



The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Shillong Khasi Belief Narratives and Violence Against Women

This article on the vanishing hitchhiker theme explores how an international narrative has generated a locally constructed set of orally transmitted narratives. The narratives derive from the framework of traditional belief systems among the Khasi community in northeastern India and incorporate within them Western conceptions of hauntings and beliefs about the restless dead. The article also attempts to examine how this narrative critiques paradigm shifts in the socioeconomic structures that are dependent on government policies and infrastructural development. Alongside this analysis, the article further explores how the urban legend is supported by the living Khasic system of belief and social reality.

KEYWORDS: vanishing hitchhiker—belief narratives—matrilineal society—urban legends—restless dead

On 6 September 2002, a twenty-three-year-old pregnant woman was killed by her husband; on 8 January 2008 he was sentenced to life imprisonment.¹ Soon afterwards, the story of a young woman hailing taxis, and then vanishing mysteriously from them, began to make the rounds in Shillong.

THIS STUDY of the vanishing hitchhiker theme, paradoxically set in a country where hitchhiking is virtually unknown, will try to demonstrate how this popular international legend has generated a locally constructed set of metafolklore that derives from the framework of traditional Khasi beliefs. This framework of beliefs incorporates within it the predominately Western conceptions of how hauntings should be (CARROL 2006; DAVIES 2007; FINUCANE 1982; JONES 1968).

The state of Meghalaya in the northeastern region of India is home to three main ethnic communities: the Khasis, Jaintias, and the Garos. The Khasis and Jaintias share affinities in religion, social structure, and culture, and are more or less a composite group. During British colonial rule, Shillong was made the headquarters and center of important decision-making for the whole of northeastern India because it is a mountainous town and its cold climate was comfortable for the British. The arrival of various Christian missionaries and the spread of European education led to a wave of conversions and Westernization of the culture and traditions of the people. Today, a major percentage of Khasis are Christians; only a few still adhere to the traditional indigenous religion.² There are two main factions among Christians in Meghalaya: Catholics and Protestants (and minority denominational groups), and there are underlying tensions between the two factions that are often expressed obviously or in a covert manner.

Many traditional beliefs of the Khasis are fast becoming obsolete and redundant in the face of Christian precepts. The culture and religion of the Khasis are carefully kept separate by the Protestant Church, or sometimes even adapted to Christianity, as is done by the Catholic Church, which deems it essential to preserve the identity of this group in accordance with Christian beliefs. For example, music, handiworks, folktales, legends, and other components of culture, which are harmless to the values and precepts of the Church, are patronized and even encouraged. Other elements that incorporate within them undertones or associations with the Khasi religion are ignored, denied, or sometimes even adapted to Christianity. The

indigenous religion and culture of the Khasis are, however, inseparable, resulting in inevitable conflict as some constituents of culture are sacrificed or adapted to fit in with Christian ideas. For example, within one of the Christian denominations in Shillong, it is forbidden to attend any traditional Khasi festivals. A friend of mine, failing to observe this law, was excommunicated for a period of six months. Khasi kinship is organized around matriarchal principles, with the woman playing the central role in family and society. In 1904, Major P. R. T. Gurdon was commissioned to record an ethnographic account of the Khasi community under the directives of the erstwhile colonial administration. In his account, he writes that their social setup

presents one of the most perfect examples still surviving of matriarchal institutions, carried out with a logic and thoroughness which, to those accustomed to regard the status and authority of the father as the foundation of society, are exceedingly remarkable. Not only is the mother the head and source, and only bond of union, of the family... she is the only owner of real property, and through her alone is inheritance transmitted. In the veneration of ancestors, which is the foundation of the tribal piety, the primal ancestress [*Ka Iawbei*] and her brother are the only persons regarded. The flat memorial stones set up to perpetuate the memory of the dead are called after the woman who represents the clan [*maw kynthei*], and the standing stones ranged behind them are dedicated to the male kinsmen on the mother's side. (GURDON 1914, 8)

At present, Khasis are caught up in a confluence of change brought about by evolving perceptions of culture that have resulted from better means of communication, education, and media. Although their society was ideally composed of a clan ancestress as the founder of each clan, they are no longer held in the same regard. The numerous monoliths that mark ancient traditional beliefs that dot the Khasi landscape both in the rural and the urban areas are seldom erected now. This is indicative of the changing matrilineal social structure. Hence, the fluid and volatile nature of the transition process encourages the creation and diffusion of various urban legends, rumors, and hearsay on a dramatic scale, representing the fears and suspicion the community experiences.

THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER NARRATIVE

As early as 1959, Louis C. Jones had the following to say about the vanishing hitchhiker tale type:

If we could fathom the total history of this one story, its origins, its periods of quiescence and activity, its borrowings and lendings, its mutations and constants, its sensitiveness to world events; if we understood all this about this one story we would have the answer to many of the riddles of our folk culture.

(JONES 1968 [1959], 183)

This statement serves to illustrate how the tale type has shape-shifted, adapted, and found its way to a town in India, where hitchhiking is not even practiced. It

molds itself into the current situation and becomes an expression of social tensions to demonstrate how a legend is supported by an active system of belief.

Beardsley and Hankey first collected the American and also non-American versions of the vanishing hitchhiker in 1942, but its forerunners also existed in earlier rural contexts (BEARDSLEY and HANKEY 1942). It is not, as was earlier believed, a new story that developed only in “the last twenty years or so” (BENNETT 1998, 2–3). In 1981, Jan Harold Brunvand took the study of urban legends to a new, scholarly dimension; the American versions collected had the following stable story elements:

Driver (or cab driver in some cases) traveling by a lonely road sees a girl (or nun) and stops to give her a ride. There is little conversation between them and when they reach the destination or house where she was supposed to get off, he stops and looks around to find that she has disappeared. He goes to return to the house, some article or clothing she has left in the car, and is informed by the occupants of the house that the girl had died a while ago.

(BRUNVAND 1981, 30–45)

Brunvand discussed fifteen versions of the vanishing hitchhiker legend in his work, all of which contain the constant narrative elements of the borrowed sweater, the road, the automobile, the disappearance, and the discovery.

Various versions of this tale have been collected and examined (BENNETT 1998, 1–17; BRUNVAND 1981, 49–55; CARROL 2006, 21–26; CUNNINGHAM and CUNNINGHAM 1989, 223; JONES 1968, 161–84; LEE 1940, 7–8; MCNEIL 1985, 89–98). Each version was adapted to a local folkloric context that gave the story authenticity, thus validating and making it relevant to its immediate surroundings. In the process of the localization of the narrative, each folk group concerned altered key details relevant to social, cultural, and economic issues, and these changes in turn elucidate and clarify prevailing realities in the area of its localization.

In a key article on the subject by Gillian Bennett, the haunting of the vanishing hitchhiker is projected to be an expression of the loss of life at its fullest, because most of the vanishing hitchhikers are prone to be women who are young and thus in the prime of life. The journey of the hitchhiker, his or her desperate bid to get to wherever it is he or she wants go, is a “search for an exit from an existential maze” (BENNETT 1998, 10–11). Bennett states that traditional preoccupations with the idea of what she calls “a bad death” could allow us to trace the “progression from religiously-defined concepts of a bad death, through socially-defined concepts and morally defined concepts, to personal and individualistic concepts focusing on the manner, not the consequences of death” (BENNETT 1998, 11).

Although the vanishing hitchhiker tale itself did not appear in Shillong until after the 2002 murder mentioned at the beginning of this article, variations of similar ghost stories have been recorded in Shillong since the 1970s. In a presentation on contemporary urban legends in Shillong, Khasi folklorist Desmond L. Kharmawphlang mentioned that in the 1970s, a popular narrative that made the rounds was the “Marina legend” in which a young man meets a girl at a new-year

party held at Pinewood Hotel. They get to know each other and as it gets late, the young man takes her home, which is located somewhere in Upper Shillong. As it is cold, he offers her his jacket. The narrative proceeds as follows:

On reaching the gate to her house, they both bade each other farewell. The following day the man remembered about the jacket he had lent the woman and he decided to get it back. When he arrived at her house he knocked on the door and an elderly woman greeted him. When he introduced himself and stated the purpose of his visit, he was informed by the woman that Marina had expired three years back. The man refused to believe this despite being repeatedly assured that this was the fact. Finally, in exasperation, the elderly woman offered to take him to the cemetery to which he also agreed. They went there and when they came upon Marina's grave he found his jacket hanging on the cross on which was also inscribed the name Marina. (KHARMAWPHLANG 2010)

The central details of this version involve a risky social gathering at a party during a liminal time and in a liminal space. People attending this event are strangers, and the venue, the Pinewood Hotel, which was built during colonial times, has the feel of a bygone era. The crucial element in this variant is the time. The social setting is in a historical building during the transition of the old year into the new, which is again suggestive of a place that connotes change. In addition, the celebration of ushering in the new year is carried out in an anonymous setting where there are numerous possibilities. However, in spite of this emphasis on liminality, the significant element of the version presented here is that the motif of the forgotten garment was already present in Shillong before the tale morphed specifically into the vanishing hitchhiker tale type. It seems that it was only after the life imprisonment of the murderer that the vanishing hitchhiker version of the narrative began to circulate in the town.

The Shillong version of the vanishing hitchhiker narrative coincides with a Korean version recorded in 1941 (AOKI 1954), which involves taxicabs and unpaid fares. In both narratives, it is from a picture that the taxi driver recognizes his charge. Another parallel is that the place from where the hitchhiker is picked up in the Korean version is the crematorium. Similarly, in the Khasi version, the girl is picked up from near the cemetery where she was killed and buried. However, this version, although based on an automobile accident, lacks other story elements like the identifying object of the jacket that is present in the Shillong narrative about the vanishing hitchhiker. The increasing importance of taxis and the accompanying increase in accidents seem to be the focus of this particular legend. However, the Korean version does not seem to have the same contextual implications and social significance that the Khasi version has for the residents of Shillong. John William Johnson collected a narrative in the 1980s from Africa, which also involves a taxi driver (JOHNSON 2007, 29). This indicates that the motif of the taxi/taxi driver is also diffused in a broad context. Such a detail thus could very well signal the significance of local transport for the given community of people.

Both the African and Shillong versions also include clothing acting as an authenticating element in the narrative. Maria PALLEIRO (2012) identifies a general motif

of an item that is left by a “ghost” as evidence of its existence and of the event actually having occurred. In her examples, a dress, a military coat, or even a pair of shoes with a wine or coffee stain comprise the articles of identification. Similarly, specific material “proof” of the hitchhiker’s existence and status as the ghost of a particular female individual is a key motif of the vanishing hitchhiker narrative. Her identification with the family home, according to Brunvand, “may depend upon showing the object to her relatives... the girl’s name or a photograph of her” (BRUNVAND 1981, 32). This in turn clarifies that the vanishing hitchhiker is indeed a revenant caught in an unending cycle of haunting roads. As we have seen, the internationally known motifs peculiar to the vanishing hitchhiker legend are also present in the Shillong versions. The lady hailing the taxi, the disappearance, the forgotten sweater, and the discovery at the cemetery are familiar motifs. The Shillong variants may therefore be identified with this legend type.

EXPRESSING AMBIVALENCE: URBANIZATION,
KHASI MATRILINY, AND CHANGING CULTURAL SPACES

Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, is a hill station that the erstwhile colonial government nicknamed the “Scotland of the East,” owing to its hilly terrain and cloud-covered green slopes. Today, Shillong has acquired a cosmopolitan reputation. It has been dubbed the “rock capital” of India because of its people’s passion for music, and even Bob Dylan’s birthday is celebrated annually with much fanfare. The city has become an educational hub where young people from across northeastern India come to pursue their higher education, and it also supports a growing migrant population. Shillong thus incorporates all the characteristics of an urban center for trade, commerce, and education. Accordingly, traditional elements (for example, folk games, children’s rhymes, local pastimes including *siat khmam* [target shooting with arrows], and folk games such as *mawkynting* [throwing stones upwards]) must strive to adapt and accommodate newer, modern values that are inevitable accompaniments of change. The circulation of rumors, hearsay, and urban legends constitute a part of this transition process. This section will demonstrate that the Shillong vanishing hitchhiker narrative expresses ambivalence toward this transition process in three key areas: the modernization of the city, the Khasi matrilineal system, and the depersonalization of traditionally private spaces, illustrated by storytelling situations and enactments of intimacy in the back seats of taxis.

Shillong is characterized by elements that mark some of the bigger towns in India, but lacks the infrastructure of the larger urban areas. For example, the growing population has seen an increase in the need for transport, and the most popular means are the local cabs that ply the narrow streets, resulting in the clogging of roads and uncontrollable traffic jams.³ To make matters worse, National Highway 44, which runs straight through the heart of town, is presently under construction.⁴ Perhaps due to this recent urbanization and the resulting increase

in the importance of transportation, various urban legends and rumors about the supernatural that circulate through town are especially relevant to the roads and small streets located at strategic and meaningful places. For example, legends might include a road close to a body of water or a tree that is exceptional in appearance. The sightings of *boits* (dwarves) are especially popular. Another example is the sighting of a demonic dog that travels throughout the town, attacks unwary prey, then licks the blood of its victims. Such stories are derived from the traditional belief of the Khasis in such supernatural creatures. The narratives serve to illustrate how the traditional elements of the Khasic belief system are being expressed in new forms. In the first example, the “small people” have left their traditional abode of dales and streams and are now found in the streets of the town; in the second example, the demonic dog is understood to be a manifestation of the evil creature, U Thlen, who is propitiated with human blood in exchange for effortless wealth. The adoption of the vanishing hitchhiker tale also seems to reflect this new form.

In spite of the traffic, cabs are the preferred means of local transport because they are cheap and convenient.⁵ It was thus on 14 September 2009 in a cab packed to capacity with other passengers and traveling from the Governor’s House to the Northeastern Hill University campus that I first heard the tale of the revenant visitations to taxis. A passenger, bored with the heavy traffic and the fact that for fifteen minutes the cab had not moved, began the conversation with the taxi driver, asking him if it was true that “a woman hailed cabs, usually at night, and then disappeared in Lawmali Road.” While the driver expressed vague knowledge of a story he had heard told, a colleague of mine, Benedict Hynniewta, a lecturer at the local university who was also in the same cab, immediately said that he had also heard the tale. The following narrative is one variant of the vanishing hitchhiker tale among taxi drivers in Shillong and was collected in the taxi on 14 September in English from Benedict Hynniewta:

It was late at night and a taxi driver was passing through Lawmali Road which runs parallel with a cemetery, when he saw a woman carrying a child standing on the roadside.⁶ Feeling sympathy for the woman as it was late at night, he stopped and asked her where she wanted to go. She said that it had gotten late and she was not able to get a taxi home. The driver then immediately offered to take her home and so she got into the back seat of the cab. Since it was cold that night, the driver, noticing her distress, offered her the use of his jacket, which she accepted. Some time later they reached Riatsamthiah, where her home was. She directed him to a gate and asked him to come the following day to collect his fare as it was late at night and she didn’t want her parents to think otherwise. The driver readily agreed to this and accordingly he returned the next day.

He knocked on the door and some time later it was opened by an elderly lady. The driver recounted the incidents of the night before but the lady of the house expressed no knowledge of any such woman living there. The driver was so insistent that the woman decided to show a photo album with the pictures of all her children. As they perused the pictures of the photo album together, the

taxi driver pointed to a photo of a young woman and asserted definitely that it was the same woman who had sat in his cab the evening before. The woman expressed amazement and said that it was impossible because her daughter had died a few years ago. But the driver refused to believe her and saw her denial as a means to cheat him out of his fare. The woman said that she would take him to see her daughter. She took him to Lawmali Cemetery and there, hanging on her daughter's grave, was the jacket of the taxi driver.

This narrative is intimately connected with the murder of the pregnant woman that took place in 2002. This murder was so sensational that it shocked the inhabitants of Shillong. The locale of the murder event was also significant enough that six years later, the incident activated a narrative of a vanishing hitchhiker that can be studied from the perspective of the folk group to which it is adapted.

The above version of the tale is the most popular one that is retold. Smaller details and scattered bits or rumors provide other variants of the narrative. For example, one nineteen-year old taxi passenger claims that "she [the revenant] hires a taxi and asks the driver to take her to Sohra."⁷ Other fragments collected from a popular bakery frequented by people from different walks of life narrate the story of a woman who hires a cab and asks the driver to take her to Nongpoh (the halfway point between the two states of Assam and Shillong), where she goes to a tea stall and eats her lunch before returning to Shillong. When she reaches her destination in Lawmali, she gives him a five-hundred-rupee note. Later, when the taxi driver attempts to use the money given to him, he discovers it has turned to blank paper.⁸ The following additional version was collected from another taxi driver in Shillong, and it is reproduced verbatim here in English translation:

I just happened to hear it—you know how friends tell you stories. It so happened that once we were hanging out in the taxi stand at Lawmali. There was an old man, a little advanced in years, I do not know him personally, he was new at the taxi driving trade. So once as he was on his rounds, it was evening and he got a reservation for his taxi. This woman said, "*Bah*, please take me to Riatsamthiah." So he went and when they reached the destination, she gave him a hundred rupee note asking him to please pick her up the following morning. The driver agreed. Then he went back to that house early the next morning and he knocked on the door and he asked the woman who opened the door where the *kong* was, who had asked him to pick her up that morning. Then the woman answered, "What woman is that?" The mother, I think it was the mother, said to *bah* that no such woman lived there. But the taxi driver insisted that yes, there was a woman who was pregnant who lived there. He said, "She has even given me money already and told me to come and pick her up today morning." But the mother denied him again. Then *Bah* happened to see a photograph on the wall and he exclaimed, "There, that is the woman." Then the mother replied that the woman in the photo had died a long time ago. *Bah*, poor thing, lost consciousness then.

Sometimes she reserves a taxi and goes to Iewduh. Sometimes, on Lawmali Road, she hails the taxis but sometimes the taxi drivers see her and sometimes

they don't. If they don't see her, then they run her over. If this happens, she goes to them and she asks them why they ran her over.... Poor thing, she was murdered after all.⁹

This narrative, by far the most precise in its details and the events it describes, localizes the legend further. The details mentioned serve to make this a familiar story for the audience. The taxi driver is referred to as *bah*, the Khasi respectful term for a man; *kong* is likewise the term of respect for a woman. As mentioned above, Riatsamthiah is where the murder victim had lived. The association of the vanishing hitchhiker with the murder victim is made more actual by the mention of the physical condition of her pregnancy. The penultimate section of the narrative corresponds somewhat with the closing statement regarding the hitchhiker hailing cabs and being ignored. The details in this variant imply the violent and unnatural death of the hitchhiker on account of her restless haunting activities, as well as the association that legend-tellers make between her and the murder victim.

Yet another version, more ghastly in detail, deals directly with the events of the murder which took place, but the woman does not vanish in this variant. In this version, the husband slits the throat of his wife and goes away thinking that she will die immediately. However, she manages to crawl to the main road that runs parallel to the cemetery where she attempts to hail the passing cabs. None of the taxis stop because of her condition and their own personal reluctance to help others. She thus lies on the road bleeding for quite some time before a passing cab stops. This cab drives her straight to the Civil Hospital where she dies due to excessive bleeding.¹⁰

A reference may be made here to the concise interpretation of the vanishing hitchhiker narrative made by Alan Dundes, where the identifying motif of spirit presence is a spot of blood on the car seat (DUNDES 2002, 76–94). The association of blood and the Mary Worth/Whales/Bloody Mary ritual described by Dundes seems to suggest violence and femininity (and in this case, may be interpreted to lean toward pregnancy).¹¹ The victim was pregnant at the time that she was murdered; she was also in the uncertain position of being considered the spouse of her husband/boyfriend by society, but was not legally married to him. As such, her liminal condition, and the final bloodletting symbolized by the slitting of the throat, is a significant reminder of a rite of passage.

The different variants of this narrative reflect a general angst that permeates the collective consciousness of the Khasis concerning modern life. The transforming five-hundred-rupee note could be seen as an expression of the counterfeit money problem in Shillong.¹² The rising traffic problems and taxi-congested city roads are critiqued by the narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker, just as the stories that talk about forgotten bandages, scissors, and other medical instruments in the stomachs of patients after operations are reflective of anxiety about the dubious nature of medical practices.¹³ The immediacy with which the legend, event, and its place of occurrence are identified by the inhabitants of Shillong makes the example explored above what DUNDES (1971) referred to as the “psychology of legend,”

where it is the unconscious will of the individual and his or her community that gives any legend its meaning and relevance. The level of diffusion of a narrative depends upon the interpretation of the content of the legend in the context of popularly held values.

A distinguishing characteristic of the Khasi community is the matrilineal system of descent, which is still very much prevalent today. Society, culture, and tradition are governed by the laws of kinship and matriarchy that traces lineage from the ancestress of the clan: children assume the surname of the mother, and the youngest daughter inherits all ancestral property to become its custodian. Understood in this context, the narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker becomes an eloquent appeal for awareness. In a society that reveres the place of women as the medium through which clan and kinship are traced, shaped, and defined, the story of a young woman (with child) murdered by her husband subverts the principles upon which Khasi society is grounded. This is not to say that the problem of violence against women was not preexistent; however, the reason why this event and not others activated an urban legend may be revealed if a closer study of the contextual background is made.

According to the data collected from the Sadar Police Thana in Shillong (see note 1), the circumstances of the murder involved an ongoing relationship between the young woman and her husband, the consequent pregnancy, and the final act in which he slit her throat in the cemetery. The dual murder of the woman and her unborn child sparked a riot of protests within the Khasi community. Rallies, meetings, and protests made this into a local media event. There was an element of sensationalism, and women's rights groups began to campaign for justice. The murder was debated intensely in marketplaces, drawing rooms, and taxis. It was also covered in local newspapers.¹⁴ Public opinion was mobilized, which led the police to redouble their efforts. The murderer broke down under the strain of police questioning, and later, under the auspices of a mobile court, was finally convicted.

The increase in crimes against Khasi women undermines their social position and disrupts the Khasi matrilineal system. To quote the perspective of local newspapers, radio, and television on this issue,

In a state that boasts of a matrilineal system, crime against women has touched an alarming high. There have been 247 sexual molestation cases in the past eight years. The statistic, perhaps, is comparatively higher than any other states in the Northeast. The crime graph during 2001–2008, according to data gathered from state police and Meghalaya State Women's Commission (MSWC), shows 200 rape and 47 attempted rape cases reported in the State.¹⁵

The increase in violent crime against women¹⁶ also indicates some of the changes that are creeping into the value system of this tight-knit community of people. Narratives about the ghostly passenger then become indirect expressions of the ambivalence in attitudes toward the increasing violence that women are

exposed to, and also toward the changing position of women in the present, urban context of Shillong society. Fine has written about similar changes in America:

These value shifts have unexpected effects, as members of a society cannot alter their basic mores without some ambivalence. This ambivalence, often not talked about openly, is expressed indirectly through folklore, which disguises the threat through the projection of the fear to a “real” occurrence. Values tend to lag behind social change, and some conflict is likely. (FINE 1980, 227–43)

Another significant aspect of the narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker is the implied shift of cultural space in the context of storytelling. As with many other cultures, the time-honored tradition of storytelling around the hearth or fireside after all the tasks of the day are completed is intrinsic to Khasi culture. Folksongs and folktales affirm the traditional practice of gathering together in the cooking area of the home after a hard day’s work to recount events of the day, stories, and legends. In these narratives, some elements may be observed that clearly define the perspectives of the entire group, especially in a region of the nation that is somewhat marginalized from the mainstream. India, with its manifold cultural practices and variegated customs, remains a country in which tradition still holds sway over the general populace. Although there are significant changes in the worldview of those residing in major metropolitan cities, in isolated communities like those in northeastern India, the influence of religion, family, and moral values is paramount: connecting to the Internet continues to be very slow, not going to church is considered sinful, and homosexuals remain novelties.

Examined from the perspective of the encroachment of modernity, the slow yet inevitable changes brought about by the irreversible march of time transform the lives of everyone. Forms of oral tradition are now disseminated in urban settings through mass media such as radio, television, and newspapers. Because of the inevitable changes in perspectives and priorities that result from living life in a newly emerging cosmopolitan world in Shillong, contemporary Khasis have less and less time to bond with each other in ways considered meaningful by tradition. Telling bedtime stories to children, for instance, is declining in importance, as computer games and social networking on the Internet increasingly become the preferred modes of leisure-time activities and personal interaction respectively. This is based on my lifelong experience as a resident of Shillong.

In a society caught at the confluence of a myriad of ethnicities, cultures, and rapid economic change, the tale of the vanishing hitchhiker among taxi drivers illustrates social changes that have crept into Khasi society. The movement of the storytelling space from around the hearth to the urban settings of the backseats of taxis, the marketplace, email, and other transitory locales signifies a transition from long narratives to fragmented tellings in the form of rumors and hearsay. The audiences who listen to such fragmented tales are not friends, relatives, or neighbors, but strangers bound together only by the coincidence that they are traveling together in a common vehicle. Taxis are also as representative of a public domain that is at once

anonymous and personal. The mobility factor of the cabs that crisscross Shillong day and night promotes the diffusion of new forms of folklore on a noticeable scale.

Another point that may be made is that the vanishing hitchhiker narrative in its Khasi variants identifies the backseats of taxis as potentially sexual spaces. It is a fairly common sight to see couples kissing in the backseats of cabs. Public displays of affection are not tolerated in Shillong, and handholding among couples is the most that is allowed. There are no centers for young people to freely express romantic affection; Khasi society is still closed in its tolerance to “lewd” behavior among young people. The backseat of a taxi-cab in the dark thus affords at least a modicum of privacy to young people. To counter this, taxi drivers have now begun to resort to switching on the lights in the interior of the cab as it gets dark. Elements of the taxi as a sexual space arise in the tale. The hitchhiker is female, and it is implied that because she is female and therefore vulnerable, the taxi driver stops to give her a ride. Also, the action of the taxi driver offering a jacket to the female passenger may be interpreted as an attempt to establish a familiarity with her, which may or may not be seen as suggestive.

THE RESTLESS DEAD AND CURSED PLACE IN KHASI BELIEFS

Perhaps the most vital dimension of the narratives discussed above lies in their implications for the study of beliefs pertaining to the restless dead in Khasi traditional religion as it interacts with and sometimes opposes the Christian worldview and Western perceptions of the supernatural in general. Linda DÉGH (1996) states that the core of any narrative that is classified generically as a legend must be belief. As such, attitudes toward the key element of belief play a pivotal role in the significance of the legend and its telling. The narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker in Shillong reflects the Khasi (or more generally universal) belief in the restless dead and the unquiet souls of people who died a violent death. The idea of an unquiet soul seeking justice is popularly represented and endorsed by the media in the forms of stories, movies, songs, and other mediums. There is little belief, however, of such places being affected by misfortune and misery. Valk thus holds that legends about ghosts express memories and traumatic experiences of the living that have suffered from the turmoil of history (VALK 2006).

Taking a look at vernacular constructs of beliefs about the restless dead, I wish to isolate three central ideas: the quality of the way of life led by the deceased; the manner of death; and the fulfillment of funerary rites.¹⁷ Pentikäinen has written a brief but important article concerning the sociological component of the status or position accorded to the dead based on the manner of their deaths as well as the quality of their lives (PENTIKÄINEN 1989). In the Khasi belief system, the dead are accorded a relative position based on the quality of life led by a person and the manner of his or her death as well. Moreover, those whose funerary rites are inadequate or incomplete become wandering souls who find no peace; those who led a wicked life become the worst malicious spirits, tormenting people and causing

harm. Those who “died well” are given the rare privilege to *bam kwai ha dwar/iing U blei* (“chew betelnut in the house of God”).

The Khasi concept of *ki ksuid ki kbrei* (demons/ghosts and spirits/wraiths) is a blanket phrase to denote a wide variety of ghosts. In his essay on the philosophical foundation of the Khasi worldview, MAWRIE (2000) categorizes the different kinds of spirits in the pantheon of ghosts. First, there are the restless spirits of those who have committed *ka sang*, which is the Khasi analogue of mortal sin. Such spirits are malevolent and cause misfortune to mankind. Second, there are the souls of those whose funeral rites were not fulfilled. Such spirits are shy and timid and they seek to avoid the company of men. They usually like to remain by themselves and as such any encounter with them is purely coincidental. The third class of spirits belongs to those people who have died violently. These kinds of entities are very malevolent and afflict any person who has the misfortune to come into contact with them. They inhabit rivers, dales, caves, and other special geographical sites. A few of these spirits are elevated to the status of deity as a result of man’s fear of them. These deities, like the *taro* (household demon/deity who brings wealth), *puri* (water spirit famed for ensnaring men), and *ryngkew* (guardian deity of a natural geographical feature such as a sacred grove or river), are only malevolent spirits and nothing else (MAWRIE 2000). In Mawrie’s scheme, the restless soul of the murdered victim would fall under the third category. I argue that it is perhaps because the vanishing hitchhiker died so dramatically in an urban setting that her “soul” activated an urban legend instead of prompting ritual practices or the elevation of the spirit to a guardian deity (*ryngkew*), which might have been likely had the murder occurred in a rural context.

In the present narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker, the victim has been given a proper Christian burial, but she refuses to rest because the traditional funerary norms prescribed in the case of victims who died by violence requires the special ritual of *mait tyrut*, an exclusive ceremony that is performed in the event of an unnatural or violent death. The word *mait* means “to hack” or “to kill” the *tyrut* (curse). The ceremony involves the propitiation of the *tyrut* with the sacrifice of a fowl and other things. One may suggest that this accommodates the socio-psychological need within individuals that transcends the parameters of Christian ideology. The legend of the vanishing hitchhiker is one of the ways of expressing this particular need, thus making it unique in its function within the whole narrative repertoire of the Khasis.

As an example, in December 2009 a family in Shillong experienced the tragedy of their son-in-law’s suicide. The family, which still adheres to the traditional, pre-Christian Khasi religion, immediately sanctioned a *mait tyrut* ceremony that had to be performed three times in order to completely eliminate the threat of the curse caused by inauspicious death. *Ka tyrut*, which is a curse or taint, is associated with a location that is the scene of a tragedy; it is an “evil” associated with place, and this evil exists at the given location where the hauntings by the hitchhiker were reported. The *tyrut* may be analogous nominally with a curse, but the concept of *tyrut* also incorporates the idea that trace-remnants of the person embed themselves into the place where the incident occurred because blood has soaked into

the ground. Because of this, the place is considered to be unclean and tainted, a place of repeated misfortune that continuously plagues the living in the form of bad luck or accidents and death.

The scene of the murder that activated the Khasi narrative was Lawmali Cemetery. The hitchhiker frequents the road between the graveyard and Wahumkhrah River. Owen DAVIES (2007) argues that water and water bodies in specific counties in England are central to the concept of liminal spaces. Similarly, the Khasi locale under discussion here may also allow haunting to be perceived as an act of being in between two worlds or states of being, which is central to the concept of liminality as Victor Turner developed it in one of his early, seminal essays (TURNER 1964). Davies writes, “natural features such as rivers likewise served as liminal places where the two worlds met, and where people gathered to either reinforce the separation between them or to try to permeate it briefly for religious or magical purposes” (DAVIES 2007, 56–67). If one were to look into the “geography of haunting,” to borrow a phrase from DAVIES (2007, 45–64), wherein supernatural incidents are purported to occur, the location of the haunted road, flanked on one side by Lawmali Cemetery and on the other by Wahumkhrah River, makes it an ideal location to be given the local status of a special place that is liminal and transcendent in its implications for those residing in the area. Magical beliefs about places like this are connected with the idea that water acts as a medium for the passage of supernatural energy as evidenced in ritual and folk traditions in Khasi culture.¹⁸ Lawmali Road is therefore understood to be a remarkable place that is rife with rumors about other hauntings and supernatural sightings precisely because of its location and the significance that local beliefs associate with such places. The spirit of the murdered victim then may be perceived as being in the threshold, or in between two worlds traversing the path of the unquiet spirit as she seeks affirmation and rest. Spirits seek justice from people who talk about them; as Valk states, they

warn the living that the wishes of the dead must not be neglected. These wishes start with the proper arrangement of funerals, continue with mourning customs, and end with certain expectations concerning the future lives of family members. Spirits thus play a stabilizing role in upholding culture, its values, and religious traditions. (VALK 2006)

The haunting area, the cemetery, and the road adjoining it symbolically assume the role of the personal “turf” of the murdered victim. However, social perception overlooks the fact that all of the spirits of the people buried there own the graveyard. Nonetheless, the fact remains that it is only the particular murder discussed in this article that is able to generate a sustained narrative about haunting.

Generally, the Western perspective on the nature of hauntings encompasses unexplained phenomena like strange noises, white figures, apparitions, and other such occurrences which may have been the result of a violent or unnatural death or an unaccomplished agenda (DAVIES 2007). But in the Khasi worldview, hauntings take on a more sinister and malevolent color. As with the *bhūts* (ghosts) of the pan-Indian sensibility, the evil spirits of the Khasis plague humankind with sick-

ness, disease, and misfortune (BHATTACHARYA 2000, 11–14; CROOKE 1994, 146; FREED and FREED 1993, 76–77). The *ki ksuid ki kbrei* and the *tyrut* all incorporate within them the idea that encounters will lead ultimately to illness or a shortcoming in fortunes, sometimes even death. In broad contrast, the Western construct of the spirit world portrays disembodied beings as sometimes benign and mostly harmless. People now even seek them out for advice and guidance. The Khasi belief system, on the other hand, emphasizes the malignant side of the restless dead, and it is within this understanding that the local taxi driver's encounter with the revenant has to be understood. The encounter results in the ill effects of shock and a loss of consciousness when he realizes that he has been ferrying a ghost.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Every legend, if examined within the context of its telling and its listening, has the potential to influence the perspective of its teller and audience. Meaning that is generated via storytelling is thus relevant to the social, political, and economic circumstances of the group to which the legend belongs. In this case, the story of the murdered hitchhiker evokes a deep-rooted sentiment in the Khasi psyche: a young woman with child is upheld to be the epitome of motherhood, and her brutal murder is seen as an affront to the very image of maternity. We come back to the idea of matriarchy in the end, to the figure of a woman who gives birth and is thus venerated. Sociocultural conceptions of womanhood thus lie rooted in the image that is presented through the events of the murder.

The narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker thus fulfills a social function of reinforcing and shaping traditional beliefs in an environment fraught with traffic jams and fast-paced changes by reintroducing questions of social and cultural significance. The relationship between the dead and the living in the Khasi cultural context presents a complex question of perceived social realities and the narratives told about them; tales of the dead partially fulfill a function of upholding social norms that slowly begin losing relevance in a society adapting to cosmopolitanism. Belief is then re-represented in stories like the ones presented above, stories that question and reinforce traditional systems in an indirect manner (TANGHERLINI 2007). The narrative of the vanishing hitchhiker is reflective of the loss of cultural values and conventions among the Khasis in a modern context that allows for the subversion of the position of woman and the eternal values she stands for in Khasi society.

NOTES

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1. Case facts were kindly provided by Inspector K. Prasad from the Case Diaries of the Sadar Police Thana (Sadar Police Station), Shillong. When I went to ask for information on this case, Inspector Prasad referred to the Case Diaries, but I was not allowed to handle them or to look at them. He just told me the facts and he had the Case Diary open in his hand. See also “Life for Killing Pregnant Girl,” http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080108/jsp/northeast/story_8755786.jsp (accessed 10 May 2012).

2. The traditional religion of the Khasis is called *Ka Niam Tip Briew Niam Tip Blei* (Man knowing, God knowing). It holds that man came into this world to earn righteousness. It is monotheistic in character.

3. See Nawaz Yasin Islam, “Legalized” mid-street parking: An unseen roadblock! <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2012/04/17/legalized-mid-street-parking-an-unseen-road-block/> (accessed 4 July 2012).

4. Shillong is connected to the rest of India only through roads. There are no trains, nor any fully functioning airports in the area. Trucks laden with supply goods run through the city and this results in heavy traffic.

5. The state government has instituted an alternative public transport system in the last two years, which includes buses and maxi cabs. These have eased the local commuters’ woes to an extent.

6. Lawmali Road runs parallel to the cemetery where the pregnant girl was murdered.

7. Collected by author at Motphran Taxi Stand in Shillong on 21 January 2011.

8. Collected by author from a twenty-eight-year-old female shop assistant on Laitum-khrah Main Road in Shillong. See also “Concern over Fake Notes.” http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110205/jsp/northeast/story_13536089.jsp (accessed 14 December 2011).

9. Recorded by author from a twenty-five-year-old taxi driver at the Jaiaw Taxi Stand in Shillong on 21 January 2011.

10. I collected this from a taxi driver, aged twenty-five, in Motphran. I heard it again from my colleague Dr. G. Badaiasuklang Lyngdoh Nonglait. The taxi driver’s rendition was written down from memory because there was no recording device at the time of the telling.

11. In this ritual, popular mostly among young people, an individual utters the name “Bloody Mary” three times at midnight in front of the mirror to summon her. The most popular version of this is the name “Bloody Mary” although other variants do exist (DUNDES 2002, 76–94).

12. This is taken from: <http://theshillongtimes.com/2011/07/21/two-held-with-fake-currency/> (accessed 1 September 2011).

13. Stories like this are currently popular in Shillong. One version was narrated to me by a thirty-year-old friend in a phone conversation about a nurse who forgets to remove a bandage during a C-section procedure in a prominent city hospital.

14. In the archives of popular vernacular and English language newspapers that I have researched, it is interesting to note that this legend has not made an appearance.

15. See www.gauhatishillongplus.kolkatamirror.com (accessed 10 September 2008).

16. See “Meghalaya Women Seek Justice.” http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060907/asp/northeast/story_6711614.asp (accessed 27 April 2012).

17. Among the Khasis, it is a common belief that there are more chances for a spirit to become restless if in life the person has committed bad deeds, has had an accidental death, and has not completed all the normal funeral arrangements. This is corroborated in the pamphlets by MAWRIE (2000) and LALOO (1995).

18. Most Khasi rituals are punctuated with the use of water and rice beer. Rivers, lakes, and water bodies are believed to be the dwelling places of *puri* (water-nymphs), ghosts, and other spirits.

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