier Khasi intellectuals as well as those of colonial writers, who laid the foundations for many stereotypes that contemporary Khasi scholars do contest. In addition to Western epistemological and ontological premises, Lyngdoh relies on Khasi vernacular epistemologies and ontologies while interpreting the documented fieldwork data, which help her understand and mediate the complicated manifestations of the supernatural in Khasi communities, and thus also promote vernacular theorising.

Throughout her dissertation Margaret Lyngdoh is questioning and problematising the earlier simplified, often Europe-centric, stereotyped, and homogenising views on Khasi communities, their folklore, and indigenous religion. The author's critical observations concern both macro-level assessments to create a homogenous Khasi identity for political



or economical reasons, and micro-level statements on details from the perspective of an insider or the one who is close to the indigenous communities. In her thesis Lyngdoh clearly demonstrates great empathy, her sincere wish to understand the community members under scrutiny, and not to judge (or condemn) them for their supernatural traditions.

Margaret Lyngdoh's work is remarkable also because of the fact that the author concentrates on complicated topics labelled in the Introduction as "expressions of dark folklore" (p. 9). This also emphasises the significance of the author's documentation practices to record vernacular manifestations that are often kept in secret, which imply wild environment, dangerous situations, and unpredictable consequences. Moreover, scholarly interpretation of this kind of folkloric material is undeniably complicated. In many cases neither earlier studies on particular topics nor any employable examples from other traditions or regions are available. In addition, it may be said that local vernacular ontologies are often not well 'translatable' or 'adjustable' to Western ontologies, which may cause problems in explaining vernacular manifestations of the supernatural to the scholarly audience. In this respect Margaret Lyngdoh has done extraordinary work in sharing new data and posing novel questions; in some cases no clear answers have been provided, but I have to admit that this is often a better solution than forcible imposition of inappropriate interpretations. This way there is enough space for further interpretations and 'excavations' in Khasi vernacular knowledge.

I would like to stress that Margaret Lyngdoh's dissertation concerns topical problems in contemporary Khasi society such as stigmatisation and 'othering' of minority groups (both ethnic and religious minorities), mob fury addressed to those members of the community who are 'different', violence against women, etc. Lyngdoh's work thus exemplifies the idea (articulated also in the introductory article on p. 59) that, in addition to the function of folklore to unite and create a common identity, it may also serve to divide, to create distance and 'other' certain social groups. In this connection, however, the author mentions the possibility to 'undo' stereotypes of malicious folklore through folkloristic studies, as well as folklorists' prospect to "explain the mechanisms of folklore in generating fear, conflicts, and stigmatisation" (p. 59) also to the local communities and their leaders.

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