Symposium

Vernacular Knowledge and Indigenous Traditions: Perspectives from Fieldwork

November 14-15, 2025
University of Tartu

Venue:
Lossi 3, 328
and
Ülikooli 16, 115
(entrance behind the building)

Organised by

the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore,

and Centre for Oriental Studies,

University of Tartu

Were-Tigers of Odisha in Adivasi Folklore

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The Meriah Wars, a series of conflicts that bloodied the central districts of the state of Odisha (India) in the 19th century, pitted the indigenous populations of the Konds against the British army. Historiographic sources demonstrate that although the apparent British casus belli claimed an intent to suppress the Konds because of their practice in human sacrifice, the evidence remains unreliable and incomplete on how the Konds actually followed this ritual and indicates that the British Raj's true motivations lay elsewhere. Sources instead illustrate concretely that the British Raj focused its actual attention on areas that, until recently, drew scarce interest but reflected its increasingly urgent need to extend and consolidate the colonial rule in the belt of central-eastern India. This cultural clash with the Konds would later highlight the limited understanding of Europeans about the crucial role that many indigenous peoples played in the political balance and as social subjects in the buffer zones on the edge of the forests. If it has been reported that the Konds were often chased, persecuted, and shot down like beasts and that their villages were set on fire in this dark page of colonial history, it is also true that their communities were fluid entities capable of evading peace treaties, using the harsh and unexplored jungle terrain to their advantage and sometimes mounting a strenuous resistance. This uncontrollability is probably the main reason for their misrepresentation in colonial sources, which often emphasize the gruesome aspects of human sacrifice and the Konds' prowess in the witchcraft arts. It is in this context that the ability of some tribesmen to transform themselves into were-tigers and possibly prevail over an otherwise stronger enemy is first recorded. The practice of theriomorphism has survived to this day, along with a shamanic-type religiosity among the Kond minorities still populating the Kandhmal district.

Therefore, an ethnographic approach allows not only for a detailed investigation into this still little-known phenomenon and a clearer analysis of certain aspects of this community's history but also a deeper understanding of the wide relational spectrum of the Konds with their territory and the wildlife surrounding them and as they coped with the challenges imposed by modernity.

Traditional Proverbs, but their Vernacular Interpretation in Ecologically Fragile Sikkim

Kikee Doma Bhutia
Ghent University

The October 2023 Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) in Sikkim exposed not only the region's fragile ecology but also the deep entanglements of local cosmologies and environmental precarity. This presentation examines how traditional Sikkimese proverbs, long functioning as cautionary narratives and repositories of ancestral wisdom,

are being vernacularly reinterpreted in the aftermath of this disaster. Drawing on ethnographic engagement and traditional proverbs, the study explores how communities reframe proverbial knowledge to articulate ecological uncertainty and critique state-led development projects such as the under-construction railway line connecting Siliguri to Sikkim, hydro-power project dams, and rampant infrastructure construction, especially in the capital city of Gangtok. Situating this transformation within broader discussions of the 'vernacular' as an adaptive and negotiated category (Noyes, 2012), the presentation argues that these reinterpretations reveal a process through which local communities engage with the changing environment and infrastructural risks.

Ultimately, this study contends that the evolving proverb tradition in Sikkim demonstrates the capacity of vernacular knowledge systems to negotiate environmental justice and sustain ethical relations with sacred landscapes (Berkes, 2006; Vitebsky, 2006).

References:

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Noyes, Dorothy. 2012. "The Social Base of Folklore." In A Companion to Folklore, edited by Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem, 13–39. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Vitebsky, Piers. 2006. Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia. New York: Harper Collins.

Writing Faith:
Doa Nevisi as an Expression of Vernacular Religion in Iran

Reyhaneh Ghoroghchian
University of Tartu

This paper explores the case of doa nevisi (prayer and amulet writing) as a living expression of vernacular religion in contemporary Iran. Despite the dominance of institutional Islam, doa nevisi continues to grow as a means of addressing personal, emotional, and practical concerns that extend beyond formal religious frameworks. As a practice rooted in both Islamic devotion and magical belief, it reflects how Iranians reconcile faith, uncertainty, and daily challenges through culturally implanted rituals.

Drawing on ethnographic research and examining the use of doa nevisi, invocations (zekr), and protective charms for healing, resolving relationships, and warding off harm, the study reveals how doa nevisi represents a creative adaptation of Islamic cosmology to modern social realities. This practice exemplifies the dynamic interplay between society and religion, explaining how vernacular religion remains a vital and adaptive force in shaping beliefs in contemporary Iranian society.

Vernacular and traditional knowledge of the tribal complex In Achanakmar-Amarkantak, Biosphere Reserve, Madhya Pradesh, India

Lidia Guzy
University College Cork

The Achanakmar-Amarkantak Biosphere Reserve, one of India's "biodiversity hotspots", is considered sacred by its inhabitants and visitors. With three major rivers originating in Amarkantak such as the Narmada, Johilla, and Sone rivers, Amarkantak is also strongly connected to its tribal complex of Baiga, Gond, Kanwar, Kol, Oraon, Panika and Pardhan communities. This paper explores and discusses the traditional and vernacular knowledge around the sacred grove and earth prevalent among different indigenous communities in Amarkantak religious and ritual geography.

On the Philosophical and Folkloristic Concepts of Belief

Roomet Jakapi
University of Tartu

This talk will focus on the concepts of belief used in contemporary analytic philosophy and in folkloristics, especially in relation to the traditions of indigenous peoples. Philosophers use an individualistic concept of belief, referring to a mental state of a subject ("S believes that …"). The subject is an abstract, imaginary person to whom various mental states, such as desire, belief, and knowledge, can be attributed. In certain contexts, philosophers also discuss collective beliefs, but the underlying model remains individualistic.

While conducting collaborative fieldwork in Northeast India in January 2025, I came to realize that the concept of belief used by my folklorist colleagues differs from my own. They typically use it to refer to the convictions and views held by actual indigenous communities. I also noticed that my philosophical understanding of belief influenced my focus and interest during interviews with ritual performers and individuals who claimed to have transformed into specific animals multiple times.

The talk will discuss the need for and the possibility of bridging the gap between the philosophical and folkloristic notions of belief.

Dressing up Nature: Vernacular Rituals in Santali and Hindu Festivals

Linda Saraswati Klausner
University of Tartu

This presentation explores ritual dressing of natural forms—living entities such as trees and plants—as a site of vernacular expression within marginalized communities. Though visually resonant across traditions, these practices reflect distinct ontologies. Festivals celebrating the Sal tree in Santali indigenous traditions and the Tulsi plant in Hinduism serve as emblematic examples through which this presentation explores how clothing natural forms in saris invokes sacred presence and ritual authority.

As a central ritual material, the sari itself becomes a medium of feminine agency, linking ecological reverence with everyday spirituality, foregrounding the contributions of women—often doubly marginalized within minority communities—in sustaining religious life. These practices offer insight into how embodied, relational, and vernacular modes of knowing engage sacred power.

Aligning with the folkloristic turn in religious studies, this research centers lived experience and community-based knowledge, affirming the value of vernacular categories in scholarly engagement with indigenous and minority religious worlds. Grounded in several years of experiential immersion in Jharkhand—a center of Santali religious life and a vital Hindu pilgrimage region—this presentation seeks to demonstrate the geographic and cultural scope of South Asian ritual ecology and to reframe understandings of sacred power by centering hands-on, lived practices.

The Call of Spirits and Mental Disorders: Vernacular Theories of Prospective Shamans in Contemporary Northeast China

Haozhen Li
University of Tartu

In shaman's personal lives, a period of the disease caused by one or more spirits is often a pivotal event that led to their initiation. Often in different shamanic cultures, this is the key period when the shaman starts to report the symptoms resembling various kinds of psychotic processes. In northeast China, the animal-spirits-worshiping shamanic practitioners and believers create and develop series of vernacular theories in relation to those psychotic processes as shaman illness.

This paper investigates the belief narratives on shamanic illness of the spirit mediums in contemporary northeast China, where various mental and physical disorders are believed to be the manifestation of the call of animal spirits. Taking the sociocultural background, narrative motives and structures, and the narrators' epistemological models into account,

this paper finds that the belief narratives on the call of spirits is a polysemous category. The prospective shamans perceive the call of spirits as two-sided illness with bio-medical symptoms and supernatural etiology. This perception is shaped through the process of vernacular theorizing and spread and consolidated via belief narratives.

Traditional Knowledge as Theory, Medicine as Cultural Practice: How to Make Sense of Chinese Medicine

Erki Lind
University of Tartu

Historically, medicine has been inseparable from religion, in modernity, however, it is seen as entirely secular, despite still being one of the fields most dependent on contemporary physics-based ontology. Still, many other systems exist next to biomedicine, and they are not showing any signs of decline. One such system is Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). This presentation deals with its presence in Estonia and my own experiences with the practice. The principles of TCM are formulated very clearly and systematically, and the whole system is based on a fundamentally different ontology from that of biomedicine. This raises the question of how to understand and make sense of it in a culture that doesn't share the same conceptual framework, and what will be lost when TCM is explained by using another framework?

I argue that the picture becomes clearer when medicine is not understood as something that exists independently and outside human behaviour corresponding to the objective reality, but rather as a cultural practice. This will not only enable us to see how translation of a practice from one system of thought to another functions, but also how practice itself can help us understand a different cultural framework.

Singing Words into Weapons: Stigmatised "Magic" from Northeast Indian Indigenous Contexts

Margaret Lyngdoh, University of Tartu
Kareng Ronghangpi, Independent Researcher

Among Khasi and Karbi, there is no single word to describe the sets of rituals that are only practiced at the peripheries. Located in the greater corpus of the Jhare magical practice, *myntor* among Khasi is only used in an extreme case where there is just cause for an entire lineage or *kpoh* is to be extinguished or eliminated. Among Karbi, *mintor* is practiced independently and remains outside the sets of ritual interactions that characterise the Karbi indigenous folklife.

This presentation will attempt to examine the textual corpuses of these magical texts that are protected, secret, and derived from fieldwork. I will look at organic variation in two versions from the Karbi corpus and a fragment from the Khasi secret oral tradition. Thus

I attempt to look at what happens to the transmission of tradition when a particular piece of social practice is so stigmatised that it cannot be spoken about in everyday conversations? What kind of discursive transformations do these practices morph into when it encounters the globalised ecology of digital transmission?
These practices do not exist outside the social contexts they are used in or where they emerged from. The song of *mintor* is called the *Lam Aphu* or the "Grandfather of Words" and is considered the most powerful of all Karbi oral texts. Among Khasi *myntor* is also called *sei tyrut sei phngar* which translates to summoning the terrible female entity among Khasi *ka tyrut* in its most forbidden 9 forms; this entity is also associated with generationally transmitted curse.

All material in this presentation is derived from primary fieldwork. There is no secondary published or researched material on this topic.

Where Blood Meets the Sacred: Ritual, Magic, and Power in Assamese Tantra

Paolo E. Rosati
Independent Researcher

This paper investigates the intersections of ritual, magic, and power within the tantric traditions of Assam, a northeastern Indian state renowned for its rich and often misunderstood religious heritage. Focusing on the practices involving blood sacrifices—situated at the crossroads of brahmanic and indigenous traditions—this study explores how these acts mediate relationships between the human and the divine realms. Blood, as a powerful yet dangerous ritual substance, functions not merely as an offering but as a medium for supernatural transformations—of bodies, spiritual states, and social hierarchies.

Among the pan-Indian śaktipīṭhas' (seats of power) network, the temple of Kāmākhyā, in the Brahmaputra plain, emerges as a liminal but powerful religious space, where practitioners are allowed to access magic powers(siddhis) through the consumption of the yonitattva (vulva's essence, i.e. sexual fluids). Sexual liquids and sacrificial blood are interconnected—indeed, it is feeding the Goddess with blood sacrifices that her menstrual period is stimulated, so that her menses can flows through and revivifies the earth once every year, during the Ambuvācī festival. The festival celebrates the menstrual period of the Goddess, when the limit between purity and impurity fade away.

Within the network of pan-Indian śaktipīṭhas (seats of power), the temple of Kāmākhyā, located in the Brahmaputra plain, emerges as a liminal yet powerful religious space where practitioners gain access to magical powers (siddhis) through the consumption of yonitattva (the vulva's essence, i.e., sexual fluids). Sexual fluids and sacrificial blood are intimately connected: it is through feeding the Goddess with blood sacrifices that her menstrual cycle is stimulated, allowing her menses to flow and revivify the earth annually during the Ambuvācī festival. During this festival, which celebrates the Goddess's menstruation, the boundaries between purity and impurity blend.

In conclusion, this study reframes Assamese Tantra not as a marginal or deviant offshoot of Brahmanism, but as a transcultural and fluid religious phenomenon shaped by a long dureé dialectic between the brahmanic élite and the indigenous upland peoples—an interaction that brings magic and the supernatural to the forefront within the peculiar Assamese tantric cult of the yoni.

Dreams, Desire, and Invisible Villages: Encounters with Simultaneous Worlds among the Karbi

Abhirup Sarkar
University of Tartu

This presentation looks at one of the multiple spaces and realities that can exist parallelly or be superimposed, at various locations on the perceptible Northeast Indian geographical region of Karbi Anglong. In this presentation I will primarily present and discuss my ethnography, highlighting why this research is interesting, moments from fieldwork. Through an analysis of ethnographic fieldwork materials, together with texts by Karbi scholars, this thesis looks into oral narratives, ritual performances, and placelore to understand how Indigenous beliefs intersect with affective folkloristics in shaping community cosmologies. Theoretically, through the lenses of folkloristics, this work attempts to realize Indigenous epistemologies and other-than-human relationalities that underline the lived religious experiences among the Karbis. Methodologically, this work integrates reflexive anthropological approaches with contemporary theories of vernacular religion with an emphasis on the affective valencies embedded within human and more-than-human interactions.

In this presentation, I discuss the fieldwork context, stories about the invisible village, and the conflicting ways in which Karbi understand and make sense of this invisible village.

Warring Skies and Seething Floods: Eschatological Motifs in Contemporary Inner Asia

Alevtina Solovyeva,
University of Tartu

This presentation examines the emergence and growing popularity of new eschatological motifs among Mongolian and related communities across Inner Asia. It explores how these narratives draw upon diverse traditions - Mongolian folklore, Buddhist and shamanic and other religious mythologies, embodied in earlier and contemporary vernacular beliefs and practices. By situating these motifs within their cultural and historical contexts, the paper analyses how they reflect local and global transformations,

social anxieties, geopolitical challenges and mechanisms of interpretation and resilience within these communities.

The research is based primarily on recent folklore study fieldwork and social media materials, complemented by comparative archival sources and previous fieldwork collections on Mongolian vernacular religion. Through this multi-source and intertextual angle, the presentation seeks to illuminate the dynamic interplay between inherited cosmological frameworks and contemporary experiences of uncertainty in Inner Asia.

Humans and Cordyceps in Bhutan: Vernacular Knowledge, Beliefs, Ecology and Economy

Michele Tita
University of Tartu

Bhutan is a small country sited in the Himalaya, between India and China. Both humans and other living species have adjusted to its mountainous environment, creating unique ecological engagements. For instance, Bhutanese people collect and consume cordyceps (Ophiocordyceps sinensis), the parasite fungus of ghost moth caterpillars. The fungus is found at high altitudes, used in traditional Tibetan and Chinese medicine and hence sold all over Asia, which made its collection and sale profitable activities for Bhutanese mountains settlers.

Vernacular knowledge and beliefs are also associated to the fungus. Some Bhutanese people believe that humans can reincarnate in the caterpillars affected by cordyceps, if they have consumed too much tobacco or misbehaved in their overall existence. Nevertheless, beliefs about cordyceps also have positive connotations, such as the claimed general health benefits of the fungus for the human body. Vernacular authorities (including cordyceps sellers) support these notions and beliefs, otherwise not always known and sometimes received with scepticism.

The relationship between humans and cordyceps is hence multifaceted, involving ecological interactions, economic circulation, knowledge and beliefs. In this regard, the paper explores this relationship and vernacular knowledge on cordyceps, highlighting the role of the fungus for Bhutanese people.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Emic and Etic Perspectives in the Study of Himalayan Vernacular Religions

Davide Torri
Sapienza University of Rome

This paper explores the methodological tensions and complementarities between emic and etic perspectives in the study of Himalayan religions, with a particular focus on vernacular and Adivasi traditions. The emic approach, grounded in the insider's viewpoint, emphasizes local interpretations, lived practices, and symbolic meanings as understood by community members themselves. By contrast, the etic perspective, originating from the observer's analytical framework, seeks to identify broader patterns, regularities, cross-cultural comparisons, and continuities that may not be immediately apparent to practitioners. Through a critical examination of ethnographic and historical sources from the Himalayan region, and drawing from my own fieldwork in Nepal, my presentation highlights how these perspectives can illuminate the complex interplay between indigenous religious expressions, ritual practices, and socio-environmental contexts. Special attention is given to ritual specialists, sacred landscapes, and oral traditions of Adivasi groups, demonstrating that emic insights reveal the internal logic and moral cosmologies of these communities, while etic analysis situates them within larger regional and comparative frameworks. Ultimately, the paper argues that a reflexive integration of emic and etic approaches is essential for a nuanced understanding of Himalayan religiosity, bridging the gap between indigenous epistemologies and coherent, analytically rigorous accounts of these diverse spiritual systems.

On Closed and Open Storyworlds: Experiencing the Uncanny in Assam

Ülo Valk
University of Tartu

This paper explores the interplay between lived experience and storyworlds in vernacular storytelling traditions from Assam, focusing on narratives of *biras* (assistant spirits of village wizards, or *bejes*) and *tantriks* with supernatural powers. Closed storyworlds—often found in literary fiction or archived folklore texts—are marked by narrative distance and isolation, while open storyworlds, typical of oral storytelling, blur the boundaries between lived reality and the fantastical. Drawing on fieldwork, I examine how oral narratives lead listeners into liminal spaces where the uncanny—spirits, sorcery, and the supernatural—is not merely imagined but directly experienced. These open storyworlds collapse the boundary between fiction and factuality. I argue that closed storyworlds, too, carry the potential to be opened—activated through emotional engagement, context, and believability. By tracing how Assamese storytelling mediates the uncanny through legendry and experiential accounts, this paper contributes to broader discussions on

vernacular knowledge, emphasizing the permeability of narrative worlds and the epistemic significance of storytelling.