

Traditional Beliefs About Weretigers Among the Garos of Meghalaya (India)

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Abstract

The Garos, a tribal group who live in India (western highlands of Meghalaya and the southern foothills of Assam) and northern Bangladesh, are noted for their diverse beliefs on weretigers – that is, human beings with the ability of turning themselves, in various ways, into ferocious tigers and subsequently back to human form. The present paper provides a first attempt at classifying the different motifs in Garo weretiger-lore which include traditional beliefs of: (1) a legendary 'race' of monstrous tigermen ruled over by a Tiger Mother; (2) individuals endowed with a 'dual' vital principle inhabiting a human body during daytime and a tiger one at nighttime; and (3) shape-shifters who can physically metamorphose into tigers through magical arts. This classification highlights the rich variety of beliefs held by the Garos on these quintessential liminal beings, and provides a critical analysis of the most frequently occurring class of werebeasts in the folktales, legends, and epics of tropical Asia.

Keywords: Garo ethnic group, weretigers, legendary tigermen, magical shape-shifters, anthropological study of dreams, non-human animals' cosubjectivity with human animals

Members of the Garo ethnic group, whose autonym is Achik, live for the most part in the Garo Hills District in the northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya. The climate of densely-wooded Meghalaya is tropical, with heavy monsoon rainfall. Numerically sizeable Garo communities also reside on the plains of the Indian state of Assam and in northern Bangladesh (see Figure 1). The language of the Garos belongs to the Bodo-Garo (or Bodo-Koch)¹ branch of the Tibeto-Burman language phylum. This linguistic affiliation clearly differentiates the Garo tribespeople from the neighbouring Indo-Aryan speaking Hindu and Muslim populations, whose settlement areas surround the Garo Hills on three sides (to the north, west, and south, respectively), and closely connects them with other Bodo-Garo speaking tribes of Assam, such as the Rabhas, Bodos, and Tiwas². As this paper focuses on beliefs about weretigers among the Garos, it is germane to mention that the Rabhas, Bodos, and Tiwas, the Garos' closest linguistic relatives, have either tales about human-to-tiger transformation and back (achieved

¹ The ethnolinguistic term 'Bodo' is alternatively spelt as 'Boro' by certain authors.

² Formerly known as Lalungs.

through a magical process) and/or some traditional clans whose members claim kinship with the tiger (Brahma, 1992; Datta, 1995; Endle, 1911; Syamchaudhuri & Das, 1973).

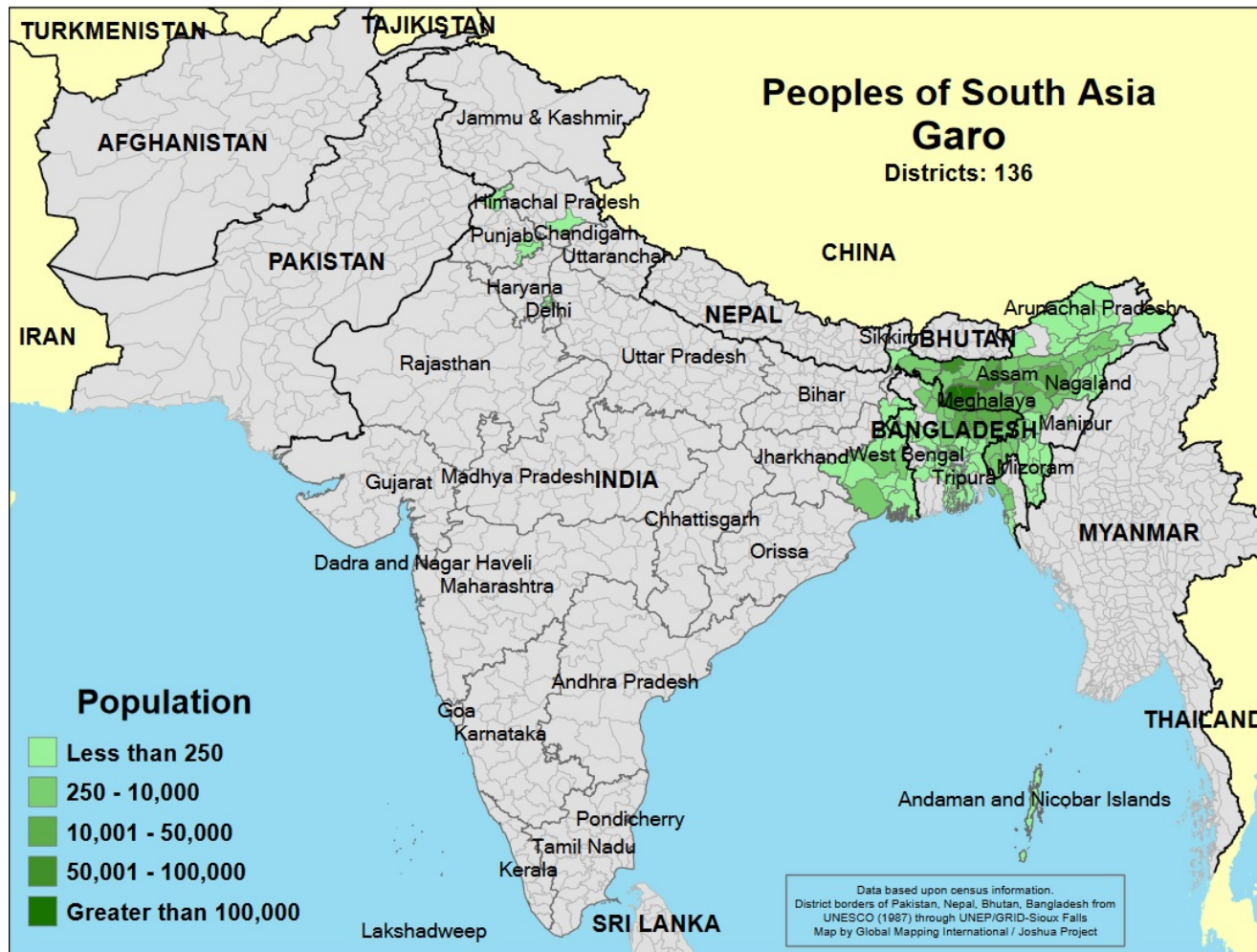


Figure 1. Populations of Garo people in South Asia (Source: Joshua Project, 2017)

The Garos are noted for the high status held by women, and have a matrilineal kinship and succession system by which property is passed along the female line. Data from the 2011 Census of India show that some 95% of the Garos of Meghalaya have been converted to Christianity. Only around 2.5% of the Garo population adheres to 'other religions and persuasions,' including the traditional animistic religion known as *Songsarek*, which is still followed in some rural pockets in the Garo Hills. Animistic beliefs and practices continue to influence some Christian rituals among the Garos (e.g., in the matter of funerals), particularly in rural areas where religion divides matrilineal kin groups (De Maaker, 2007). Likewise, one scholar reports that, in some areas, even after becoming Christian, many Garos continue to believe in the existence of weretigers (Thumra, 2003, p. 61). It may thus be concluded that traditional animistic beliefs about weretigers still linger among at least some sections of the Christianized Garo population.

Tigers have historically been a threat to Garo rural settlements. However, only when a tiger had carried off or mauled a villager or a farm animal, was it hunted down by the Garos. A bamboo cage with bait in the form of the kid of a goat or a dog, was used. Once trapped, the animal was killed with a spear or gun. The meat of the slain tiger would only be eaten by males, including, of course, the hunting party (Marak, 2014, pp. 43-44, 54, 117). The old forest in the southern tracts of the Garo Hills still provides one of the best tiger habitats of northeastern India. A recent study estimates that some 54% of Meghalaya's total number of tigers live in the Garo Hills, although massive clear-felling and fragmentation of native evergreen and semi-evergreen forests for shifting cultivation, as well as increasing human encroachment, are rapidly reducing tiger populations in the region (Kumar & Marcot, 2010).

As they share their predominantly non-urban habitats with substantial tiger populations, the Garos evolved various sets of beliefs about weretigers over time. My research has undertaken a comprehensive study of traditional beliefs about weretigers and 'tiger-shamans'³ in South Asia, Southwestern China, and mainland Southeast Asia (e.g., Brighenti, 2011, 2016). The results of this long-term research across much of tropical Asia reveal that such beliefs generally do not arise in urban environments, but are an eminently rural phenomenon. More specifically, liminal areas on the fringe of human occupation are the typical places of the origin of beliefs about both weretigers and 'tiger-shamans'. These include the village-forest interface, which is the most common habitat of tribal groups and other ethnic minorities in tropical Asia.⁴

Consequently, when legends of weretigers are recounted in old literary works, which were in most cases composed by members of dominant urban elites, the weretiger is, almost invariably, identified as the 'other' – a liminal being belonging to an ethnic minority or some 'wild' jungle tribe, rather than to a settled urban world.⁵ Indeed, there is a common belief among the Hindu population of the semi-urban area of

³ 'Tiger-shamans' are powerful shamans who take the tiger as their spirit-guide and who can supposedly perform miraculous cures with its help.

⁴ For instance, the theme of the miraculous or magical deeds of 'tiger-shamans' of the past parallels and integrates that of the weretiger in the cultural traditions of some ethnic groups of mainland Southeast Asia (e.g., the Semai and Temiar of peninsular Malaysia), of Northeastern India, (e.g., the Naga tribes), and of Nepal, where many Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes have tales of shamans who had the ability to turn themselves into tigers whenever they liked. All these tribal groups live in the village-forest interface, i.e. in places where human contact with tigers or leopards was once common experience (which is, conversely, not true of urban or semi-urban societies of tropical Asia).

⁵ For example, the southern tribespeople described in Han Chinese sources as having the power to metamorphose into tigers were possibly 'tiger-shamans' transformed by a religious experience, a fact Chinese writers failed to understand; in other cases, the southern tribespeople were portrayed as weretigers in Chinese sources in order to demonize them and, subsequently, repress them (Hammond, 1992/93, 1995). Another example of the cultural identification of forest tribes with weretigers, constructed by their urban or semi-urban neighbours, is evidenced by a traditional belief held about the Semang 'Negritos' by some Malay communities:

[According to Malay beliefs] were-tigers and Negritos share a position intermediate between man and the beasts. The former fluctuates back and forth while the latter does not, but the poles of the were-tiger's fluctuation are the same as those used to define the constant nature of the Negrito. Were-tigers and Negritos are considered similar, being feared as semi-natural creatures of the forest, and are even identified by some in the belief that Negrito magicians are were-tigers. One striking feature of Negritos

Mayong, a cluster of villages not far from the capital of Guwahati in Assam, that Garo magicians living in Meghalaya and the adjoining regions have until recently been practicing the art of human-to-tiger transformation. These Garos are still remembered in local oral stories. For example, many people from Mayong narrate the story of Rai Sing, a Garo tribal 'king' of bygone days, who could turn himself into a tiger and subsequently shift back to human form (Kalita, 1992; Valk & Goswami, 2013).

It should be pointed out that the various types of weretigers of Garo folklore are not regarded by the people as 'vampires', that is, as monstrous beings who are especially fond of sucking human blood. Of course, in Garo folklore weretigers are said to occasionally become man-eaters (details below), yet in this case they devour the whole body of a human being, not just feed on its blood. The distinction between the weretiger and the vampire is, however, not clear cut across tropical Asia. For example, present-day Miao (or Hmong) folklore from the Guizhou province in southern China contains stories of dead persons who gradually change into blood-sucking, vampire-like weretigers (De Beauclair, 1970). Likewise, in the Burma-China borderlands, the Lahu people use one and the same term for a kind of evil spirit that possesses people, sucks blood like a vampire, and can metamorphose into a weretiger (Matisoff, 1988).

Of interest in Garo tales about weretigers is the variety of types under which these monstrous beings are classified. These include *matchadus* (a legendary 'race' of shape-shifting tigers who were the merciless enemies of the Garo tribe), *matchapilgipas* (Garo people who dream of being a real jungle tiger endowed with its own 'life-soul' which the 'life-soul' of such people merge during night-time), and weretigers who draw their shape-shifting power from their mastery of magical arts. The following is a preliminary classification of beliefs about weretigers among the Garos based on both historical and more contemporary scholarly sources.

The 'tiger disease'

Some traditional Garo beliefs in the existence of individuals who may be characterized as weretigers have been recorded since the early period of British rule in Bengal, a region bordering to the south of the Garo Hills. The earliest attested record of a phenomenon termed 'transformation into a tiger' by the Garos themselves is found in the late-eighteenth century work of a British magistrate, J. Eliot, the first European to visit the territories of the then still unsubjected ethnic group. He reported the following:

Among the Garrows [*sic*] a madness exists, which they call transformation into a tiger, from the person who is afflicted with this malady walking about like that animal, shunning all society. It is said that, on their being first seized with this complaint, they tear their hair and the rings from their ears, with such force as to break the lobe.⁶ It is supposed to be occasioned by a medicine

and were-tigers is that they habitually occupy or transgress the boundary between two major categories in the Malay classification of the world, namely, those of man and non-man (Endicott, 1970, p. 82).

⁶ The reference, made by Eliot's informant(s), to the odd circumstance of a man afflicted by the malady called 'transformation into a tiger' violently tearing his earrings from the ears can possibly be connected with the belief, widespread among the populations of Assam, that when a Garo male turns into a tiger his earrings, often hanging in large numbers from both ears, remain visible on the animal's ears (Goswami, 1949; Rajkhowa, 1973). Therefore,

applied to the forehead; but I endeavoured to procure some of the medicine, thus used, without effect: I imagine it rather to be created by frequent intoxications, as the malady goes off in the course of a week or a fortnight; during the time the person is in this state, it is with the utmost difficulty he is made to eat or drink. I questioned a man, who had thus been afflicted, as to the manner of his being seized, and he told me he only felt a giddiness without any pain, and that afterwards he did not know what happened to him (Eliot, 1972, pp. 42-43).

In line with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Eliot regards the syndrome called 'transformation into a tiger' by the Garos as a form of delirium or mania followed by amnesia which would, in his view, be induced by excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages. In short, it would be a pathological form, a temporary disorder of the mind said to be caused by applying a medicine to the forehead. Even in recent times there have been scholars who have suggested that the syndrome by which some Garos convince themselves they can turn into tigers or other wild beasts during sleep (see below) can be considered a form of multiple personality disorder (MPD), otherwise known in psychiatry as dissociative identity disorder (DID) (Bordoloi, 2002). Yet, in the writer's opinion, such an interpretation appears too simplistic as it does not consider the richness and variety of traditional ideas associated with figures of tiger-persons in Garo culture and society.

***Matchadus* (legendary shape-shifting tigersmen)**

More than a century after Eliot's article, A. Playfair, a British administrator to whom we owe the first and most influential monograph on the Garos, returned to the subject, informing us that members of this ethnic group traditionally believe in the existence of malevolent shape-shifters called *matchadus* in the Garo language (a term derived from *matcha*, 'tiger'), who may appear as either men or tigers. Another category of shape-shifters deemed to be able to assume either human or tiger shape are the *matchamarus*, who, despite having the same abilities, are regarded by the Garos as evil spirits or demons rather than earthly creatures as per the *matchadus* (Playfair, 1909, p. 23). From an episode contained in the *Khatta Agana*, the cycle of oral epics and heroic ballads of the Garos documented independently by both Playfair (1909) and later scholars (Bertrand, 1958; Rongmuthu, 1960), one learns that *matchadus* retain their human form during the day and turn into tigers at nightfall, and then, alone or in a group, follow the trail of cows, goats and humans in order to devour them. Garo folk tales are replete with confrontations between humans and *matchadus*. In some of them, Garo heroes of the past succeed in deceiving and killing the foolish tigersmen.

Matchadus are described in the oral tradition of the *Khatta Agana* as a 'race' of cannibals, half-men and half-tigers, living in their own villages located deep in the forest. They would be recognisable by their thick head of hair, sturdy and hirsute body, blackish complexion, nervous gait, and tendency to growl (Rongmuthu, 1960, p. 218). Their character is believed to be extremely savage, cruel, bloodthirsty, and treacherous. A scholar of Assamese folklore (Bhattacharjee, 1990) characterizes the *matchadu* as "an

the reference to the act of pulling one own's earrings out might imply that weretigers do not like to be recognized as such when they assume their animal form.

imaginary animal which takes the form of human beings in day time and turns into tiger at night” (p. 43) – in other words, as a non-human animal. A Garo dictionary (Nengminza, 1978) states that the *matchadu* is considered “an animal holding the middle place between man and tiger” (p. 109). The latter definition makes clear that the *matchadu* is conceived as a creature living in a ‘cross-species’ state, as both tiger and man, and therefore occupying the liminal space between human and beast.

The notion of the tigerman is reflected in the historical figure of the Garo head-hunter. The Garos have had both trade and warfare relationships with neighbouring people since before the advent of British rule, and previously had the reputation of being head-hunters. During their head-hunting raids, which were carried out until about 1876, they used to adopt a ‘hit-and-run’ tactic moving stealthily and silently through the jungle, then suddenly attacking the farmers working in the fields (Burling, 1963, pp. 293-95, 300). Similar to Garo head-hunters of previous times, *matchadus*, driven by an atavistic compulsion to pursue, capture, and kill, are reported in oral epics and heroic ballads to adopt special techniques to annihilate their human foes; for example, by hiding themselves at vantage points, minutely spying on the movements of their selected victims, calculating the chances of success of a surprise attack, and finally hurling themselves, silently and lightning-quick, across the open field to instantly kill their victims (Rongmuthu, 1967, pp. 30-31). A similar parallel between the figure of the head-hunter and that of the tigerman is found among certain Naga tribes of Nagaland in northeastern India – the general geographic area which includes the Garo Hills. For instance, in historical times some prominent village chiefs of the Sangtam, Sema and Konyak Naga tribes, who were accustomed to leading head-hunting raids, were simultaneously considered tiger- or leopard-men – that is, in the ordinary usage of these terms among most of the Naga tribes, men who, while fast asleep or in a trance state, had the faculty to get their ‘animal double’ to attack their enemies. Note that the Konyak (or Northern Naga) branch of the Tibeto-Burman language phylum is classified by Burling (2003) as one of closest relatives of the Bodo-Garo branch of the same phylum, a fact that may reinforce the hypothesis that at least some ideas about ‘psychic’ weretigers (see the next section) were culturally inherited from the linguistic predecessors of both the Garo and Konyak Naga tribes.

A scholar of Garo folklore, D. S. Rongmuthu, himself a Garo, who undertook a systematic collection of the orally transmitted epic legends and heroic ballads, known collectively as *Khatta Agana*, affirms in one of his works (1993, pp. 123-25) that *matchadus* possessed a secret, magical method for transforming themselves from human to tiger form and back. This method consisted of a nocturnal metamorphosis at both the psychic and physical level, the esoteric techniques of which, inherited from one’s family, could not be disclosed to any stranger by those who knew them (as did Rongmuthu himself, according to his claim), on pain of death. Rongmuthu goes so far as to affirm that *matchadus* are not just legendary characters, but form an actual secret community of weretigers who still live today, incognito, in close proximity to Garo villages!

Legends about villages, or places in the forest, inhabited by dangerous tiger-men are shared by other Tibeto-Burman-speaking ethnic groups of northeastern India (e.g., by several Naga and Kuki-Chin tribes) as well as by different populations of Southeast Asia. In the Garo oral tradition of the *Khatta Agana*, such legends are combined with the theme of the epic struggle undertaken against the

matchadus by the founding heroes who led the tribe to their village settlements in the Garo Hills (some of which are now becoming semi-urban). A large cave located on Landu Hill southeast of Boko (Kamrup District, Assam), known as *Matcha Melaram* (the 'Mustering Place of Tigers'), is mentioned in particular as the place close to where a band of Garo warriors dispersed, by a surprise attack, an army of *matchadus* who were continuously raiding and plundering the early settlements of the Garos in the Brahmaputra Valley (Playfair, 1909, p. 10; Rongmuthu, 1960, pp. 321-22, 325; Tyler, 1962, p. 38). The surviving *matchadus* subsequently moved away from their settlements in the Valley to remote locations in the Garo Hills where they have continued to perpetuate their bloodline to this day. In the Garo Hills there are other rock caves and hilltops listed as ancient fortresses, or otherwise as annual meeting places of *matchadus* and/or of tigers.

Garo oral traditions also refer to an immortal female being, called Durokma,⁷ who resided in just such vast caves and, in accordance with the matrilineal structure of Garo society, was conceived as the 'matriarchal'⁸ ruler of tigermen (*matchadus*), as well as the queen of tigers and tigresses – hence her appellation Matchama, 'Tiger Mother'. In the epic lore of the Garos she is described as a female tyrant who exercises absolute power of life and death over *matchadu* warriors. The bravest, most heroic, and most famous *matchadu* generals were her progeny. One of Durokma's legendary abodes is situated on Koasi (or Khoasi) Hill in the northeastern portion of the Garo Hills. Here, it is said, tigers used to have annual meetings. The ancient inhabitants of the surrounding country, known as Matchadu Asong ('the Land of Tigermen'), are said to have worshipped this immortal female being as their tutelary tiger-goddess under the name of Koasi Durokma ('Durokma residing on Koasi Hill'). The summit of this hill is a plateau full of huge boulders, a liminal and heterotopic space which was home to a bloody Garo sacrificial cult until about 1860, when the site was 'desecrated' by a group of Garo Christian converts. At the base of the Nokrek Peak, another high hill situated at the centre of the Garo Hills, is the opening to a rock cave which is traditionally regarded as another dwelling-place of Durokma, as well as innumerable tigers (Bareh, 1974; Carey, 1919; Marak, 2000; Rongmuthu, 1960, 1967; Simon, 1996).

At this juncture, the question arises whether there could exist a connection between the above-sketched Garo epic lore about the tigermen called *matchadus* and the presumed *disease* referred to as 'transformation into a tiger' by Eliot (who, as noted above, wrote his report on the Garos in the late eighteenth century)? In light of the results of twentieth century studies in cultural and social anthropology

⁷ This name is alternatively spelt as Dorokma or Dorogma in D. S. Rongmuthu's works. Curiously, Bhattacharyya (1995, pp. 19, 94) labels Durokma as a "queen of monkeys" or "goddess of monkeys", most likely because *durok* is the Garo term for the Bengal loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*), a strepsirrhine primate native to South and Southeast Asia, while *ma* means mother. Bhattacharyya's etymology for the name Durokma, however, conflicts with the tigine character of this supernatural being as consistently related in Garo folktales and must, therefore, be discarded. My view is that the etymology of the name Durokma is still unknown to scholars of Garo folklore.

⁸ The reason why the adjective 'matriarchal' is here enclosed within inverted commas is that Garo society is not a matriarchal, but rather a matrilineal one. Until recently, women were the actual owners of the ancestral property, which was passed from mothers to daughters. This inheritance pattern placed them in a very high social position within their village community, although Garo men appear to have always played dominant roles in most public spheres such as religion, politics, and administration (Bal, 2007). This notwithstanding, Rongmuthu (1967, p. 31), rather unhistorically, defines Durokma as the "*Matriarchal* (emphasis added) Head of the Tiger Race", which would include both tigermen and ordinary tigers.

(Tyler, 1962; Goswami & Majumdar, 1968; Majumdar, 1978), it may be assumed that the fierce and dreadful *matchadus* of Garo oral traditions are an epic-legendary transposition of an archaic animistic belief that is still present, or remembered, in the collective imagination of this ethnic group (at least among the remaining adepts of their old tribal religion), namely, the power attributed to the spiritual essence of human beings to be projected into the body of a tiger or of other wild animals. In the early 1960's, American anthropologist S. A. Tyler (1962, pp. 198-201) suggested that the power of bodily metamorphosis ascribed to *matchadus* would seem to represent an extreme example of the ability, attributed by the Garos to the vital essence which animates man as well as all other living beings, to temporarily leave the body it occupies and enter the body of someone else (for instance, of an unborn child), thereby changing it dramatically from the interior. A borderline case of such transformative power of the vital spirit, Tyler held, would be constituted by the latter's ability to change the very shape of the human body it resides in and to transmute it into an animal's body, as is the case with the *matchadus*. Human-to-animal physical shape-shifting would, therefore, be but a special manifestation of the transformative power Garo cognitive norms attached to the people's spiritual essence.

As will be discussed in the next section, subsequent and more in-depth studies of Garo culture and social attitudes (Goswami & Majumdar, 1968; Majumdar, 1978) have shown that the power of turning oneself into a tiger attributed to *real* people – that is, not to *matchadus*, imaginary beings that belong to the world of legends – instead operates in the metaphysical realm of the dream, not in that of empirical reality.

Matchapilgipas (people who dream of being a tiger)

The most interesting feature of dreams in traditional Garo culture is the acknowledgement of a dimension where they mingle with mundane events. Garo society imputes to certain individuals the ability to transform themselves in a dream into dangerous wild beasts such as tigers, snakes, and elephants. The vital essence (*janggi*, 'life, soul') of such persons is believed to come out of the body during deep sleep (during the REM phase) or while the subject is in a hypnotic trance. This 'life-soul' then goes and shares the body of a wild animal – the alter ego, or other self, of the sleeping person – together with the animal's *janggi* on a plane of existence that can be described as *dual*. Those who are deemed to be changed into tigers, snakes, and elephants in this way are called *matchapilgipa*, *chipupilgipa*, and *mongmapilgipa*, where the terms *matcha-*, *chipu-*, and *mongma-* mean tiger, snake, and elephant, while the verbal affix *-pil-* translates as 'to return, change, turn, back and forth', and *-gipa* is a nominalizing suffix.⁹ The Garos believe that a *matchapilgipa* habitually dreams of being a tiger in the act of attacking a domestic animal or a human being, and that whenever such a person has dreams of this kind, a domestic animal or human being is simultaneously attacked by a tiger (Goswami & Majumdar, 1968, p. 65; Majumdar, 1978, p. 25; Marak, 1986, p. 93). From a rational standpoint, this spontaneous and unconscious psychic process, through which a human's *janggi* is said to become one

⁹ Thanks to Emeritus Professor Dr Robbins Burling for providing the etymology of the Garo term *matchapilgipa* (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

with a tiger's *janggi* during night-time, can be interpreted as an illusion brought about by dreams or dreamlike trance states.

The Garos also believe that, if a *matchapilgipa* wandering in animal form is wounded or killed, the person it has come from, still immersed in sleep at home, is also affected the same way – that is, he/she suddenly gets wounded or killed (Rongmuthu, 1960, p. 113). Such effects are described in very similar terms by all of India's tribal groups who have traditional beliefs about the power, attributed to certain persons, to temporarily project their spiritual essence into the body of a great feline predator during sleep or trance. In addition to the Garos, these include some Khasi and Naga groups in the Assamese region and, further south, some Kondh groups in the state of Orissa.

Among the Garos the killing of a man-eating tiger is thought to require a major reparative sacrifice – an ox and two jars of liquor – for the human *janggi* that might have temporarily occupied the body of the animal at the time of its death (Bertrand, 1958, p. 67). The only way to sever the link with the tiger is through rites of exorcism arranged by the *matchapilgipa*'s relatives with or without the consent of the subject, the goal of which is to permanently constrain the *janggi* of the shape-shifter within its original, human body (Rongmuthu, 1960, p. 112).

Tiger-persons are feared by some Garos as they can cause harm in their beastly form (Burling, 1963, p. 62; Goswami & Majumdar, 1968, p. 65). However, some other Garos believe tiger-persons normally refrain from harming or devouring villagers, or at least their own fellow villagers (Bordoloi, 2002). The view expressed by the Indian anthropologists who have interviewed some alleged Garo *matchapilgipas* (Goswami & Majumdar, 1968, p. 65) is that the latter neither suffered a mental disorder nor had an eccentric personality. On the contrary, they were generally proud of their presumed ability to 'psychically' metamorphose into tigers, and openly talked with people about their night roaming in even faraway lands, which supposedly occurred in dream life. No social stigma appears to be attached to the supernatural power ascribed to such persons. Likewise, American linguist and anthropologist R. Burling (1963, p. 62) maintains that the Garos take a rather casual attitude towards tiger-persons, so much so that, out of politeness, they usually abstain from calling attention to the abnormal existential condition these people must face.

After having entered for the first time the body of a tiger, the *janggi* of a *matchapilgipa* will, for the rest of his or her life, always share the body of that same specimen. He or she will be able to see through that tiger's eyes, and control its movements. *Matchapilgipas* can sometimes be recognized by their relatives, for example, if a man insistently scratches his wife, or the house wall adjacent to his bed, unconsciously in sleep (Thumra, 2003, p. 61). As proof of its nature being still human while identical (or 'cosubjective') with its dormant, human alter ego, a *matchapilgipa*, in tiger form, would be able to clearly understand the conversations between people it hears while prowling, unseen, near isolated houses or through village streets; then later, after the *janggi* has re-entered the human body and the subject has awakened, relate such conversations to others. In periods of wakefulness, *matchapilgipa* would clearly remember everything their animal 'double' has done, seen, heard, or perceived. It is however believed that excessive disclosure of such claimed activities and experiences will ultimately result in an

irreparable loss of the *matchapilgipa*'s ability to merge his or her human *janggi* with a tiger's *janggi* (Marak, 2005, p. 115, note 3; Rongmuthu, 1960, pp. 112-13).

There are also tales of tiger-persons who manage to save their family members from death from fire by scratching on the door of their house while in animal form, thus waking their family in time to put out the fire. However, despite retaining a compassionate and protective attitude in their 'dual' mode of existence, alleged Garo *matchapilgipa* would nevertheless not refrain from killing and eating humans. Indeed, some of them claim they can tell when they change to tiger form at night because of the bad taste of human flesh in their mouth the next morning (Tyler, 1962, p. 199).¹⁰

In the language of the Garos, the ability to 'psychically' convert oneself into a tiger in sleep is known as *matchapila*, meaning 'to assume the form of a tiger' (Nengminza, 1978). According to the belief of the Garos, at least those living in Bangladesh on the southwestern border of the Indian state of Meghalaya, this skill cannot be acquired voluntarily. These animist Garo communities instead claim that the *matchapila* power was, and is still today, given to certain people by Tatarā – the supreme *mite* (divine spirit), who created the world and all its creatures – for reasons beyond human comprehension (Khaleque, 1984, p. 145).

In contrast with this view, however, some Garos of Meghalaya hold the alternative view that the *matchapila* power can be attained through the use of magical formulas by adepts of the spiritual-esoteric tradition of knowledge known as *Jadoreng*, a kind of religious cult which is said to impart to its practitioners the ability to 'psychically' and, to a certain extent, physically (see next section) turn into tigers or other wild animals. The nocturnal migration of one's 'life-soul' into the body of a tiger is seen, in this case, as a voluntary and conscious psychic process triggered by the utterance of special incantations. In order to preserve their magically obtained transformative power, practitioners would allegedly have to pass certain tests imposed by the divine spirit presiding over the animal species they have chosen as their alter ego (Rongmuthu, 1960, pp. 112-14). As summarised by another Indian scholar:

One of the many myths which is still unexplainable is the practice of *Jadoreng*. *Jadoreng* is still said to be practised by some devout Achik [i.e. Garos]. *Jadoreng* means holding the kite by the hand (*ja* - hand or the human astral body and *doreng* - kite). The spirit of the man is likened to the kite and, as the kite is attached to the man by an invisible cord, so is the spirit to the body. But just as the kite flies about, so does the spirit of man while still attached to his body. Here in the practice of *Jadoreng*, the spirit can change and take another physical form. Thus one's spirit can change into a tiger, a snake or an elephant and roam about at night, while the human form remains in a trance, almost lifeless. But just the way the kite is attached and cannot fly away for good, the transformed animal also comes back as a spirit and re-enters the human body. This cult is still said to be practised by a select group. There is no scientific explanation of *Jadoreng* (Bordoloi, 2002, p. 105).

¹⁰ In his master's thesis Tyler apparently lumps together Garo *matchapilgipas* (people who dream of being a tiger) and *matchadus* (legendary shape-shifting tigers) into one category, "the *matchadu* or tiger-man" (1962, p. 199).

Nevertheless, the dominant notion that 'psychic' weretigers are predestined from birth by the intervention of some divine spirit, and that there is therefore no need for them to resort to magical practices and incantations to develop their power, bears a strong similarity with what is traditionally believed about 'psychic' weretigers among the Khasis and Nagas of the Assamese region and the Kondhs of Orissa. Significantly, all these tribal groups of eastern and northeastern India believe, at the same time, that the killing of the animal form of a 'psychic' weretiger has a repercussive effect on the human vital essence (or 'life-soul') dwelling in the body of the tiger at the time of its death, thus, causing the simultaneous death of the shape-shifter's human form (at that time immersed in deep sleep or in a trance). In sum, there is a convergence of beliefs among all these Indian tribes concerning either the theme of the birth of a 'psychic' weretiger (the idea of a divine predestination) and that of his or her death (the repercussion of the killing of a tiger on the man or woman controlling it).

In my analysis, this peculiar kind of cross-cultural parallelism makes room for the hypothesis that a shared complex of ideas concerning the nature of 'psychic' weretigers developed, possibly from prehistoric times, in the Assamese region with contributions from tribal populations speaking either Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic languages – the Garos and the Nagas in the former case, the Khasis in the latter. This complex of ideas, in course of time, might have reached the Kondhs of highland Orissa (a group of Dravidian-speaking tribes) through the medium of another Austroasiatic-speaking tribe, that of the Mundas of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, who, in their turn, seem to have once held beliefs about the existence of 'psychic' weretigers. J. Hoffmann reports that in his time, the Mundas believed in the possibility of a migration of the human 'life-soul' into the body of a tiger during sleep (1930, pp. 730-31). Further cultural parallels may be traced to the Batek 'Negritos' of the Malay Peninsula, another Austroasiatic-speaking tribe, whose most accomplished shamans are traditionally ascribed the power to project their own 'shadow-soul' into the body of a tiger in the forest outside of the village, when their human body lies asleep at night. In this case, too, it is believed that when the tiger body is killed, the human body also dies (Endicott, 1979, pp. 132-33).

Magical shape-shifters

In addition to *matchadus* (legendary tigermen) and *matchapilgipas* (human-to-animal 'psychic' shape-shifters), a third category of weretigers is recognized in the Garo cultural tradition. Lacking a specific native term designating it, I have chosen to call this category 'magical shape-shifters'. Some Garo people, it is said, could achieve a *physical* metamorphosis from human to animal form – just like the legendary *matchadus* – by magical means, the initiatory techniques of which would, however, have been largely lost by the Garos (Bordoloi, 2002, p. 105; Rongmuthu, 1960, p. 113). In this regard, Rongmuthu cites two main methods for physically transforming oneself into any wild beast: one consisting of the sprinkling of the initiate, at the hand of an assistant, with water previously treated with special spells (*mantras*) by a magical instructor; the other comprising the continuous repetition by the initiate, completely naked, of a *mantra* said to be that 'of Narasimha' (the incarnation of the Hindu god Viṣṇu as man-lion) to which is inserted the name of the animal the initiate wishes to physically turn him/herself into. To regain human form, in the first case the initiate would again be sprinkled with water treated with

mantras; while in the second, the clothes taken off by the initiate at the commencement of the rite would be thrown at him or her while still in animal form (Rongmuthu, 1993, pp. 120-22). Another source (Goswami, 1949) states that the clothes should, in turn, be treated with magical *mantras* prior to being thrown at the weretiger.

The techniques of bodily metamorphosis allegedly used by this third category of weretigers represent a key part of the teachings of the *Jadoreng* initiatory tradition (see above). However, the references made by Rongmuthu to *mantras*, aspersions with consecrated water, and even Hindu gods seem to relate more to Tantric (i.e. Hindu) sorcery in general, than to a magical tradition particular to the Garos. For example, the area of Mayong (Marigaon District, Assam), which is known in northeastern India as the 'land of black magic', abounds with oral tales about Tantric wizard-healers (called *bej* in Assamese) of the past who were able to transform either themselves or other people into tigers and other animals due to their magical skills. Foremost among the magical techniques of transformation employed by the wizard-healers was the recitation or chanting of certain esoteric *mantras* (Kalita, 1992; Valk & Goswami, 2013). As mentioned above, the utterance of special spells was also a necessary component of the process of physical metamorphosis from human to animal form allegedly adopted in the past by Garo 'magical shape-shifters'. The latter, in order to achieve the desired transformation, would also have needed the assistance of a magical instructor, which appears to correspond to the role played by the Tantric *bejs* of the Mayong area in the process of human-to-tiger transformation. For this reason, I hesitate to consider this third category of weretigers as a genuine product of the animistic traditions of the Garos, and instead consider it a by-product of the influence of Hindu magico-religious ideas on Garo culture and society.

Discussion

The oral traditions of the Garos indicate that three categories of weretigers are acknowledged by this Indian tribe. Two of these – the *matchadus* or shape-shifting tigers of Garo epic lore, and what are here called the 'magical shape-shifters' – are ascribed the power to physically metamorphose into tigers and later revert to human form, whereas a third category, that of *matchapilgipas* or 'psychic' weretigers, is ascribed the power to merge their own vital essence with that of a tiger roaming in the jungle during the night while they are lying asleep or in a trancelike state in their houses (where they still maintain their human form).

Although most of the scholarly sources used here to develop this classification date back to the second half of the twentieth century, there are reasons to think these ideas are still present in Garo communities today (at least among the small minority of the tribe who has not been converted to Christianity and still clings to animistic religion, customs, and folklore). For instance, as recently as 2011 T. Douglas, an independent researcher from England, visited some Garo villages and wrote:

I also hear of a common belief that in certain [Garo] families someone will share their spirit with a tiger and that they can transform into animals during hypnotic trance. I am told of incidents of people who have never left the Garo Hills but can still recollect adventures far, far away.

This belief is less prevalent now but it was common in the days when Garos were nature worshippers.¹¹

Douglas' statement testifies to the fact that some animist Garo communities of Meghalaya continue to believe in the existence of *matchapilgipas* or 'psychic' weretigers. As regards the *matchadus*, the warlike tigermen of the legendary past, their memory has been kept alive in Garo folklore through the recitation of oral epics and the singing of heroic ballads in which they are mentioned. But what about the memory of the 'magical shape-shifters' of the past who could allegedly change from human to tiger form by the use of Tantric-like black magic? Unfortunately, I have found no clues as to the continuation of this particular belief in present-day Garo society.

Furthermore, pertaining to this last category, a certain confusion seems to reign in the Assamese region about the role of black magic in the context of the alleged process of transformation of a human being into a big cat (either a tiger or leopard). An important fact to be taken into account is that among all the various oral folk traditions of the region (be these tribal or Hindu), those asserting that the phenomenon in question requires magical knowledge do not generally define the transformation into a tiger as the projection of a human being's 'life-soul' into the body of an animal. On the contrary, they invariably describe the transformation process in physical terms – that is, as bodily shape-shifting. Symmetrically, black magic practices appear to occupy no place among tribal beliefs associated with what is here called the 'psychic' weretiger, the only exception to this being represented by the *Jadoreng* spiritual-esoteric tradition of the Garos (which, as noted above, appears to have been to a great extent influenced by Tantric magical rituals).

The belief that certain people share their 'life-soul' with a tiger or leopard and are able to transform 'psychically' into such predatory animals is prevalent in several areas of the Assamese region – particularly among the Garos and certain Naga and Khasi tribal groups.¹² Rather than a magical-ritual tradition, beliefs about the existence of 'psychic' weretigers may hark back to a type of 'para-shamanic' experience contemplating the possibility of a simultaneous, consubstantial, or 'dual' existence of the vital essence or spirit of one and the same individual in two different bodies, the one human and the other animal. Such a 'dual' existence is understood from within an animistic conceptual framework (as was used by the Garos prior to their mass conversion to Christianity) by positing a community and identity of essence between man and beast. In other words, in the case of 'psychic' weretigers we might be dealing with a form of 'para-shamanic', ecstatic (from Latin *ex-stasis*, 'stand outside') experience as they manifest themselves through liminal experiences of dreams and altered states of consciousness.

¹¹ Douglas, T. (2011). *Research in the Northeast region*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/885538/Research_in_the_Northeast_Region

¹² In work currently in preparation I propose to include a comparative study of Garo, Khasi, Naga, Kondh, and Batek 'Negrito' beliefs about 'psychic' weretigers with a view to ascertaining whether the striking similarities noted among all such tribal beliefs, which have been summarily discussed in this article, are the result of cultural inheritance, of diffusion, or just fortuitous coincidences.

I propose that the idea of an outward projection of one's own 'life-soul' into the body of an animal may be compared to the concept and practice of a 'shamanic journey', one of the defining characteristics of which is precisely an out-of-body experience. However, since Garo individuals who claim to be 'psychic' weretigers are not shamans (there being no shamans proper in traditional Garo religion), it may be safer to define their shape-shifting experience as a particular type of self-hypnotic trance undergone during the deep stages of sleep. This would be experienced by the individuals who are in this mental state as animal metamorphosis – a return to the primordial state in which all living beings, endowed with a 'life-soul', had not yet differentiated, and lived together co-operating with one another. As stated by an ethno-anthropologist:

Shamanic metamorphosis into animal and vegetal forms – in the same way as shamanic journeys – is only a re-elaboration of the primordial pattern when harmony, peace and perfection were possible due to the non differentiation-collaboration between all living beings and between the latter and supernatural beings (Riboli, 2009, p. 349).

From this interpretative perspective, *matchapilgipas* would be conceived by the Garos as 'dual' individuals formed by the fusion of two vital essences or spirits – a human's and a tiger's – in one. In other words, they would not be conceived, as stated by Khaleque (1984), as persons "who possess two souls, the soul of a man and the soul of a tiger" (p. 145). Rather, Garo stories about *matchapilgipas*, as is the case with other tales of 'psychic' animal shape-shifters across South and Southeast Asia, seem to sustain the possibility of a mutual awareness between man and beast – a liminal mode of sharing knowledge and experience that could also be called 'cosubjectivity', or, 'copersonhood'. As summarized by Langford (2013):

This copersonhood is similar to what Lucien Lévy-Bruhl has described as "homogeneity of essence" among humans and other beings (1971: 36-55), which also allows for creatures to dually exist as both human and beast (1971: 158-84). For an animistic mentality, he writes "the transit from animal to man and from man to animal is accomplished in the most natural way.... It is agreed, too, as self-evident, that the faculties of animals are no whit behind those of human beings" (1966 [*sic*; read 1971], p. 36). (p. 233)

The liminal qualities inherent in 'psychic' animal shape-shifters may have led the ancient Garos to transpose them onto a new category of liminal creatures, the *matchadus* or shape-shifting tigermen known from Garo epic lore and heroic ballads. The latter are true monsters of a mixed, hybrid type, representing, in their frequent physical transformations from human to tiger and back, the co-presence of a human and a beastly nature within one physical body. Living in a 'cross-species' state as both tiger and man, these monstrous beings occupy the liminal space between human and beast.

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