Kradi Mliva: The Phenomenon of Tiger-Transformation in the Traditional Lore of the Kondh Tribals of Orissa

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Abstract

The belief in a form of therianthropy consisting of the nocturnal migration of one’s soul-substance into the body of a tiger, which thereby comes to be controlled by the will of a sleeping human, forms an important component of the traditional lore of the Kondhs, a complex of Dravidian-speaking tribal groups in the highlands of the eastern Indian state of Orissa. The Kondhs never describe this type of human-to-animal transformation as the physical metamorphosis of a person into a tiger (that is, as shape-shifting) — a motif which, conversely, recurs in the main bulk of weretiger tales associated with witchcraft across Middle and Eastern India; nor do they ever describe it as possession of the human body by any tiger-spirit or tiger-deity. Besides, the transformation is reportedly not achieved through evil magic, but is rather conceived of by the Kondhs as a spontaneous psychic phenomenon affecting individuals — sometimes even children — thus predestined by divine entities. Although the majority of the Kondhs tend to believe the faculty of commanding a living tiger in dreamtime to be the prerogative of religious specialists such as shamans and healer-diviners, this supernatural ability is generally understood by them as being potentially available to laypersons as well. The little-studied Kondh weretiger-lore is of great anthropological and historical interest in that the only other area of South Asia where beliefs in similar psychic phenomena are known to be widespread is the northeastern mountain region inhabited by the Naga, Garo and Khasi tribes, which nevertheless lies at a great distance from Orissa.

1. Kondh “feline therianthropy”

Kondh tribal groups, when taken as a whole (that is, as the sum total of the tribal speakers of the closely allied Kui and Kuvi languages), constitute the largest Dravidian-speaking tribal population of the Indian state of Orissa. Different sections of the Kondh tribe retain in their cultural traditions a complex of supernatural beliefs centering around the idea that all or most of man-eating tigers prowling around their villages are actually weretigers\(^1\) — namely, human beings turned into tigers.

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\(^1\) The modern English compound term weretiger (also spelt as were-tiger, wer-tiger) is formed by the union of the Old English word *wer*- ‘man’ and the word ‘tiger’ on the analogy of the compound term werewolf (from late Old English *werewulf*).
Therianthropy, derived from the Greek *thērion* (meaning ‘wild beast’) and *anthrōpos* (meaning ‘human being’), is the general category of shape-shifting in which man or woman is able to transform into animal and back. The most well-known type of therianthropy is lycanthropy (human-to-wolf transformation). The more general term therianthropy can refer to any sort of were-beast or to transformation into any animal. In South Asia, the southern regions of China, Indo-China and Indonesia the tiger (or, alternatively, the leopard), being the most formidable wild carnivorous mammal of humid tropical Asia, is the most common form assumed by alleged shape-shifters; for want of a better term, the expression “feline therianthropy” is used by the author of the present paper to designate the belief in the possibility of the transmutation of a man or woman into a tiger or leopard and back.2

The Kondh belief in weretigers implies neither possession of the human body by a tiger-deity or tiger-spirit nor any bodily metamorphosis of a human being into a tiger (viz., it does not imply any physical shape-shifting). On the contrary, the transformation is reportedly achieved through the nocturnal transmigration of a man or woman’s soul (or, better, of a type of sub-soul sometimes termed as “life-force” by anthropologists) into the body of a tiger whose will and actions thereby come to be controlled by a person in deep sleep. In other words, some Kondh sub-groups, among whom the Kuttia and Dongria highlanders are foremost, believe that the soul of certain specially endowed individuals has a faculty of commanding a living tiger in dreamtime, and they regard such individuals as weretigers.

This supernatural phenomenon is believed to relate to human beings’ desires as expressed in dreams, particularly when dreams are provoked by thoughts incurred prior to going to sleep. For instance, in a dream a person may feel a strong desire for flesh and blood, like a tiger might feel when spotting some wild animals in the jungle or some domestic ones in the vicinity of a village. Another person while dreaming may feel a strong desire of turning into a tiger and, while in such form, of causing bodily harm or death to an enemy or a rival in revenge for either a military defeat or a social offence; as an alternative, he or she may desire to kill and devour their cattle, goats, pigs, etc. The sleeping person thus runs to satisfy his or her desires, and at that moment, his/her human nature is transformed into a tiger’s nature and his/her psychic energy takes control of a tiger roaming nearby.

It is generally believed that certain Kondh individuals are predestined by the gods to develop the faculty of projecting their psychic energy into the body of a tiger during sleep. The Kondh lore about the phenomenon of tiger-transformation is rooted in the mythology of the earth goddess, Dārṇī Pēnu,3 who is worshipped with reverence and awe by all sections of the Kondh tribe. In myths accounting for the origin of this phenomenon, which were first recorded by British army officers in the mid-nineteenth century, Dārṇī Pēnu is regarded as the creatrix and first practitioner of this supernatural art, whose secrets were transmitted by her to certain Kondhs after the latter’s prayers. Although most of the

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2 The alternative scientific term “tigroanthropy” was proposed by the Dutch Sinologists J.J.M. de Groot (1854-1921) to designate this form of therianthropy, but it seems no one followed up on his suggestion. See J.J.M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, vol. 4 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1901), pp. 163ff.

3 The Kui and Kuvi term *darṇī*, designating the sacred stones connected with the earth goddess, is a corruption, by deaspiration of the initial stop, of the Oriya term *dharamṇi/dharanī* ‘the earth’; *pēnu* is the general Kui and Kuvi word for ‘deity, spirit’.
Kondhs have currently forgotten such myths, many of them still believe that the power of tiger-transformation has a divine origin.

2. British colonial accounts of Kondh weretiger-lore

Kondh traditions about feline therianthropy do not appear to have been recorded in any Oriya literary texts anterior to the colonial period. Accordingly, the earliest written testimonies to this phenomenon are those provided by some early reports on the Kondhs authored by British colonial officers. Going back in chronological order, we first find Samuel C. Macpherson’s account of the religion of the Kondhs. In a famous article of his, published in 1852, this British army officer and ethnographer writes\(^4\) that “Umbally Bylee” — that is, Am(b)ali-Bāeli,\(^5\) mythical Great Ancestress of the Kondhs and, at one time, a human manifestation of the earth goddess — originally choose to manifest herself to man in her tiger form; after she had assumed such form, she killed a large quantity of game animals (whose carcasses were eaten by the Kondhs with great delight) as well as of enemies of the Kondhs; finally, she taught the Kondhs both the art of “Mleepa”,\(^6\) i.e. how to make themselves into tigers or leopards like she herself had first done, and the art of public war, i.e. how to kill enemies in battle. Macpherson’s account, however, does not make fully apparent whether the two teachings were mutually interrelated, that is to say, whether the power of tiger-transformation was meant to be used by the Kondhs for killing their enemies in battle or not. Because, as is told in this mythic narrative, the earth goddess had asked the tribe to sacrifice human beings to her on a regular basis in return for her teachings, this story is nowadays recited by Kondh village priests at the celebration of the buffalo sacrifice that, since Macpherson’s time, has replaced the older human sacrifice known in the Oriya language as Meriā.\(^7\)

Macpherson also writes\(^8\) that, always according to the Kondhs, a man-eating tiger can only be (1) the earth goddess herself, embodying the wild and chaotic powers of nature incarnated into a tiger that starts killing the people when the goddess herself gets enraged with them for lack of sacrifices (thus, literally “devouring” her victim), or (2) a “Mleepa tiger” — an expression by which he translates the Kui deverbal compound noun \(mlīva\ krāḍi\) (‘a transformed tiger’), formed by inverting the order of the

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\(^6\) The Kui transitive verb \(mlīpa\) or \(mlīva\) means ‘to be changed or transformed into’; when used as a verbal noun, it means ‘transformation’. Another meaning of this verb is ‘to change s.o. by cursing’ — cf. Barbara M. Boal, *Fire Is Easy: The Tribal Christian and His Traditional Culture* (Manila: Christian Institute for Ethnic Studies in Asia, 1973), pp. 147-49.

\(^7\) Macpherson, “Account of the Religion of the Khonds,” pp. 232-40. The links between tiger-transformation beliefs and the human-sacrifice tradition appear to have been very close among the Kondhs. In former times, human sacrifice to the earth goddess represented the principal form of ritual response to supposed weretiger-attacks in the Kondh inhabited area. Tiger attacks were diagnosed by priests as signs of the goddess’ profound dissatisfaction with a group — whether household, clan or village — which had failed to keep her well supplied with blood sacrifices. The immediate celebration of a human sacrifice (or, after its suppression, of a buffalo sacrifice) was deemed necessary to restore the relationship and thus put a stop to serial (were-)tiger attacks. Cf. Boal, *Konds*, p. 109; V. Elwin, “Notes on a Kondh Tour,” *Man in India* 24 (1944), pp. 51-3; P. Rossillon, “Mœurs et Coutumes du peuple Kui, Indes Anglaises,” *Anthropos* 7 (1912), p. 652.

\(^8\) Macpherson, “Account of the Religion of the Khonds,” p. 239.
object and the verb in the verbal phrase $kṛāḍi mlīva$ (‘to be transformed into tiger form’).\(^9\) Macpherson goes on with saying that a “Mleepa tiger” is probably controlled by that particular form of the human soul — in his opinion, the Kondh would recognize four different forms of soul — which has the power of temporarily quitting the body at the will of a deity, as would also occur when a Kondh child or youth is called to shamanhood. Such a temporary transmigration of the soul into the body of a tiger would allegedly leave the human body in a weakened, languid, drowsy and dysfunctional state.\(^10\)

In spite of its imprecision, Macpherson’s seems to be the first clear recognition of the aspect of “migration of the human soul into the body of a tiger during sleep” which is now known to be an essential component of Kondh beliefs concerning the $kṛāḍi mlīva$ phenomenon. As for the identity of the gods who “choose” the persons who will develop the power of tiger-transformation, Kuttia and Dongria Kondh shamans interviewed by the author of the present paper confirmed, without any hesitation, that it is the goddess of the earth herself who confers this faculty on the people, though some of them further added that the Sōru Pēnu (gods/spirits of the hills and forests), too, may “choose” the individuals designated to be weretigers, thus, in one sense “mediating” between the latter and the paramount earth goddess, from whom the power in question ultimately emanates.

Macpherson does not consider the superhuman power he terms as “Mleepa” (viz., $mlīva$ or animal transformation) as being acquired through black magic arts. Indeed, in a report of his dated 24 April, 1842, some excerpts from which were published by the *Calcutta Review* four years later, he contrasts “sorcery” — meant by him as the use of supernatural powers, acquired through the assistance of a deity or spirit, to harm someone — with profane black magic and states that the $mlīva$ power has more to do with the former than with the latter:\(^11\)

> “[Among the Kondhs] the gods are held to inflict death either by ordinary means, as by a wound received in battle, or by the agency of men who are endowed by them with the power of transformation (called Mleepa) which enables them to assume the forms of wild beasts for the purpose of destruction […] ; and this gift is considered to be very commonly dispensed, as the Khonds […] attribute all deaths by tigers to persons so endowed; for they believe that the gods did not create the tiger to prey upon man, but to hunt, to provide food for him […] . Magicians are, however, believed to have acquired the power to take away life at pleasure, without reference to the will of the gods, by dark and impious arts which are purely human. Against the class of sorcerers gifted by the gods, those who have suffered by them frequently rise, to compel them by threats of plunder and by violence and by levying heavy compositions, to promise to cease to afflict them; but the magician experiences a different doom [ — namely, he is often assigned extreme penalties, at least among the lowland Kondhs].”

The power, given to the Kondhs by the earth goddess, of turning themselves temporarily into tigers is defined as a “magical art” in only one passage of Macpherson’s account of the religion of this Indian tribe. The reference is found in a prayer to the earth goddess which asks for protection against,

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9 In Kui, $kṛāḍi$ means ‘a tiger’ and $mlīva$ or $mlīpa$, as has been already mentioned in footnote 6, means ‘to be transformed’ or ‘transformation’; $kṛāḍi mlīva$ therefore means ‘the act or process of being converted into a tiger’.


11 Quoted in G. Duff, “Goomsur: The Late War There — The Khonds or Wild Tribes,” *Calcutta Review* 5 (1846), p. 52.
among other things, “danger from those who by magical arts become Mleepa tigers.” This definition is, however, in apparent conflict with Macpherson’s own description of the “magician” as a person believed to “have acquired the power to take away life at pleasure, without reference to the will of the gods, by dark and impious arts which are purely human” (see above; italicization added for emphasis). Indeed, Macpherson regards tiger-transformation as a gift of the earth goddess to certain Kondhs and contrasts it with any “magical” achievements. It may be noticed here that the text of this Kui prayer, reproduced in a number of later publications by other authors, is given by Macpherson in English translation only. It would be therefore interesting to know what was the Kui term translated as “magical art” here. Was it possibly kēpa, klēga ‘sorcery, witchcraft’? One hundred and seventy years after the recording of the Kondh prayer in question, one will hardly know; therefore, this stray reference to mliva as “magical art” found in Macpherson’s overall work is not to be given much weight in the context of the present discussion.

Coming to another nineteenth-century British army officer who has handed down to posterity an account of his experiences among the Kondhs, John Campbell, one may point out how this author has done his best to depict the power of tiger-transformation, referred to in Kondh mythology and traditional lore, as a pure superstition whose cultural background would have been provided by beliefs in witchcraft and evil magic. Campbell labels the phenomenon at issue as “Pulta Bag” or “Phulto Bag”, an Anglicized spelling of the colloquial Oriya term pālaṭa bāgha (literally ‘the act of converting oneself into a tiger’, an expression also applied, by semantic extension, to any human being who is believed to be able to convert him/herself into a tiger). The Oriya term is possibly a calque of the Kui kṛāḍi mlīva, which has exactly the same meaning. By the way, Campbell’s is probably by far the first occurrence ever in colonial literature of the Oriya expression pālaṭa bāgha. It may be presumed that he got familiar with this expression through his Oriya informants and that he, unlike Macpherson, did not know the Kui term kṛāḍi mlīva.

Campbell writes13 that “[Kondh] witches have the faculty of transforming themselves into tigers,” and then goes on to tell the case he had once come across of two women posing as pālaṭa bāgha to blackmail the superstitious Kondh people living in their surroundings and extort them food and clothing at will. Subsequently the two women confessed the imposture before Campbell, who had exposed their fraud. They stated they had hitherto lived by imposing on the credulity of the neighboring villagers, who had kept on supplying them with what they demanded in order to secure themselves and their cattle from the two self-claimed weretigers’ depredations. It is yet to be noted that the two alleged witches temporarily converted into tigers would have in this case, as Campbell was told, resumed their human shape out of fear as they were pursued by a Kondh whose son they would have carried off while in tiger form. In other words, they would have instantly reverted back from beasts to humans on the very spot where the incident had taken place whereas, on the contrary, according to Kondh oral traditions one of the most notable features of the kṛāḍi mlīva phenomenon would precisely consist in

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13 John Campbell, A Personal Narrative of Thirteen Years Service amongst the Wild Tribes of Khondistan for the Suppression of Human Sacrifice (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1864), pp. 44-46.
the total absence of any bodily metamorphosis from human to tiger and back. Consequently, Campbell is not describing an actual case of kṛāḍi mlīva or pālaṭ a bāgha here.

The other supposed pālaṭ a bāgha story related by Campbell in his book\(^{14}\) is equally spurious. A Kondh soldier serving in Campbell’s body of irregulars, who had shot dead a free Kondh tribesman during a conflict, was persuaded that the latter was possessed of the mlīva power and would certainly come back from death and destroy him. The man returned to his village, terrified at the thought of the inescapable supernatural vengeance of his victim, and was there mauled by a tiger in the middle of the night just as he expected! This story, however, does not fall under the category of kṛ āḍi mlīva tales as the man-eating tiger is in this case supposed to be controlled by the spirit of a dead man (viz., a revenant), not by the soul of a living person fast asleep.

In sum, Campbell’s “Phulto Bag” stories are of no use for the understanding of the Kondh cultural tradition concerning feline therianthropy.

Yet another British army officer, C.C. Morris, who was based in Ganjam District (southwestern Orissa) during the 1860’s, has left us an interesting article on “Pulto Bagh” based on his memories of service in the Kondh inhabited region. In his article he writes:\(^{15}\)

“[O]ne of the most weird and fanciful of [Kondh] beliefs is that of the ‘Pulto Bagh’ […] — that is to say, they believe that certain men’s spirits have the power of quitting their bodies and entering that of tigers or panthers, wreaking their revenge in that form upon their enemies. Nearly every man killed by a tiger — and in the wild jungle life they lead there are many of them so killed — is supposed to have made an enemy of a ‘Pulto Bagh’. Owing to this belief any man credited with having this power is hated and feared, but is always treated with the greatest respect, and no one would dream of incurring his enmity; hence many assume, or are willing to have it inferred, that they have this gift, for the sake of the power and profit it brings to them.”

Like Macpherson, and unlike Campbell, Morris therefore grasps the essence of the Kondh’s belief in the mlīva power. He is aware that this belief entails the admission, on the part of the Kondhs, of the possibility that a man or woman’s soul can break away from the human body and temporarily migrate into the body of a wild animal so as to possess and control it. In his article Morris also relates a local story about one Samoo Manty, a supposed kṛ āḍi mlīva practitioner or kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju\(^{16}\) who had been living in the Kondh village of Baliguda (then situated in the undivided district of Ganjam) just a few years before the Indian Government established a police force there. It was reported to Morris that one night, after Samoo Manty had vowed vengeance to a youth of his village who had taken away his betrothed from him, a tiger came up to the latter’s door. The young man, who owned a gun, killed

\(^{14}\) Ibid., pp. 242-43.


\(^{16}\) In Kui, a person believed to be endowed with the power of tiger-transformation is called kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju if male, and kṛ āḍi mlīvaren f i if female (with -enju and -er i being, respectively, the masculine and feminine [pronominal] terminations used to form verbal nouns). Other verbal nouns used by Kui speakers to designate such individuals are, respectively, kṛ āḍi mlīva gaṭ anju (a male) and kṛ āḍi mlīva gaṭ ar i (a female), where gaṭ anju (m.) and gaṭ ar i (f.) both mean ‘possessed of’.
the animal with a shot right between the eyes. In the morning an enormous tiger was found lying dead in the centre of the village, while the alleged \textit{kṛāḍīmlīvarenju} was found dead in his house.

Thus, this mid-nineteenth-century story recorded by C.C. Morris not only tells us that a Kondh weretiger was then believed to have the power of projecting his or her soul into the body of a tiger while asleep, a fact that was later on emphasized by the famous ethnologist Edgar Thurston;\textsuperscript{17} it also tells us, for the first time ever in colonial literature, that the phenomenon of \textit{kṛāḍīmlīva} was then firmly associated in the Kondh mind with the typical principle of repercussion by virtue of which, if a \textit{mlīva} \textit{kṛāḍī} — that is, a tiger possessed by a \textit{mlīva} practitioner — be killed while attacking a village or being hunted in the jungle, the sleeping person who is controlling the animal will, in his/her turn, die synchronously.

In his \textit{Ganjam District Manual} (1882) T.J. Maltby, of the Madras Civil Service, spells out the most extreme consequence of the circumstance, remarked by Morris, that among the Kondhs “any man credited with having [the tiger-transformation] power is hated and feared.” It seems that the mere fact of becoming an enemy of one such man — for instance, against the background of inter-individual or inter-group conflict and tension — urged a Kondh to perform some act of preemptive self-defence which could even result into the self-claimed weretiger’s death by violent means:\textsuperscript{18}

“[The Kondhs] believe in a power possessed by certain of themselves of converting themselves into panthers or tigers and in that form compassing the death of their enemy (this is called becoming a ‘Paltobhag’), and a threat from one man to another that he will so convert himself has, in my own experience, caused a threatened man to murder the man who threatened him.”

It is therefore apparent that when a Kondh explicitly threatened to another Kondh that he would assault him (or his cattle, goats, pigs, etc.) in the shape of a tiger, the threatened man being afraid of the threat used to take any action, even to the extent of murdering the supposed weretiger as a precautionary measure. Threatening one’s own enemies to take revenge on them by preying upon them after being converted into a tiger seems to be an old feature of Kondh inter-clan and inter-village feuds. This may also be evinced by the myth, recorded by S.C. Macpherson and already referred to above, about the earth goddess’ simultaneous teaching of both the art of \textit{mlīva} and that of war to the Kondhs.

Again in this connection there even was, as detailed in a 1883 judiciary report by C.H. Mounsy, the Special Assistant Agent of Ganjam, a special form of solemn oath current among the Kondhs of Ganjam District by which a man could clear himself of the charge of being a weretiger and, while in his tiger form, of aiming at the destruction of his own enemies.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} “[The Kondhs of Orissa] believe that they can transform themselves into tigers or snakes, half the soul leaving the body and becoming changed into one of these animals, either to kill an enemy, or satisfy hunger by having a good feed on cattle in the jungle. During this period, they are believed to feel dull and listless, and disinclined for work, and, if a tiger is killed in the forest, they will die synchronously. Mr. Fawcett informs me that the Kondhs believe that the soul wanders during sleep” (Edgar Thurston, \textit{Castes and Tribes of Southern India} [Madras: Government Press, 1909], vol. 3, p. 405).
All this shows that kṛāḍi mlīvarenju and kṛāḍi mlīvarṛ is (respectively, male and female mlīva practitioners) were perceived by the nineteenth-century Kondhs as evil-intentioned persons who underwent the transformation into a tiger mainly with the intent to cause economic loss (e.g. by raiding one’s cattle at night), bodily harm, or even death to their enemies. Still in our days, the belief in feline therianthropy is responsible for many social tensions among the Kondhs, who may accuse a neighbor or a relative of, in the form of a tiger, killing their cattle at night.

At any rate, the murder of an alleged weretiger does not appear to have represented the first choice of an individual or community threatened by him/her if one lends credit to what Macpherson writes in this regard:

“Against the class of sorcerers gifted by the gods [including weretigers], those who have suffered by them frequently rise, to compel them by threats of plunder and by violence and by levying heavy compositions, to promise to cease to afflict them.”

Macpherson’s reference to some “heavy compositions” which, in his time, used to be levied on Kondh tribesmen suspected of being weretigers or on their clans of origin, most likely hints at an institutionalized system for the resolution of inter-group conflicts which is in vogue among the Kondhs still today, and which goes under the name of ḍiba tiṇ(m)ba (‘eating/feasting on the earth of the ant-hill’). This para-judicial system has been described by a team of researchers in the following terms:

“[S]uch believed killings or deaths [as those caused by persons supposedly endowed with the mlīva power] could not go on forever. Hence, the feuding villagers or clan members meet every six years in an open, neutral, holy ground. They make accusations against each other and confess their own guilt in the name of the earth goddess, the sun and the moon. They then come to an agreement to stop the believed killings. […] Oral agreements are entered into in the presence of the entire gathering and peace is made. The day is marked by drinking, dining and also dancing; these all go together. Although the process is periodic and involves a long drawn-out procedure of reconciliation, the Kondhs have institutionalized the system. […] The punishment, in the shape of goats or pigs to the guilty group, is imposed by common consent. These are instantly killed for feasting together. Interestingly, the operation appeared to be like a battle where neither side claims victory and both accept full reconciliation.”

It does not seem likely that any person accused of practicing black magic arts would ever come to an agreement with his or her self-proclaimed victims in such a smooth manner as that described above (that is, by merely paying a fine to them); consequently, this Kondh system for the resolution of inter-group conflicts caused by the activities of individuals believed to be weretigers is yet another piece of evidence testifying to the “non-magical” character attributed to the kṛāḍi mlīva phenomenon by the Kondhs. Indeed, Barbara Boal, a twentieth-century scholar who has studied the cultural traditions of the Kondhs in great detail, does not include the mlīva power among either witchcraft or sorcery beliefs;

20 See footnote 16.
21 Quoted in Duff, “Goomsur: The Late War There,” p. 52.
instead, following Macpherson, she just considers it a “gift” of the earth goddess to certain people.\textsuperscript{23} She also stresses that, according to the Kondhs, the chain of violent, though secret, antisocial acts committed by a supposed $kṛāḍīmlīva$ practitioner cannot be stopped by any reversal rituals aimed at restoring the previous situation; in contrast to this, antisocial behaviors manifesting themselves in the form of, respectively, curses, the evil eye, sorcery, and witchcraft (barring “pure” witchcraft without the use of any material medium, to which the power of tiger-transformation can be, in a sense, compared), can be countered by performing some complementary rituals meant to reverse such life-destroying situations due to man’s ill-will.\textsuperscript{24}

Therefore, Boal’s classification of the secret, violent and antisocial acts of manipulation of the supernatural whose “reality” is acknowledged by the Kondhs makes a clear distinction between the $kṛāḍīmlīva$ phenomenon on the one side, and forms and manifestations of black magic such as witchcraft, sorcery, curses and the evil eye on the other.

### 3. Recent research among the Kuttia and Dongria Kondhs

Aside from Barbara Boal, during the twentieth century very few, if any, researchers have discussed Kondh beliefs in feline therianthropy in print. A team of social anthropologists and ethnobotanists led by Dr. Mihir K. Jena has recently published two monographs on, respectively, the Dongaria (or Dongria) and Kuttia Kondh sub-tribes in which they address this topic to some extent on the basis of information they have received from both Kondh individuals and organized discussion groups during their field studies.\textsuperscript{25} The present writer, too, did some field work in the same line among both the Kuttia and Dongria Kondhs; some interviews with Kuttia village priests ($jānis$) and shamans ($kūṭākas$) as well as with Dongria shamanins ($pejuṇis$) the author made during his field trip in Kandhamal and Rayagada districts in 2001-2002 have been published so far only in an online article in Italian.\textsuperscript{26} Yet another Italian researcher, Dr. Stefano Beggiora, has interviewed some Kuttia Kondh shamans ($kūṭašeus$) and shamanins ($kūṭakāḍāsus$) and has reported and discussed their opinions about the phenomenon of feline therianthropy in a book he published in 2010.\textsuperscript{27} There is also a short but informative article by A.M. Pradhan in the Orissa Review.\textsuperscript{28} What emerges from this new research work is, first of all, an almost complete agreement between the descriptions of this phenomenon provided, respectively, by the Kuttia Kondhs of the Belghar Hills and the Dongria Kondhs of the

\textsuperscript{23} Boal, *Konds*, pp. 109, 177.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 106.
\textsuperscript{26} F. Brighenti, “Metamorfosi feline dei vivi e dei morti fra i Kondh dell’Orissa”, March 2004, at: http://www.psychomedia.it/pm/grpind/magscia/brighenti.htm (last accessed on October 15, 2011; in Italian).
\textsuperscript{27} S. Beggiora, *Sacrifici umani e guerriglia nell’India britannica. Dal genocidio in nome della civiltà alla civiltà come genocidio* (Bassano: Itinera Progetti, 2010; in Italian).
Niyamgiri Hills. This circumstance is striking because, although these are considered the two most “primitive” sections of the Kondh tribe, their settlement areas are not adjacent, being separated by vast expanses of sparsely populated jungle. Moreover, the dialects spoken, respectively, by the Kuttia and the Dongria Kondhs could be mutually understood only with some difficulty. It, thus, appears unlikely that either the Kuttia lore about weretigers has directly influenced the Dongria one or vice versa; conversely, one is led to think that both these traditional lores must necessarily derive from an archaic “weretiger complex” which was once shared by all sections of the Kondh tribe, but which is nowadays preserved in its entirety by the Kuttia and Dongria mountaineers only.

The following is a synopsis of the principal points of contact between the descriptions of the kṛāḍī mlīva phenomenon given by the Kuttia and Dongria Kondhs as resulting from a comparison and collation of the information provided in Jena et al.’s, Brighenti’s, and Beggiora’s respective studies (cited in footnotes 25, 26 and 27). Some Kui terms adopted in this synopsis, such as kṛāḍī mlīva, kṛāḍī mlīvarenju and kṛāḍī mlīvareṛi, are not used in exactly these forms by the Kuttia and Dongria Kondhs to designate the intended referents; nevertheless, they have been adopted here for uniformity of terminology.

1) It was the earth goddess herself, Darṇi Pēnu, who, at the beginning of time, arranged for certain people to be gifted with the supernatural faculty of transferring their soul-substance into the body of a big cat at night. At the individual level, a kṛāḍī mlīvarenju or a kṛāḍī mlīvareṛi is “chosen” by the hill-gods (the Sōru Pēnu) of his/her own native village. These same divine spirits are believed to determine the fate of the persons predestined to become shamans or shamanins by appearing to them in dreams during their childhood. Likewise, it is presumed that an individual predestined to become a weretiger can develop the mlīva power since birth: indeed, cases are allegedly known of Kondhs who could convert themselves into tiger-shape when they were still children.

2) There are no magic formulas, incantations or rites enabling one to acquire the mlīva power. As matter of fact, the idea that Kuttia and Dongria Kondh tribesmen supposedly possessed of the ability to make themselves into tigers are the practitioners of black magic is especially prevalent among local non-tribals, mostly belonging to the Hindu caste of untouchables known as Ḍoma or Pāṇa. Nevertheless, the Kondhs themselves do not seem to consider a supposed kṛāḍī mlīvarenju or kṛāḍī mlīvareṛi a practitioner of black magic, namely, a person who self-consciously manipulates the supernatural for evil purposes.

3) There are, however, Kondhs who reportedly feel a strong desire to master the power of tiger-transformation even though they have not been endowed with it since their birth. If such a man or woman wishes to acquire this supernatural ability, he or she must propitiate Darṇi Pēnu in secret at the jākeri stones (the goddess’ representative symbol located at the centre of each Kondh village) in the middle of the night. Alternatively, some other pēnus, residing in the forest and not in the village, may teach him/her the required skills. Offerings and sacrifices are made to such deities over several nights to convince them of the complete dedication of the candidate until the latter supposedly acquires the longed-for ability to command a living tiger in dreamtime.
4) Cases are also reported in which one’s ability to convert him/herself into a tiger was at some point affirmed to have been induced by the external aid of some individual already endowed with this faculty. It is believed that a young person possessing the mlīva power in latent form has to go through a process called vēpka giva\textsuperscript{29} to enhance his/her power under the guidance of a senior mlīva practitioner. This teaching is, of course, said to be performed very secretly. Therefore, the Kondhs seem to believe that this superhuman faculty can, in certain cases, manifest itself by means of close and intimate association with some weretiger.

5) Both the Dongria and Kuttia Kondhs believe that religious specialists are far more apt than any other class of people to develop the mlīva power. It is thought by some of them that only some very experienced shamans and healer-diviners can fully understand the miraculous kṛāḍi mlīva phenomenon (though this might simply be due to the fact that, in tribal societies, shamans and the like are often feared as potentially abusing their power).\textsuperscript{30} This notwithstanding, instances are on record of laypeople who have claimed they were possessed of the ability to turn themselves into tigers. Accordingly, one may presume that the Kondh’s traditional belief system allows for some exceptionally endowed laypersons — that is, persons attributed with the ability to achieve a high degree of concentration — to claim they can change themselves into tigers.\textsuperscript{31}

6) The kṛāḍi mlīva phenomenon is not about persons turning themselves phisically into tigers. It is a different concept than shape-changing, for a kṛāḍi mlīva practitioner, unlike a lycanthropic shape-shifter, undergoes no bodily metamorphosis whatever and does not lose his/her human body, which remains unchanged.

7) Only a part of the “life-force” (termed as jella in both the Kuttia and Dongria dialects) of the kṛāḍi mlīvarenju or the kṛāḍi mlīvareṛi leaves the body at night, otherwise the sleeping weretiger would die. Half of the life-force of the man or woman stays in the human body (which remains in deep sleep) while the other half of it departs in search of an animal-double.\textsuperscript{32} During deep sleep, typically around midnight (that is, after the onset of the REM phase of sleep), the jella of the weretiger gets out

\textsuperscript{29} A.M. Pradhan, pers. comm. In Kui, vēpka means ‘to stretch forth, stretch up, spread out’ and giva means ‘to make, perform, cause’.

\textsuperscript{30} Jena et al. surmise that Kondh religious authorities believed to have attained the power of animal transformation would be regarded by Kondh laypeople as “practitioners of black-magic and sorcery” (Dongaria Kondh, p. 119) or as “master witches and sorcerers” (ibid., p. 264), and that the mlīva power would be “one of magic’s evil uses” (Kuttia Kondh, p. 254). Pursuing this same line of reasoning, social anthropologist Upali Aparajita has claimed that among the Dongria Kondhs all individuals believed to be able to turn themselves into tigers are regarded as “pangins” (viz., paṅṇeṇi, a Kuvi term meaning ‘witch/wizard’ or ‘black magician’) — cf. U. Aparajita, “Religion and Belief System among the Dongria Kondhs,” Man in India 75 (1995), p. 372. As should be clear from the previous discussion, the present author does not subscribe to this view, which is basically the same as that propagated by nineteenth-century British colonial writers like J. Campbell (vide supra) and H.H. Risley (cf. The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, vol. 1, p. 408).

\textsuperscript{31} For example, the informants cited by A.M. Pradhan (“Lycanthropy in Kandhmal”, pp. 61-62) never state that the Malia Kondh weretigers of by-gone days, dealt with in their tales, were religious specialists. Likewise, Samoo Manty, the Malia Kondh weretiger whose story was succinctly narrated by C.C. Morris at the end of the nineteenth century (vide supra), was not a religious specialist at all; he was, on the contrary, described as one who disdained the religious practices of his fellow villagers! More in general, nineteenth-century British sources never refer to a pāḷaṭ a bāgha as a religious specialist.

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Thurston, Castes and Tribes, vol. 3, p. 405.
of the body and begins to roam the jungle in search of the jella of a big cat. The dreaming weretiger must visualize a path in the jungle leading to the animal to be possessed; when he/she finds it, his/her jella joins the jella of the animal and overpowers it by virtue of the superiority of man over beasts. After the merger of the two, the jella of the sleeping human being forgets its own human nature and is converted into an animal nature. Its behavior is now fully animal, though it (the jella) is still driven by the human instinct of the dreaming mlīva practitioner; therefore, while inhabiting the feline’s body the jella but seeks to fulfill the weretiger’s desires. It still has human feelings such as revenge, hate, love, care, etc. The whereabouts of the wandering animal is perceived by the sleeping human at home, who is fully aware of any problems his/her animal-double faces while moving outside. In the hours during which the kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju’s or the kṛ āḍi mlīvare ṛi’s soul is united with the body of the tiger, he/she remains constantly immersed in deep sleep and cannot, therefore, react to any external stimuli. Such persons, as the belief goes, must not be shaken, disturbed or woken up from sleep by anyone as this could even cause their instant death; indeed, in this way they would be violently made to return to consciousness while still deprived of half of their jella or life-force.

8) According to other informants, the jella of a kṛ āḍi mlīva practitioner can only migrate from the front part of the body (some say from the forehead). It first enters the body of a small wildcat or of a tiger or leopard cub — it is not clear whether a newly-created one or one which happens to be roaming through the neighborhood at that time. The small animal immediately starts to grow till it reaches the shape of a large adult feline. The detail of the soul being transferred from the human’s to the feline’s body and back through the front side seems to be important. It is, indeed, believed that, if the soul should for some reason exit the body of the mlīva practitioner from the back, the tiger possessed by it would not be able to recognize the weretiger’s village and, being confused, would attack it. Conversely, should the soul come back to the human body from the back instead of from the front side, the following day the weretiger would wake up deprived of some mental faculties such as memory, discernment, communication, etc. Even worse is the case when the jella of a kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju or of a kṛ āḍi mlīvare ṛi cannot come back to its human body at the close of the night because the tiger, which is temporarily its recipient, has wandered too far from the weretiger’s own village (for it is said that the human soul can travel hundreds of miles in the body of the tiger!). In this case, next morning the kṛ āḍi mlīva practitioner would be found in a lethargic state from which he or she would only recover when the tiger, during one of the following nights, returns to the vicinity of the village, thus, allowing the wandering jella to rejoin the human body it belongs to.

9) There would also exist a very close individual relationship between the holder of the mlīva power and the tiger whose body his or her soul periodically inhabits — namely, the animal he or she controls at night would remain one and the same through time. During sleep at the time of possession, the jella of the weretiger is believed to be fully merged with that of the tiger — nay, to be the tiger with its full faculties. The relation is believed to be so close that, if his/her animal-double is wounded or killed at this time, the body of the sleeping mlīva practitioner is supposed to undergo the same fate. Thus, if the animal be hurt a corresponding hurt remains in the weretiger’s body, and if the animal be killed the sleeping weretiger dies also.
10) The tiger can be directed to attack a person or his/her domestic animals by the dreaming kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju or kṛ āḍi mlīvareṇ ṛi either because the latter craves for blood and flesh (in certain cases even human!) or because he/she thereby means to take revenge on an enemy or rival.

11) While in animal form, a kṛ āḍi mlīvā practitioner is thought to be able to recognize and communicate with the souls of other weretigers who, like him or her, temporarily inhabit tigers. Several people in a given area may choose to experience transformation into a tiger on one and the same night. On occasions, particularly on very dark nights, a number of such possessed tigers may even decide to hold nocturnal gatherings in the midst of the forest.

12) Although, according to a belief shared by all Kondh sub-groups, converting oneself into a big cat is by far the most common form of therianthropy, it is admitted that the holder of the mlīva power can project his/her soul-substance into other living creatures too. These include wild beasts such as snakes (especially water-snakes), bears, boars and sambar deer, and even certain species of trees or plants.

13) Only village shamans and healer-diviners can establish whether serial tiger-attacks on a village are caused or not by the secret activity of some weretiger, whose identity they can discover through techniques of dream divination (not involving the use of trance) and ritual invocations aimed at gaining the assistance of the hill-gods as well as through an attentive observation of both the daytime and nighttime behavior of all the individuals who should happen to be suspected of being weretigers. In full sunlight a kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju or a kṛ āḍi mlīvareṇ ṛi can, for example, be betrayed by his or her skin, which is said to be extremely dry. However, some among the most recognizable “symptoms” allowing one to identify a kṛ āḍi mlīvarenju or a kṛ āḍi mlīvareṇ ṛi are reportedly observed while the latter is fast asleep. These would be the convulsive shivering of the limbs, the rhythmic opening and closing of the fingers, and the involuntary contraction of the facial muscles around the mouth, with all of them reminding of the movements made by a cat while it is dreaming.

14) Although, as has been mentioned above, Barbara Boal suggested that, according to the Kondhs, the phenomenon of tiger-transformation would have no “complementary rituals to redress the wrong and restore the situation,” more recent field work (particularly the present writer’s) indicates that some kind of “healing” rites are traditionally performed by Dongria and Kuttia shamans and healer-diviners in order to reconvert an alleged weretiger into a “normal” human being after his or her identity has been “unmasked”. The most common method they use to “cure” alleged kṛ āḍi mlīva cases consists in forcing the accused individuals to wear a thread, generally tied with three knots, round the waist. Sometimes a metal amulet is attached to the thread by means of knots in the thread itself. The thread must formerly have been ritually consecrated to some pēnu (some say to Darṇi Pēnu herself) by means of oral spells. This method is reportedly applied to male weretigers only; females are generally

33 Respectively, the kūṭaaka (male shaman) and kūṭa akāḍu (female shaman) among the Kuttia Kondhs, and the peju (male shaman) and pejuṇi (female shaman) among the Dongria Kondhs.

34 The disari (Dongria Kondh “medicine man”-cum-astrologer).


36 Boal, Konds, p. 106.
“cured” through the application of medicinal herbs instead. Such “healing” rites are clearly aimed at dispelling what is perceived by the people at large as a kind of “disease” — the dangerous mlīva power. It is believed that a person claimed to be a weretiger will cease to be a danger to his/her own and other communities only after the performance of such rites.

Conclusions

The above discussion shows that the Kondh weretiger-complex has few if any connections with witchcraft beliefs. Kondh tiger-transformation stories are profoundly different from those current among various Munda and Gond tribes in the tribal belts of Middle and Eastern India. Indeed, Munda and Gond tales about tiger-transformation invariably describe the metamorphosis from man to tiger in terms of physical shape-shifting and as a supernatural ability which can only be manifested by an act of profane — that is, non-religious — magic. In some such stories, for example, a man rubs his back in a particular manner against a white ant-hill and is then magically turned into a tiger on the spot; in other cases, he eats a certain root or alternatively sniffs, or else rubs on his body, a certain drug prepared with some medicinal plants, roots, etc. and is then magically converted into a tiger on the spot. In sum, there is always some kind of a material medium enabling the shape-shifter to get physically transformed into a feline. In this connection, it cannot be excluded that beliefs in the efficacy of some as yet undeterminable form of Tantric magic may in the past have contributed to the shaping of both the Munda and Gond weretiger-lores. By contrast, this kind of story-pattern, characteristic of witchcraft beliefs, is completely absent in Kondh weretiger-lore.

Besides, though Kondh myths state the prime source of the power of tiger-transformation to be a most powerful female deity (Darṇī Pēnu), there appears to be no connection whatever between the Kondh weretiger-complex and the cult of the Hindu Great Goddess, who is in turn, as is well-known, associated with the tiger in both her mythology and iconography. Indeed, no reference to any miraculous transformation of a human being into a tiger by the aid of the Great Goddess (or of some regional or local manifestations of hers) can be traced in the Śākta temple legends of Orissa. Consequently, notwithstanding the fact that the Hindus of Orissa use a specialized Oriya term, pālāṭ a bāgha, to describe the phenomenon labeled as kṛ āḍi mlīva by the Kondhs, it seems clear they have no tiger-transformation complex of their own, and that their term pālāṭ a bāgha refers not to their own, but rather to the Kondh tradition in the matter of feline therianthropy.

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37 Not even at the important shrine of Vyāghra Devī in Kulada, a locality near the southern edge of the Kondh Hills in Ganjam District at which the Hindu Great Goddess is worshipped in her feline manifestation as Tiger Goddess. On the probable Kondh origin of this goddess cult, see Francesco Brighenti, Śakti Cult in Orissa (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001), pp. 160-61.

38 However, a thorough study of the thousands of Tantric palm-leaf manuscripts, popularly known as guṇī-gāreḍī (‘magic incantations’ or ‘magic charms’), preserved in Orissa an dealing with black magic, sorcery, and witchcraft, might help throw some light on the possible existence of any Tantric magical rites that might have been once performed by Hindu guṇīās (exorcists and magicians) of Orissa to neutralize people accused of being weretigers. So far, such a study has not been carried out.
Conversely, and in the ultimate analysis, the study of the weretiger-complex of the Kondhs of Orissa may provide a so far unnoticed cultural link with some tribes of Northeastern India, namely, the Garos and Khasis of Meghalaya and the Nagas of Nagaland. Indeed, the Garos and Nagas (both speaking Tibeto-Burman languages) and the Khasis (Austroasiatic speakers) each possess a rich weretiger-complex having many aspects in common with that of the Kondhs, chief among which is the notion of a migration of the human soul into the body of a tiger or leopard occurring during sleep. Further cultural parallels may be traced to the Batek “Negritos” of the Malay Peninsula, an Austroasiatic-speaking tribe whose shamans are credited with having the power of projecting their shadow-soul into the body of a tiger at night, when their human body is asleep. The strikingly similar and convergent traditions about weretigers (who are in certain cases shaman-healers) found among these tribal peoples have practically nothing in common with the traditions about shamans, or even laypersons, being possessed by tiger-deities, tiger-spirits or tiger familiars that typify certain forms of Malay and Eastern Himalayan shamanism as well as certain tribal cults of Middle India. In fact, no divinity or spirit whatsoever is claimed to “possess” any of the supposed Kondh, Garo, Khasi, Naga or Batek weretigers during the night hours, when their soul is said to be temporarily inhabiting the body of a big cat.

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39 A paper under preparation by the present author will present a study of Kondh, Garo, Khasi, Naga an Batek beliefs in feline therianthropy in a comparative perspective with a view to ascertaining whether the striking similarities noticed among all such beliefs are the result of cultural inheritance or only fortuitous coincidences.