Fear and Fright in South Asia: Encounters with Ambivalence and Alterity in Vernacular Religion and Society (Editorial)

Beggiora, Stefano; Guzy, Lidia; Skoda, Uwe

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Editorial

Stefano Beggiora, Lidia Guzy and Uwe Skoda

Fear, fright and monstrosities

The contemporary era, both in the "East" and in the "West", seems to have – in a certain sense – legitimised the theme of fear, the figure of the monster and the fright that it instils. Multiple and polychrome representations through fashionable narrative cycles – such as television and film series, comics and novels, videogames and whatever else distinguishes the mass production of the postmodern period – have now accustomed contemporary society to a certain familiarity with the theme (Levina / Bui 2013, Asma 2009). However, in these contemporary forms of representation of what we conceive of as unknown, unknowable and consequently scary, even potentially monstrous – but also prodigious and admirable – there is a certain widespread awareness of the survival of the original root of an ancient tradition. A certainly pre-modern, pre-urban cultural element that boasts a similar imagery in social and ideological complexes that are also very distant in space and time. It is important to start from the assumption that the term monster derives etymologically from the Latin *monstrum*: a divine sign, a prodigy; from the verb *monēre*, or to warn, to admonish about something extraordinary, frightening, still horrible or wonderful, that could manifest itself in order to warn or instruct the humans on the will of the gods. In more recent times this constitutive ambivalence has diminished through modern dualism between what is natural and unnatural or supernatural, ultimately relegating monsters to the status of em-

Stefano Beggiora, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy; stefano.beggiora@unive.it. Lidia Guzy, Study of Religions Department, University College Cork (UCC) / National University of Ireland, Cork, Ireland; l.guzy@ucc.ie. Uwe Skoda, India and South Asia Studies, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; skoda@cas.au.dk.

pirical non-existence as a product of superstition or fantasy, or to that of the organic anomaly in scientific terms, or even to that of generic synonym for anything inhuman, cruel, terrifying (Miyake 2014: 16). Considering this, it should however be clear today that the stories of fear constitute, in a very general comparative dynamic, a narrative and folkloric corpus that goes well beyond the old legend or pop-culture tendencies of more recent memory. To immerse ourselves in this corpus, in relation to a specific culture, means entering into a sort of intimate, secret yet elective non-place for that given culture, in which the community agrees to face the most critical aspects of its identity.

In the social sphere, this effort is transformed in the exogenous dynamics of the rationalisation of otherness: relations with all that is perceived as alien to society, the different, the foreigner, what is beyond established boundaries. Or with what, having overstepped those borders, imposes itself by contrast as a new dominant culture. This criticality, with all its intrinsic fears, re-emerges forcefully in the phases of transition and change. This happens in an introspective, existential dynamic, when the community looks within itself, examining its values, its knowledge – or the decadence of the same – and questioning, in addition, its spirituality. Or on the occasion of rites of passage: both ordinary ones and those of greater importance, such as birth, death, *post mortem*, ... If it is therefore true that on the one hand the amazing stories of mysterious places, monstrous creatures, spectres and ghosts respond to a constant and atavistic need that people have to wonder, to shudder, to feel that subtle sense of pleasure that fear provides, such fear is experienced outside of a real dangerous situation. On the other hand these representations constitute a sort of displacement in relation to much more concrete fears of real risk.

The theory of fear that is fundamentally based on liminality (Turner 1969, see below) is supported by the work of the medievalist Jeffrey Cohen (1996: 3–25), who is now considered the father of the field of studies known as "monster studies" or "monster theory". He elaborated a theory of seven theses where the imaginary of the monster, clearly circumscribed by the feeling of fright and repulsion s/he or it evokes, ranges from its incorporation as an integral part of a cultural moment to its belonging to the other, or to the outermost boundaries – territorial, geographical, spatio-temporal and epistemological – of what is normally known and that it constantly patrols.

There is also, in the wide range of possibilities developed by Cohen, the aspect of monstrosity as the matrix of an ambiguous fear, which hides within itself a sort of unexpressed desire for something unattainable, in precisely the same way that the forbidden and the frightening can trigger escape fantasies: this can be interpreted as the typical dynamic of attraction-repulsion that is staged in folk/fairy tales and folklore. Moreover, figures such as the phantom, the aberration, the demon – in addition to being commonplaces or tropes – are narratives that perpetuate through other narratives, therefore requiring

listeners even more than witnesses. In this way the substantial function of the story of fear, which evokes terror even as it is experienced by staying safe, serves to exorcise a somewhat more dangerous demon. This occurs through a process that was (and continues to be) collective even in different and today much more "technological" forms (Mittman / Dendle 2012).

Secondly, an interesting question is not exactly whether ogres, dragons, ghosts and all the projections of fear really exist, but rather what these creatures really are. In other words, in addition to the exorcist-apotropaic function mentioned above, do they actually convey other meanings? In this imaginary, is it possible that ideas and elements of ancient disappearing or endangered traditions survive in those cultural images and memories of fear? Do these continue to convey and to reiterate themselves without the necessary awareness of their narrator, or of those who, by passing them down from generation to generation, contribute to the crystallisation of their content? If so, the monster becomes a figure in which the idea of such survival is linked to a world in which the earth, the cosmos and all its manifestations were themselves considered forces, deities, spirits, semi-divinities or in any case the expression of a complex and rigorous animistic, pantheistic and naturalistic order. This is generally called animism, but in its recurrent Platonic sense of *anima mundi* – of which monsters and fears would constitute a great variety of manifestations (from the subtle to the gross) – it is not so far from the indigenous ontologies of India and Central Asia.

According to a traditional perspective in the study of religions, the monster also embodies the symbolism of the rites of passage. It devours the old so that the new may be born. The treasure guarded by the monster (it would be appropriate here to say "by the dragon") is intended as spiritual: this world is accessed only through a radical transformation, which often implies the abandonment of material values, if not exactly one's own physical body. The monster, like the whale of Jonah, swallows and vomits up its prey after transfiguring it (Propp 2006: 345–374). Having accomplished this kind of katabasis, this journey into the realm of the dead – which in some cases is a sort of night prison – the hero re-emerges, renewed, immortal. So the fundamental character of the monster figure in different civilizations can only be frightful for the function it performs: as a psychopomp, anthropophagous, the monster tears and swallows.

Nevertheless the chivalrous quest of medieval literature substantially repeated this theme *ad libitum*: the journey, the defeat of the dragon, were initiatory proofs. The control of fear and heroism are none other than the measure of the capacity of the individual, or rather his/her merits. The hidden treasure that the monster guards is, as noted, spiritual, but is often characterised by the features of a sacralised context: the ultimate reward for those who survive is eternal youth, or immortality (Olsen / Houwen 2001). The theme is of course

very ancient; in the West there is a dragon guarding the golden fleece of Colchis, as well as the griffins that watch over the tree of life, a hideous snake tending the spring of Ares in Thebes and again a dragon guarding the golden apples of the Hesperides (Ogden 2013). This brief digression into the Greek myth requires also the mention of the famous Norse cycle of Siegfried, in which the priceless treasure guarded by the dragon is also immortality (here the "learning of the language of birds" is a clear initiatory metaphor). In Indian philosophy and religiosity the theme is equally developed in many senses, so much so that it would be simplistic to make a synthesis here. Suffice it to remember the famous cosmogonic myth of Indra: he hurls lightning at Vtra, the monster that includes everything in itself, including knowledge (Apollo killing the snake Python by flinging the arrow is probably an echo of the same symbolism). From this act therefore the *soma*, the nectar of immortality, is obtained (Zimmer 1993: 171).

> (1) I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters [...] (4) When, Indra, thou hadst slain the dragon's firstborn, and overcome the charms of the enchanters, then, giving life to Sun and Dawn and Heaven [...] (14) Whom sawest thou to avenge the Dragon, Indra, that fear possessed thy heart when thou hadst slain him; that, like a hawk affrighted through the regions, thou crossedst nine-and-ninety flowing rivers? (Rgveda 1, XXXII in Griffith 1889: 56–59)

Much of Indian medieval literature is a multiplication of frightful entities, in particular of dragons and serpents, which are nothing but the echo of a much older doctrine, that of "the rope and the snake", which had intersected the tradition of Advaita Vedānta. The hero – or the mystic, one should say – is misled by the darkness and mistakes what it is simply a rope for a snake, an imminent frightening danger, invincible in appearance. The dragon is therefore an illusion: this does not mean that it does not exist – it certainly exists, just like the rope – but we are confounded by *māyā*, a sort of metaphysical ignorance that overlaps the real, preventing us from seeing what it really is. In the Indian medieval literature of the Siddhas and the Nāths, and later in that of the Sants – in Kabir or even in Jāyasi, just to mention the influences of Sufism on this matter – this serpent wraps its coils around what was called the "citadel of the heart", a metaphor fairly well known at the time and with a clear meaning (Jindal 1993: 40–41, McGregor 1984). The liberated or self-realised (*jīvanmukta*) one is therefore the one who faces the fright, kills the dragon, dissolves the illusion of *māyā* and acquires immortality. In this game of overlaps, the monster can be interpreted as the image of an ego, but a kind of "self" that must be overcome in order to develop a higher "Self". Making a parallel with the symbolism of yoga, it is interesting to observe that *kuṇḍalini*, the self-luminous flame or the lightning of the "awakening", is also represented as a snake asleep on its coils. The theme of sleep is undoubtedly in-

teresting because in many narratives conveying this precise symbolism, dragons or other fantastic beings can be found sleeping beside or over the treasures of which they are guardians. The hero generally must take great care not to awaken the creature, acting with cunning and skill. But it is interesting to note that that sleep, in which the monster seems immersed in its abyss, has an allegorical nature: it is not so much in relation to the creature, but rather refers to the individual who is preparing for the trial. In the fairytale transposition of the rite, theorised in Propp's (2006: 146) milestone study on this subject entitled *Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale*, the hero is called to be awake. Defeating sleep is considered the trial: overcoming the sleep of the mind and senses overlaps here with the concept of defeating fear. Only those who are able to do so will be spiritually awakened, born into a new life.

Liminality and danger

The strong metaphor of sleeping and waking leads us to a further crucial element of the cultural dimension of fear: its liminal characteristics. In her pioneering treaty on Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas (1966: 2) starts by arguing that "primitive religious fear, together with the idea that it blocks the functioning of the mind, seems to be a false trail for understanding these religions". She rightly criticises the overemphasis on fear among nineteenth-century missionaries and travellers. They viewed "primitive religion" as, rather than being governed by reason, being primarily "inspired by fear", which was additionally coupled with a preoccupation with pollution, defilement and hygiene. Rejecting any obsession with fear that could not be upheld in the light of ethnographic research, she opts for hygiene and its alter ego dirt – or, rather, purity and its concomitant threat of pollution – as an entry point for a comparative understanding of socio-cultural order. Dismissing any earlier evolutionist viewpoint, Douglas considers instead – as her book title suggests – purity and danger as complementary ideas and thereby also implicitly returns to those fears intimately tied to or surrounding (potential) dangers and the risk of pollution.

For Douglas, dirt is culturally defined disorder and its avoidance is caused not by "craven fear" or "dread of holy terror", but rather by the idea that it is opposed to order. Similarly, pollution may best be understood as a deviation from a defined order or normalcy. It is equally specific to each society and may range from "menstrual blood […] feared as a lethal danger" to death, pollution, etc., with the body often used as a mirror to express major societal concerns, schisms and norms, while morality is defined with reference to a dangerous contagion (Douglas 1966: 3, 122). Apart from an expressive dimension,

pollution has an instrumental one. As Douglas states, "[the] ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness" (ibid.: 3).

Relevant especially for this volume is also the insight that rituals acknowledge and deal with the "potency of disorder", i.e. that power as much as danger is located beyond the societally defined boundaries. Those venturing beyond them have access to forms of power not accessible to those confined within the boundaries – a trope very familiar, for example, in the concept of kingship in India. Here, ideally, a new king needs to conquer the wilderness in order to appropriate its powers and to establish his realm, and rulers periodically oscillate between settlement and forest (Heesterman 1998, Falk 1973).

Likewise, but fast-forwarding to the modern era, new technologies that enable space-shifts or time-shifts by creating hybrid conditions or bridges to an elsewhere or elsewhen, thereby transgressing our tidy categories, may appear as equally frightening – as Buchanan-Oliver and Cruz (2011: 288 ff.) argue. They raise questions about the established and familiar boundaries, for example, between bodies/machines (artificial intelligence, cyborgs) or human/nonhuman, past/future and here/not-here, leading to liminal tensions, ambivalences and anxieties.

Thus, the crossing of categories and boundaries is commonly considered as potentially dangerous, as are "outsiders" associated with marginality or non-structure, though their power might be dormant, while others such as witches may be clearly threatening and frightening, as Douglas describes them: "social equivalents of beetles and spiders who live in the cracks of walls and wainscoting. They attract the fears and dislikes which other ambiguities and contradictions attract in other thought structures, and the kind of powers attributed to them symbolize their ambiguous, inarticulate status" (Douglas 1966: 103).

Building on these insights of Douglas, but also van Gennep's (1909) threefold model of rites of passage, Victor Turner (1969) stresses the link between liminality and danger. Liminality as an undifferentiated, slippery "limbo of statuslessness" (1969: 97), on the threshold or somewhere betwixt and between social positions, defies the usual classifications. It refers not only to blurred boundaries in ritual contexts but is frequently linked to darkness, invisibility, wilderness and to death and the symbolism of the grave or subsequently to (re-)birth. Hertz (1960: 83ff.) showed that death rituals as such usually broadly follow a tripartite model, with an intermediary phase between death itself and secondary burial or resurrection. However, the symbolism of death is frequently employed to indicate a state of tabula rasa or a void, i.e. giving up everything and thus creating ritual orphans. Therefore, a "ritual

death" is often performed, hinting at arguably the most radical and most feared threshold: that separating us from the "other side".

Once the initiand is detached from his or her previous status, stripped – at times literally – of markers of social positions, s/he is often expected to passively endure the ordeal of transition, before being reincorporated into society with a clear and stable new role. Perceived as "dangerous, inauspicious or polluting to persons, objects, events and relationships that have not been ritually incorporated into the liminal context" (ibid.: 108–9), liminality may present real physical threats or risks for the initiands, such as circumcision. As Douglas noted, "sisters and mothers are [sometimes] told to fear for their [the initiands'] safety, or that they used in the old days to die from hardship or fright, or by supernatural punishment for their misdeeds" (ibid.: 97).

At the same time, liminality "attributed with magico-religious properties" also has the potential for the emergence of communitas as anarchic anti-structure. As Turner sees it:

> Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy,' possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences and unprecedented potency. (Turner 1969: 128)

Thus, liminality implies the moment of transgression or crossing of boundaries – both in terms of time and space. As an exceptional state, it is commonly induced ritually and frequently requires the help or guidance of specialists for the return to a "norm" or "normality". While such a transition may create fears and cause considerable anxieties, it is often, depending on the context, also an occasion to communicate with spirits, ancestors and the like. And liminality may not be confined to ritual contexts alone. In fact, in a later focus on complex industrial societies, Turner (in Schechner 1988: 159–60) also found liminal-like or liminoid conditions, detached from customary rites of passage, but collectively experienced. Created by artists, such liminoid experiences may form part and parcel of entertainment genres such as film or literature where the dead, undead or monsters may re-appear in a somewhat tamed form.

Vernacular religion, the Other and fear

The taming of the liminal, liminoid and hybrid evolves then through systematisation and institutionalisation, the radical change of ontologies or the change of religions by conversion. Institutionalised religions as well as non-systematised indigenous ontologies all deal with individual and collective fear of the

cultural and the extramundane Other. They deal with the fear of death and the dead. "Do not fear!" is the leading promise of all proselytising religions.

Cultural fright can be regarded as a driving force for religious change. Conversions in Indian tribal areas are a good example of this phenomenon: conversions to Christianity have been very successful here as entire tribal communities, such as the Sora, have adopted the Christian faith (Vitebsky 2008). In particular, the symbolism of baptism with water, the vows and the orientation towards the charitable European foreigners have made a strong persuasive impact on tribal populations. Apart from Christian missionaries and their medical institutions, Hindu ascetic and reform movements have also been active, including Mahima Dharma (Guzy 2002) or individual Hindu *babas*. The success of Hindu missions is apparent in that in many places the consumption of meat and alcohol has been given up or *tulsi* (holy basil) trees have been planted.

A cultural element of fright can also foster the rejection, escape or alteration of one's own cultural and ontological frame. For example in tribal India the act of conversion to an Ascetic/Reform Hindu or Christian faith can also be interpreted as an indigenous attempt to control emic, culturally specific and traditionally uncontrollable ontological elements, such as evil spirits, monsters or post-mortem personalities (Vitebsky 2008, Guzy 2002, Mallebrein 2011). Fright can thus also be seen as a socio-moral regulator and counterbalance to the ambivalence of the emic concepts of social, cultural and ontological alterity or political otherness.

Indigenous ontologies are substantially different from the dualistic nature-culture divisive worldviews encountered in monotheistic traditions of one truth, one entity and one god, which differentiate clearly between "good" and "evil". Indigenous worldviews are embedded in analogous ecological knowledge systems relating to their own cosmologies and ontologies (Kopenawa / Albert 2013). Indigenous, shamanic worldviews can be commonly understood as value systems that are based, on the one hand, on cultures of orality, and on the other hand on the non-dualistic perspective towards benevolent and malevolent human and non-human agencies (Guzy 2017: 165–180) in a mutually shared world and cosmos (Descola 1992, 2013; Viveiro de Castro 1998), which Guzy labels "eco-cosmological" worldviews (Guzy 2019).

Indigenous cosmovisions – exemplified in shamanic worldviews – are neither unified nor peaceful systemic entities. They are potentially conflictual and violent – with the shaman as a religious specialist who is particularly equipped and specialised in trans-empirical flights/journeys and battles with unseen, other-than-human agencies. In their ground-breaking work on *Shamanism and Violence in Indigenous Conflicts*, Diana Riboli and Davide Torri (2013) discuss the dangerous, frightening and violent aspects of indigenous worldviews on a global scale. This particular perspective has often been overlooked

in comparative research on Shamanism (Vitebsky 1995, 2005), which has tended instead to focus on the oral, poetic (see Vargyas 1994, Walraven 1994), aesthetic (see Oppitz 1981, 2013), ecstatic (Eliade 1951) and healing aspects (see Kakar 1982, Sidky 2019) of shamanic cosmovisions and of their ritual practices.

Sudhir Kakar's (1982) analysis of shamanic specialists such as local Indian healers emphasises the ritual use of metaphorical, symbolical language in order to relieve and heal fears and psychological anxiety. Piers Vitebsky's monograph on *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality among the Sora of Eastern India* (1993) highlights how shamans handle the most overwhelming fear of ontological alterity, namely dealing with the dead. Based on his prolonged ethnography among the Sora, Vitebsky describes the dialogical, narrative, oral alternative personality and mortality concepts of the Sora, which, through dialogues with the dead, reveal existential alternative concepts of continuity between death and afterlife, between the living and post-mortem personalities. Sora ritual specialists of these dialogues with the dead are trance mediators – the *kuran* (Sora shamans) – the ritual mediators between the worlds of the dead and the living and communicators of the spiritual, *post-mortem* alterity. These shamans, mostly women but also men, place themselves into a dissociated trance state, thereby becoming receptive to possession by a post-mortem personality. The dead person then speaks through the female or male shaman. The living participate in the dialogical ecstatic mediation ritual, while embracing the dead person (embodied by the shaman), arguing intensely with him/her, crying, laughing, hitting or caressing him or her. The shaman is thus confronted with extremes of emotions and has to mediate them dialogically and emotionally. For Vitebsky, such dialogues represent not only expressions of communication with the afterworld, but also the feelings of the collective, which are dealt with by the Sora shaman. Among the Sora there are two types of shaman: funeral shamans (usually women), who take over more important roles, and divining shamans (men and women), who heal through sacred oracles or auguries (divination). Male and female shamans of the Sora undertake "journeys" that a "normal" person only experiences once – namely the departure from the body at the time of physical death. The shaman, however, travels to the underworld and begins dialogues with the dead in order to confront the emotions of the living and dead and thus to comfort and heal the living as well as the post-mortem personalities.

Shamanic cosmovisions and ritual performances are dynamic, changeable, unpredictable and – in their uncountable agencies of other-than-humans – highly frightening. Spirits, animals, deities, ancestors, collective memories and emotions need to be mediated, balanced and appeased. In eco-cosmological worldviews of vernacular Hindu traditions, fear is often associated with the alterity of animality (Ferrari / Dähnhardt 2013). The fear of illness is, for ex-

ample, personified by the donkey (Ferrari 2013: 236–257). In textual, icono-graphic and ritual Hindu traditions, the crow signifies a proximity to inauspi-ciousness and death (Zeiler 2013: 200–201). In Tantric Hindu traditions the crow symbolises the dangerous ambivalence (Zeiler 2013: 204) of life and death embodied by the goddess Dhumavati.

The worship of Indian vernacular goddesses in particular is a fascinating example of ontological and ritual handling of fright and fear. The Indian god-desses (Kinsley 1985) called Devi ("goddess") or Ma ("mother") are viewed as both the creators and potential destroyers of the eco-cosmological entity between the human and non-human world and cosmos. A Devi or Ma is be-lieved to be omnipotent and is associated with the idea of *shakti*, the sacred female energy in South Asian religious and spiritual traditions (see Tambs-Lyche 2004). *Shakti* as the indigenous concept of embodied and spiritual fe-male power has an extremely ambivalent character, as the goddess simulta-neously personifies a creative and a destructive power: she can kill and she can create (Guzy 2017: 175). Vernacular Hindu goddesses manifest themselves in aniconic forms – in stones, quarries, eruptions of the earth, waterfalls, rivers or other natural phenomena (Stietencron 1972), personifying the eco-cosmo-logical nature of vernacular Hinduism. Frequently, local cults of goddesses are integrated into the pan-Indian worship of goddesses such as Kali or Durga (Mallebrein 2004: 273–99), which then gain iconic status and power in a local region.

The life-giving and life-taking powers and energies of goddesses are con-ceived as an uncontrollable, frightening, bewildering and wild force. In her manifold manifestations the goddess is believed to be responsible for one's personal fate, which can be changed benevolently through advice given in dreams or through destructive intrusions in the form of dangerous illness, as for example chicken pox (Ferrari 2014). Only the correct ortho-practic ritual worship may appease and positively influence her.

In India, the agency of human trance mediums, as exemplified in the musi-cal and ritual *boil* tradition of the Bora Sambar region (Guzy 2013: 41–47) is a widespread mode of communication with a goddess (see Assayag / Tarabout 1999). *Boil* as ritual goddess spirit possession and embodiment is character-ised by particular rhythmic sequences of ritual *ganda baja* music and wild folk dance movements of *dalkhai* (Guzy 2013: 54–71). Ritual goddess embodi-ment is thus codified by trance, ritual language and often ecstatic forms of expression such as dance or other ritual performances. Ritual goddess spirit possession, which entails a dynamic of fright and risk within the ritual, is al-ways accompanied by ritual music, performed exclusively by initiated male musicians on highly symbolic instruments – such as drums (see Roche 2000: 288–95). In greatly dynamic ecstatic musical and dance performances, musi-cians and specialised male or female ecstatic priests provoke and indicate

spiritual transformation within the ritual – a ritual transformation that, with its liminal and temporary character, is frightening as such.

This special collection assembles perspectives on different concepts of fright and fear within diverse Indian cultural contexts – introduced primarily through the lens of anthropology, religious studies and folklore studies. The articles are based on a workshop held at Aarhus University's Conference Center in Sandbjerg in May 2017, which brought together senior and junior scholars from Europe and India, all engaged in long-term field work in South Asia.[1]

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