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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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‘[A] single word (and only a word) can tie or untie
a fate...’

Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980: 9)

Cutting the name

- 1 ‘W-w-w-what is his name, again?’ Mukunda Da asked me with stuttered urgency, his eyes wide and freckled by the lamplight dancing across the room.
- 2 It was a late winter night in Burha Mayong village. My laptop battery was dead once again, drained from a few hours without electrical current. Earlier, Mukunda Da and I had

been passing the time watching a film, *She's so Lovely* (Nick Cassavetes 1997). While doing triple-duty of viewer, translator, and cultural interpreter, I was having a difficult time explaining the film's narrative arc. Here was a dark love story that was about as rough as a Bukowski novel in its exploration of addiction, sickness, violence, and longing. Needless to say, our conversation digressed.

- 3 'His name is Sean Penn... He is a famous actor in America.' I tried to recount everything I knew about Sean Penn, but before I could cook up a good story worthy of the cult of celebrity, Mukunda Da leaned in and scolded me with a half-sarcastic, half-terrified riposte.
- 4 'O Sean *bhaiti*...you cannot speak his name. You must call him *mita* (friend). [...] You share his name, and it is dishonorable to call him 'Sean'; just speak '*mita*' to him. Let's forget it... [laughs] now pay a fine!'
- 5 'Why?' I asked as I rummaged through my bag to remove my digital recorder and turn it on. 'I have never met him and he is not my friend. He is an actor in Hollywood.'
- 6 'He is your *mita* and you are his... honor him (*xonman di dibo*). It is bad practice (*beya kam*) to speak his name... this rule of *mita-mita*... this rule of '*cutting the name*' (*nam to kati ase*)... is to give honor; we do not call our *mita* by name. Such is forbidden (*nixiddho*) in Assam.'
- 7 The deed was done; I broke a taboo, albeit a seemingly minor one. But it was a taboo so rare that, before then, it was hidden in plain sight. As Mukunda Da explained, individuals who share personal names are forbidden from addressing or referring to each other by name, and instead must verbally interpellate each other as *mita*, meaning 'friend.'
- 8 Flushed with an ethnographer's vanity, I quickly rejoined, 'I don't understand...for example, if my name is Mukunda and I say to you, 'O Mukunda, how are you?', then why is that forbidden? What would happen if we share the same name?'
- 9 Ever the moralist, Mukunda Da responded in an increasingly solemn tone, ending with a short list of obligations I have to Mr. Penn and our shared name:

There is no problem if you do not recognize me (*muk sini na pai je digdar na hobo*), but you are my brother now, you are a man of Mayong, so you will be shamed (*las lagibo*)... [and] I will be frightened... [because I will then think] why does my *mita* speak my name? Maybe you have bad thoughts of me, maybe you want to harm me; nobody addresses his *mita* by name. Names are powerful, and you know what a sorcerer (*bej*) can do with someone's name. The name must be honored,... protected,... [and so] you must honor your *mita* always.

- 10 Transgressive action leading to contemplative revelation: the trope is familiar enough. One may recall, for example, Alfred Gell's (1979: 134-35) taboo-breaking experience among the Umeda of New Guinea. Upon cutting his finger and unconsciously sucking the blood from the wound, Gell breached a fundamental—and thus unmentionable—taboo: auto-cannibalism.¹ Yet, only in light of his transgression was Gell able to articulate the structural features and congeners of Umeda selfhood that were otherwise inarticulable in ordinary, reflexive language use. As it is for the clueless ethnographer, so it is too for the Umeda hunter who 'lapses' into unreflective carnal action, and is in turn put into place by taboo—the contemplative position that restores his ego and renews him for future activity in the world.

- 11 In this paper, I proceed from the dialectic of transgression and containment observed by Gell to reflect on my own lapse into tabooed speech, and on name sharing in Mayong more generally.² In what follows, I analyze the place of personal names in acts of sorcery and magic, a baptism ceremonial, and nominal modes of address in Mayong to present some first steps toward an ethnographic theory of what a shared name is and what its taboo implies for relations of conspecificity.
- 12 My argument is that, in Mayong, confronting a person with the same personal name is tantamount to confronting one's own singular destiny in another body *and* another time. Names and persons here are meant to have a telic identity. Or better stated, Mayongians *wish* that names and the persons who bear them will become one and the same over a lifetime. This wish is partly normative aspiration and partly a result of the cosmological pre-determination of personal names. Thus, when a subject transgresses the taboo on shared name utterances, she bespeaks her own past or future—*her own life*—in a body beyond her control. For Mayongians, this presents a philosophical and moral puzzle: is the 'self' confronted in the 'other' a result of independent actions and intentions, or a shared, cosmologically determined destiny?
- 13 Name sharers seem to solve this puzzle in practice by following what Mukunda Da referred to as the 'rule of *mita-mita*,' or using 'friend' as a euphemistic term of address. This solution, however, raises another puzzle for anthropologists. If taboo containment is generally understood as a method for creating distance from *threatening* substances (see below), then why does correcting this taboo seem to move closer in intimacy and permissiveness to the bearer of the taboo? After all, friendship is, ostensibly, a rather intimate and flexible social bond. To attempt an answer, I propose that the name-sharing taboo clarifies what friendship actually is in Mayong. But it does so somewhat obliquely in that its transgression—addressing my name sharer by name—implies a kind of mutual destiny more closely aligned with the logics and practices of kinship. Hence taboo containment further clarifies the limits of that gray area—a bane of anthropologists—where kinship bleeds into friendship and vice versa. Ultimately, the taboo sets a boundary via negative definition: kinship is what friendship is not.
- 14 At least potentially so. For it is not so much that the rule of *mita-mita* ultimately solves the philosophical puzzle described above. Rather, it reframes it more concretely by prompting a code for action: that is my name, but that is not my body—what obligations do I have with that person, what do I enjoin and what do I cut?

- 15 This puzzle between nominal identity and bodily difference takes us to the heart of taboo theory. On one hand, as far as current anthropological and psychoanalytic theories would have it, the enforcement of taboos is a means of constituting an *embodied subject*—a corporeally whole, self-aware person. By creating a safe distance between a body and a symbolically threatening external object or action, taboos protect the integrity of the subject by preventing the disintegration of the body in which it necessarily must be located.³
- 16 On the other hand, a sometimes explicit addendum to this theoretical closure is that taboos cease to be operative when subjects are figured *transcendent*—as Kant or Christian theologians might have it—*i.e.*, disembodied, referenced in speech or name alone, and

thereby distanced from the external dangers (especially other bodies) that would otherwise put the subject at risk (Valeri 2000: 113). Of course, this in turn begs an ethnographic rejoinder: whence name utterance taboos? And serious ones at that? For Mukunda Da, my verbal transgression implied a very real threat of physical harm, a fear of the unknown intentions of other bodies lurking behind a name. While it is obvious that speech is always an embodied action, the question of why a name avoidance taboo would have implications on the integrity of one's body is worth investigating further.

- 17 Thus, before returning to the ethnography at hand, it is useful to clear some conceptual ground. Although a distinction between unmentionable and untouchable things might not make much difference to Mukunda Da—or matter at all when it comes to the logics and practices of Mayongian naming in general—it certainly has made a difference in anthropological theory.

The unmentionable and the untouchable

- 18 An irony of the subject of name avoidance taboos in anthropological theory is that they are both everywhere and nowhere. At the foundation of anthropology as a comparative social science—a science that non-anthropologists were actually interested in—name avoidance practices were a rich source of theoretical insight and debate (Benveniste 1971, Frazer 1996, Freud 1918, Haddon 1935, Wittgenstein 1993). It is only recently that name taboos have reappeared in the literature as phenomena of theoretical concern, prompting useful insights into the (meta)pragmatic efficacy of speech avoidance in general (Fleming 2011, Fleming & Lempert 2011, Lempert & Silverstein 2013, Stasch 2011). Among other things, this literature demonstrates that, as a token of the verbal taboo type, name avoidance taboos are curiously inflexible. They have an almost crushing logic of referential and performative fixity, allowing for their transgression and containment to accrue more power to the proscription itself, making it socially productive.⁴
- 19 Accordingly, it is not surprising that name avoidance taboos populate the comparative ethnographic record. But this makes it all the more ironic that their elaboration has not contributed explicitly to a *general theory of taboo*. Major, path-breaking works on taboo theory in the twentieth century—Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1969), Gell (1979), Douglas (1966), Leach (1964), Valeri (2000), Kristeva (1982)—all focus rather exclusively on the particularities of the untouchable rather than the unmentionable. My question here is: can we bring the particularities of the unmentionable back into a general theory of taboo, but this time with one that has embodiment as an integrative feature?
- 20 In anthropology, one has to go back to Frazer, for better or worse, to begin carving out an answer. Frazer's original hypothesis as to why name utterances are widely prohibited centers on the threat of injury by magic: '[name taboos] originate in a reluctance to utter the real names of persons addressed or directly referred to. That reluctance is probably based on a dread of revealing the name to sorcerers, who would thereby obtain a handle for injuring the owner of a name' (Frazer 1996: 334). Personal names, for Frazer, act as a kind of mimetic or sympathetic label, an indexical icon that a sorcerer can use for transmitting lethal or harmful magic in a situation where there may or may not be co-presence. We might call this, following Fleming and Lempert (2011: 7), a 'hazard of addressivity.' For mentioning an unmentionable name is not simply a matter of saying too much, but of ushering an addressee—an embodied subject—into existence (and, moreover, if not the inevitable death of that subject,⁵ then at least its vulnerability). In

this sense, physical co-presence need not be direct or immanent to an interaction—or to what Goffman (1981) refers to as a ‘participation framework’—for this hazard to unfold.

- 21 In this light, we might also reconsider ‘untouchability’ via Freud’s (1918: 33) rather valuable insights into what taboos against ‘touching’ actually imply:

As in the case of taboo the nucleus of the neurotic prohibition is the act of touching, whence we derive the name touching phobia, or *délire de toucher*. The prohibition extends not only to direct contact with the body but also to the figurative use of the phrase as ‘to come into contact,’ or ‘be in touch with someone or something.’ Anything that leads the thoughts to what is prohibited and thus calls forth mental contact is just as much prohibited as immediate bodily contact; this same extension is also found in taboo.

- 22 On one hand, Freud’s psychoanalytic argument is useful for figuring embodiment richly, as a matter of vicarious *contact* (even mental or spoken). On the other hand, for Freud, speaking and thinking are essentially metaphors for touching. It is ultimately bodily contact, in its promise of immediacy, that grounds taboo. I would propose, on the contrary, that we can locate embodiment as a defining feature of unmentionable taboos in the ethnographically salient ways that bodies, names, and speech are all integrative elements of a richly defined subjectivity. A good place to start—as it was with Frazer—is in sorcery and magic as an ethnographic explicans.

The depth of magic

- 23 Sorcery is something Mayong is, coincidentally or not, most famous for. Rumors circulate across Northeast India—and now across much of the sub-continent—of Mayong being a center of dangerous black magic, inhabited by sorcerers (*bej*) who can inflict harm or manipulate one’s intentions from a distance. In Assam, it is not uncommon to hear Mayong referred to *jadur dex* (country of magic) or *bhoyonkor dex* (country of fear/danger), a place where anyone could be a potential victim or practitioner of sorcery. To the point, Mayongians are quick to remark that whether or not one *believes* in sorcery, it nevertheless *exists* as a social-cum-economic reality, efficacious and easily caught up in. Indeed, throughout Assam, healing and harming through preternatural means is one of the fastest growing industries around.
- 24 For our purposes here, it is important to recall Mukunda Da’s lesson to me: ‘you know what a sorcerer (*bej*) can do with a name.’ Sorcerers in Mayong, and throughout Northeast India, use names much like they use bodily substances—hair, fingernails, saliva, etc. All are sympathetic vehicles that are especially good for directing assault sorcery (*ban*, lit. ‘arrows’) toward an intended victim or, alternatively, curing someone suffering from a chronic illness. The phonemes-cum-lexemes of one’s name are not innocent particulars; they are *particulate* bits of cosmological data that serve as a guidemap for a sorcerer who then can access and interpret parts of a person’s destiny (*bhagyo*) and bio-moral composition simply by reading them.⁶ For acts of assault sorcery, once that data is accessed it is not only an individual who becomes a victim, but indirectly anyone who is a conspecific in terms of shared substance, like the blood of kin, the food of feast sharers, the rice beer of the ancestors, the title of a patriclan, or the name of a name sharer. The threat of contagion (*khoti*) is, among other things, why Mayongians take care not to become caught up in sorcery logic and practice, and take precautions to contain and manage substances that a sorcerer—or any other precarious being—might find of use.

- 25 Early on in my fieldwork, I decided to consult a local sorcerer and noted astrologer, Sri Prabin Saikia, about a chronic sleeping problem I have suffered from throughout my life. During the consultation, Prabin Da only asked me three questions: first, when the sleeping problem began; second, if I would write out the letters of my entire name (in English and Assamese); and third, if I would write the date, day, and time of my birth. I began by saying that my parasomnia started when I was a young teenager, probably 12 or 13 years old. Uncertain how to properly transliterate my name phoneme by phoneme at the time, I wrote the following:

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- 26 Before I could write the details of my birth, Prabin Da looked at the phonemes of my name and remarked quite casually that I have been bothered and manipulated by an aggressive, headless *bhut* (ghost, spirit)—called a *murkond*—most of my life. He said I must have disturbed his home, a tree on the eastern side of my house, sometime in my childhood. Borrowing my sensory faculties that night, the *murkond* heard someone call out my name (*tur nam to xunisile*) and became ‘stuck’ to it (*gotike namot logai dise*). Yet, only being able to perceive the world through my minimal senses when I slept (ears, closed eyes, and nose), the *murkond* developed evil eye (*beya soku*).⁷ Singlemindedly, it followed me across the world causing fits of sleeplessness and terror wherever and whenever I dozed off.
- 27 When the consultation was over and a remedy for removing the *murkond* was applied, I asked Prabin Da how he had come to know all of this from my name. Knowing a little about how names are selected in Mayong at that point (see below), I told him that my mother chose my name arbitrarily without ritual divination or astrological consultation. He said it didn’t matter, that it was built into my *bhagyo*. I learned that my name contains phonemes associated with general divinity (*deo*) and the planet/god Saturn (Xoni [Shani])—hence forces (both positive and negative) easily ‘magnetize’ (*okorxon kore*) to me. I was, in so many words, a vulnerable name/body. The forces I attract, and thus the parasitical bond with the *murkond*, were all created independently of anyone’s intentions, wishes, or potential divinations.
- 28 In Mayong, at least, there is some ethnographic evidence to support Frazer’s hypothesis. Not only sorcerers but hostile *bhut* can access a life through a revealed name. For the *murkond*, however, the attachment to my name was not intentional. It was only through using *my body* that it could actually hear my name. (Being headless, *murkond* have no sense of sound.) Effectively, the *murkond* was as much a victim of my name’s phonetic magnetism as I will always be. Here we have this almost subjectless, flatly tactile being who is only able to sense the world through my body yet doubly trapped by (1) only being able to access it when I sleep and, (2) being perpetually ‘stuck’ to my name—not by its own choice, but by forces that, although immanent in my name, were transcendent and stronger than either of our bodies or intentions. Unintentional magic built this bond, and intentional magic broke it.
- 29 This image articulates exactly what is at stake for a more general theory of taboo that can bridge the unmentionable and untouchable divide. The locus of the event is an integrative subject, of which body, speech, and name are parts of a whole *and* contain the whole within them. As stated before, name utterance ushers in a vulnerable, embodied

subject as an unavoidable ‘hazard of addressivity.’ But there are more entailments. It also ushers in the forces that constitute that subject, and also other bodies (like the *murkond* or crafty sorcerers) that can put it at risk or set it straight. We could say, then, that taboo ultimately constitutes not just embodied, but *cosmological* subjects.

- 30 We would do well, then, to counter Frazer’s hypothesis by asking not just what a name and its utterance *does*, but what they *mean* in an entire cosmology of other forces, bodies, and signs. Unfortunately, what a name actually means for Frazer is only implied in his statement that a person is an ‘owner’ of a name. The assumption that names are properties (something owned and something distinguishing) is also shared by Wittgenstein whose challenge to Frazer was, characteristically, to make the connection between magic and naming taboos universally logical: ‘Why should it not be possible for a person to regard his own name as sacred? It is certainly, on the one hand, the most important instrument which is given to him, and, on the other, like a piece of jewelry hung around his neck at birth’ (Wittgenstein 1993: 126–27).
- 31 Sacred, instrumental, precious, emblematic, inciteful of jealousy? Of course. Names can have all these values, in Mayong and elsewhere. But I would press Wittgenstein further on his related position that ‘the depth of magic must be preserved’ (Wittgenstein 1993: 116). Magic not only ‘expresses a wish’ (Wittgenstein 1993: 126), it also acts as an access point into deep cosmological possibilities, into forces bigger and beyond ourselves—and this independent of our wishes. One of these possibilities—let’s call it a cosmologic—is that rather than a name belonging to me, I might actually ‘belong to a name.’⁸
- 32 Mayongians embrace this cosmologic of nominal precedence and mobilize it most explicitly in the ritual contexts where personal names are selected and given. Accordingly, I turn now to describe a baptismal ceremonial, or *oxus*, in which personal names are given in Burha Mayong village. Since it was in conversation with a Plains Karbi elder (Mukunda Da) that I first encountered the name sharing taboo, I will focus only on the *oxus* of this community, but I should also note that the rituals of name-giving ceremonials in Assam (and throughout Mayong) are as diverse as the surfeit of ethnic groups that enact them.

The Plains Karbi *oxus* and the cosmological singularity of personal names

- 33 For the Plains Karbi community in Burha Mayong, *oxus* (*oxusiya nam*; *xusikoron*) refers doubly to a given condition of impurity (*suwa*) and the ritual actions that transform this condition: protection, purification, and name-giving (*namokoron*). Infants are the predominant subject of this ceremonial (usually conducted twelve weeks after birth), but they are not the only ones who undergo it. Anyone who wishes (or is fated) to enter the society (*i.e.*, to become Karbi)—due to marriage, birth, or ethnic conversion—must complete most, if not all, the rites of the *oxus* ceremonial. In effect, *oxus* accomplish something radical. As Philippe Ramirez (2013: 65) brilliantly notes,

In several Northeastern cultures, ‘purification’ should be understood as ‘transformation.’ [...] The forms taken by this purification evokes that of classical Hinduism, as well as the universal concerns about social pollution. Its function, however, is the opposite of Hindu purifications [...] whereas Hindu purification re-establishes a limit after removing the external agent, here it enables [the foreign agent] to move into the group.

The implication for childhood *oxus* is that the infant is like a stranger, to be incorporated into local society (*raiz*) through transformative rites of purification and name-giving. *Oxus* are thus baptismal in a rather literal sense. This will become clearer as I proceed. In what follows, I outline some ritual features for childhood *oxus* that sufficiently ground what I will call the ‘cosmological singularity’ of a personal name.

- 34 The first rite of the ceremonial involves a bit of trickery on the part of the Karbi *raiz*. Male elders of the patriclan begin the ritual by fashioning two child-like dolls out of straw in the family’s courtyard (see Figure 1). The dolls are fashioned to be ersatz host bodies for *daini* (witches, evil spirits) who would otherwise harm the child by attaching themselves to the real child’s body in its vulnerable state. While these dolls are being constructed, female elders of the patriclan prepare an elaborate display of areca nut (*tamol*), pan leaves, tumeric, incense, and cut cloth to drape the dolls in—a feast and presentation to entice the *daini* to possess the dolls instead of the child.

Figure 1.



Men of a patriclan fashion straw dolls as host bodies for *daini* (witches, evil spirits) who might harm the child in its pre-named state, or, worse, use the vulnerable child’s body as a host out of jealousy for wanting of a name. *Daini* are nameless spirits, evil in intention, and jealous in rapport. Throughout Assam—especially among the Bodo community—they are considered to be female in gender.

- 35 Concurrently, the mother, father, and infant initiate are led to the edge of the forested hills at the rear boundary of the village where the fresh water streams emerge from the jungle. There, the village high priest (*rongbong kathar*), erects an arch (*bir*) made from two young bamboo stalks, and places each stalk on opposing banks of a stream (Figure 2). A small basket, also made from bamboo, is hung from the cross-section of the arch, and an egg from a hen (from the household belonging to the infant undergoing the ceremony) is placed inside of it. The mother, father, and child (held by the mother) collectively pass through the arch (*bir kilut* in Karbi, *kath kore* in Assamese) clockwise, father first and wife/

child second, thus stepping in and out of the water each time. All the while, the *rongbong kathar* recites mantras of purification and anoints the family with basil water (*tuloxi pani*) from a short container of bamboo (to be used later on in the ritual) each time they cross under the arch.

Figure 2.



The current *rongbong kathar*, Nilesur Ingti, prepares the *bir* (bamboo arch) for the purification ritual of 'passing through the arch.'

- 36 This circuit is completed, ideally, nine times—a cosmo-numerical constant in most Karbi rites. The 'passing under the arch' serves two purposes: (1) to remove all pollution (*suwa*) from the child and her parents (thus protecting the patriclan and tribe from potential transmission of inauspiciousness or dangerous substances associated with childbirth), and (2) to prepare the child for social transformation into a Karbi person.
- 37 A quick note: before the completion of an *oxus*, the child lacks *jati*.⁹ While it is most commonly the case that a child is a reincarnated ancestor from the same patriclan, there are dozens of instances where this has not been the case. Either way, the origin of the child's *atma* ('life substance') remains indeterminate until divination rites are completed to determine who this child previously was (usually one year after the *oxus*). In this sense, the infant initiate is rather like Georg Simmel's (1971) 'stranger'—in but not of the society, socially distant yet physically close. In Burha Mayong, she fits (at least temporarily) into a class that unites wives, the line of kings, uxorial local male sorcerers, and converted Karbi—all outsiders who have come to stay, yet keep one foot in the society and one outside of it.
- 38 Once the circuit is complete, the *rongbong kathar* breaks down the bamboo arch, removes the egg from its basket, and after constructing a ritual space on the ground (a nine point mandala made of *pitha guri* [rice flour]), he proceeds to break the egg with a knife,

‘cutting’ it and pouring its contents over the mandala. This rite is understood as a sanctioned sacrifice: ‘cutting in the name of god’ (*bhagabhanor nam loi katise*). Before cutting the egg, the *rongbong kathar* recites a *shlok*, asking the egg for forgiveness. Using the intimate *toi* form of address, he announces ‘O little egg! Please do not take this slaughter as an injustice. You need not think of your sacrifice as death [as a life that has been ‘cut’]. God has given this sacrifice his blessing in the past so another might live now.’ He then recites the name of the household god (Hemphu in Karbi; Mahadeu in Assamese) to nullify the sinful transgression (*mahapap*) of egg sacrifice.¹⁰

- 39 A short divination rite concerning the family’s collective destiny follows, which involves the following: first, prostrating in the four cardinal directions; second, placing nine strips of *tamol* (areca nut) bark, nine drops of *lau pani* (rice beer), and nine (inauspicious and inedible) tips of pan leaf onto the rice flour mandala (and over the broken egg); and third, cutting the bamboo container used during the *bir kilut* rite in half lengthwise, spilling its water onto the mandala, and then rubbing the halves together before dropping them three times onto the mandala. The way the bamboo halves fall (outside or inside up, crossed, not touching, etc.) is supposed to divine the collective destiny of a patriline now that the child is becoming a part of it.
- 40 After these rites are completed, the *rongbong kathar* returns to the courtyard of the child’s house with the *lau* gourd (*xorbong* in Karbi, see Figure 3) that held the rice beer from the previous rite. From it, he bathes a red cock with ablutions of rice beer before sacrificing it to the household deity. The cock’s blood is spilled over a set of sacred objects contained in a banana leaf, and arranged around another cosmic map made of rice flour (another nine point mandala, notably with the *xorbong* at the zenith, holding the rice beer necessary to complete all rituals and, in turn, symbolizing the ‘containment’ of Karbi society as a whole).

Figure 3.

**XORBONG (LAU GOURD).**

The *rongbong kathar* then ‘reads’ the grooves and color of the cock’s intestines to find auspicious letters (phonemes-cum-lexemes) that should compose the child’s name and determine her life course (Figure 4). The *rongbong kathar* refers to this act as ‘acquiring the child’s destiny’ (*puwalir bhagyo to paise*).

Figure 4.



The *rongbong kathar* divines phonemes/lexemes for the child's name from the grooves and color of the cock's removed intestines.

- 41 Immediately following the divination, the intestines are placed before the child-like dolls, now clothed and placed on a tray with the other objects of display laid around them (tumeric, *tamol*, etc.). The dolls—now inhabited by the *daini*—are then carried by the elder women of the patriclan out to the rice fields or into the forest, beyond the village settlement. While carrying the dolls away, the women sweep the ground ahead of them and beat sticks against fences, tree trunks, and the external walls of the house, shouting at the *daini*: 'Go! Eat! Away from the house!' (Figure 5). Once the *daini* have been chased away, the child is then taken indoors in order to finalize what name she will receive.

Figure 5.



With the dolls now possessed by the *daini* (witches, evil spirits), the women of the patriclan take them out to the rice paddy field behind the home of the family hosting the *oxus*. Dogs eagerly await to feast on the cock entrails.

- 42 With purifications complete and protections in place, the senior chief (*bor bangthai*) now consults with family members about the date and time of birth, and other astrological events relating to the child's conception, birth, development, etc. The chiefly act of choosing the *right* personal name is a delicate process. Most of the time, the parents have already picked out a name, but the chief can only approve if the name meets a minimal set of requirements: (1) that the name contains the phonemes divined from the shape and color of the sacrificed cock's intestines and from other cosmic events coincidental with birth—the name has to 'fit' *singularly* in this sense because its contents (phonemes) are cosmologically pre-determined; (2) that the name has significance in either Assamese or Karbi languages—a meaning that serves as a moral model for a normative aspiration, expressing a wish that persons and names should become the same, singular thing over time (this also allows for some flexibility in arranging the pieces of a name already available); (3) that the name is not shared by any living person in the local Karbi community and in the village as a whole.¹¹
- 43 This portion of the ceremonial is never taken lightly. Arguments often ensue between patrilineal members and the *bor bangthai*, who has the unenviable duty of balancing the multiple criteria needed to select the 'right name.' I recall at one *oxus*—for the newborn daughter of my host sister—my own mother's name, Maureen, was proposed as a namesake for the newborn girl. But the *bor bangthai* immediately shot it down: 'No English names this time! Besides, it doesn't fit!' After that, the child's paternal grandmother intervened and suggested a Hindi name: Sangamitra (meaning: socially graceful, a friend who unites others). The *bor bangthai* and *rongbong kathar* agreed that the

name fit the criteria, but the *bor bangthai* further interjected that the name must be pronounced in *khati Oxomiya* [pure Assamese] as ‘Xongomitrɔ.’ In another *oxus* (for the child in Figure 6), an English name, Tina, was suggested and agreed upon, but the *bor bangthai* interjected again saying that the name needed a locally meaningful suffix to match another cosmologically pre-determined phoneme (*mo*). The name finally chosen was ‘Tinamoni,’ only a partial exonym.

- 44 Once a name is chosen, an unmarried boy from the child’s patriclan carries in a young hen anointed with a couple drops of rice beer. The boy holds the hen up to the child’s head to “kiss” it, thus sanctifying membership in the patriclan through physical transmission,¹² while the chief addresses the child by her newly given personal name and clanic patronym. The *rongbong kathar*, in turn, addresses the child by both names and then proceeds to tie a string around the child’s wrist and then one around the foot of the hen (Figure 6), mimicking a marriage rite in the sense that the child is now ‘bound’ to the patriclan and the tribe. Patrilineal men give collective toasts of rice beer and guzzle away. The child is now *of* a patronym and thus belongs to the house, the patriclan, and to the Karbi *raiz* (i.e., to a *jati*) as a fully transformed person. Mutual destiny is inaugurated as such. But she is also now *of* her personal name—of a singular destiny that is much more precarious, dependent upon individual action and intention as much as cosmological predetermination.

Figure 6.



The *rongbong kathar* ties a string around the wrist of a child and is proceeding to tie a string around the foot of a hen after the child’s name is given.

- 45 The entire *oxus* ceremonial is meant to enact a transformation in the child—from an indeterminate vessel to a person socially and cosmologically constituted through acts of

cutting, binding, containing, and naming. In that the society, in all its features, has to be 'opened up' for this to happen, protective rites are followed. They prevent jealous witches and pollution (immanent to childbirth and necessary sacrifices) from coming in through the same door, so to speak. Purification, through the rite of *bir kilut* and sacrificial appeasement of the household deity, further enforces the protection of all socio-cosmic domains (bodies, house, patriclan, *raiz*, village, tribe).

- 46 Name-giving, then, is the ultimate moment of transformation. It transubstantiates the child in two ways. First, the address of a clanic patronym—in conjunction with the kiss of a hen anointed by rice beer, and the strings that bind the child to the hen—transmits what we might call, following Sahlins (2013), *mutual being*. The code of that mutuality is a collective fate (*bhagyo*), originally divined by the *rongbong kathar* after the *bir kilut* rite, which then flows cross-substantially through the rice beer that grounds clanic affiliation.
- 47 Second, the address of a personal name transmits to the child a singular destiny. Recall the rather circuitous path that the name travels along until it unites with the child's body. For the *bor bangthai*, a personal name is a puzzle. The particulate pieces of the puzzle—a given collection of cosmologically charged phonemes—are already there, predetermined by impersonal forces beyond human control. But he has to arrange them syntagmatically in such a way that the paradigmatic result is a locally nonexistent name that is also a meaningful model for the child to aspire to. Exonyms are one solution (see above), but they do not always have an intuitively local meaning. Non-existing endonyms are another, but they are hard to come by as Burha Mayong's population grows and death rates decline.
- 48 It is an arduous arbitration that leads to the conclusion that, being unique and so carefully chosen, personal names are 'cosmological singularities.' Predetermined from impersonal forces (lexemes hidden in the phonemes), the contents of a name are *a priori*. Being phonetically fixed, a name always retains its connection to the impersonal forces that constituted it (recall Prabin Da's divination of forces from my own name). It is a fate one cannot escape.
- 49 However, this does not mean that one's singular fate is sealed in perpetuity. Indeed, the code and substance built into personal name is entirely amenable to individual experiences and practices in real time. What one does in response to the impersonal forces immanent in a name can change the course of that singular destiny. Here we are on solid ground for the karmic theory that all lives are a combination of predestination and individual actions and intentions—and for Marcel Mauss' (1979) insistence that names are socially grounded categories of human understanding.

- 50 This brings us back to Mukunda Da. His fear of not knowing why his *mita* would speak his name is, in this context, a rather practical one: not being able to control another body's actions and intentions when the same configuration of impersonal, cosmological forces are present in each other. If his *mita* was gauche enough to break a taboo, then who knows what he is capable of doing; their shared name might become disgraced, a *badnam* so to speak (see Aditya Bharadwaj's contribution in this volume).
- 51 The cosmologic here turns on implications of *conspicificity*. Similar to the *xará* (namesakes) of Southern Mozambique and Brazil (Pina-Cabral 2010), actions of name

sharers are substantially fused; they are *like* kin who are co-responsible for the well-being of their shared name and thus each other. But there is a major difference in Mayong; and the difference has to do with the notion of substance name sharers share. Name sharers are indeed conspecifics, but their consubstantiality is not—or rather, should not be—the same as that of kin.

The kith and the kin, one more time: conspecificity and destiny

- 52 To return to the puzzle of the name-sharing taboo, we are still left with the question of why an interpellation of ‘friendship’ serves as a euphemistic substitution. To understand what an idiom of friendship means in this context, we also must reckon what kinship is.
- 53 Kinship and friendship are tricky to delimit in Mayong, just as they are anywhere. Even as current anthropological theory proposes that kinship is just as constructed as friendship (that is, not necessarily a given of birth and biological relatedness), there nevertheless remains a tendency to keep the two conceptually distinct (see: Bell & Coleman 1999, Desai & Killick 2010, Schneider 1980: 53, Testart 1999: 40–1). Perhaps in its most simplistic formulation: *kinship* = *systematic, jural obligations* while *friendship* = *unsystematic, non-jural sentiment*. Yet I would contend that any attempt to define kinship over-against friendship without exploring how the boundaries between the two are defined and altered in practice—in the wake of embodied, critical events (*cf.* Das 1997) like taboo transgression and containment—will always come up short.
- 54 Julian Pitt-Rivers (1973) goes to some length to illuminate an event-centric mediation of kith and kin that I encourage here, first by posing a counterpoint to Meyer Fortes’ (1969) restriction of the axiom of *amity* to kinship. By extending (indeed, *returning*) the meaning of amity to one that includes ‘friendship,’ he makes a case quite similar to Sahlins (2013): *viz.*, birth and biology have no bearing on what kinship really is.¹³ For Pitt-Rivers, friendship and kinship are both modes of amiable conspecificity worked out in practice (*cf.* Pitt-Rivers 1992: 232).
- 55 But, there are also two particular paradoxes of friendship that this amiable conspecificity reveals. The first is that
- though the favours of friends must be free, they must still be reciprocated if the moral status quo is to be maintained [...] [moreover] the disillusioned friend who complains that his favours have not been reciprocated destroys his own reputation by implying that he expected they should be, that he gave them only out of calculation in expectation of a return [...] [revealing] that the sentiment is not mutual. (Pitt-Rivers 1973: 97)
- The second is that
- moral equality is essential between unequals, for the only admissible reciprocity is in sentiments. It must be accepted that *my* sentiments are of the same value as *yours* even though I cannot demonstrate them by material equivalence. (Pitt-Rivers 1973: 98)

For our purposes here, we can unite these two and state them more simply: friends are conspecifics from the perspective of mutual and reciprocal sentiment, but by the same token, this conspecificity fails in tautology because there are no grounds for measuring equivalence in sentiment. Friends are thus like the primordial beings in Aristophanes’ discourse on love who, having been cut into two by Zeus, spend their lives searching for

the unity in their other half that they once lost. All this is another way of saying that friends *do* and *do not* have mutuality of being.

- 56 How, then, does this paradox play out for distinguishing kith and kin in Burha Mayong? Names of address are an excellent place to explore this paradox, since they each (1) imply different notions of substance,¹⁴ and thus different kinds of conspecificity; and (2) constitute micro-events that provide a code for normative action and obligation. Consider the following table:

Table 1: Names of address and their corresponding notions of substance in Burha Mayong

Names of Address	Notion of Substance
Personal Name	Impersonal Force (Cosmological Singularity)
Nickname	Love (<i>morom</i>)
Kin Terms as Address	Honor (<i>xonman</i>)
Title (<i>uppathi</i>)	Fame/Recognition (<i>xunam/bikhat</i>)
Clanic Patronym	Rice Beer (Cosmological Mutuality)

- 57 Let's start with the middle three. Nicknames (*moromiyal nam*) are some of the most widely used forms of address, especially in co-present interaction. They express sentiment in its rawest form. In contexts of both kinship and friendship, they are given and used out of love and affection. They are usually terms for 'beauty' (*dhunu, moina, mamunu, majoni, aitu*, etc.). Although they can be used sarcastically, they most often express a sweet, relaxed, and playful sentiment, and are used so often that addressors sometimes forget what the addressee's *real* name actually is.
- 58 Moving to the second: as with most societies throughout South Asia, one can make kin out of anyone by addressing them in the terms of kinship. In Assam, one can address a stranger as *dada/kokai* (elder brother), *bhaiti* (younger brother), *baideu/bhonti* (elder/younger sister), *deuta/ai* (father/mother), *khura* (father's brother), *mama* (mother's brother), etc., depending on context and what expectations of obligation are implied. All of these kin terms of address involve a notion of substance in honor and rank. (Note that the kin terms for many seniors are also terms for divinity: *deo/deu* [god], *ai* [goddess].) While one may use them casually, each moment of address ushers in a specific way of acting with the addressee that is also specific to kinship relations. No metaphorical extension here—addressing someone as *kokai* means that he *is* one's elder brother in terms of honor and rank, and that is how one should act with him. (The Mayong king is always referred to as *deuta*, for example, and he is thus a literal father for everyone.) The key point here is that addressing someone as kin is an attempt to build mutual being through honorifics or ranked relations, even if there are no prior grounds for it.
- 59 A title (*uppathi*) is essentially the surname that one *writes*. (To find out what a stranger's title is, one asks '*Ki likhe?*' ['What do you write?'].) It is a minimal index of tribe/caste/religious affiliation and functions most often as a means for grasping what rules to follow with guests and strangers. If a person writes 'Hussain,' you shouldn't feed her pork. If a

person writes ‘Nath,’ you shouldn’t serve him alcohol. Moreover, in Burha Mayong it is often the case that if one, for example, writes ‘Bangthai’ or ‘Kathar’—the respective terms for ‘chief’ and ‘priest’ in Karbi society—one is not necessarily indexing affiliation to a chiefly or priestly clan (*kur* in Karbi, *phoid* in Assamese). Clanic patronyms, which I will describe below, are conceptually distinct from titles. Titles that are not clanic patronyms are often given by someone else, but in either case they are a sign of fame and public recognition (*xunam*, *bikhat*), emphasizing a particular feature of a person that should be inherited by contemporaneous and future generations. For example, one of my main informants is a member of the Timung clan, and from childhood he wrote his clanic patronym as his title. However, because of the fame and recognition he accrued with the Karbi Students Union, he was given a new title—a chiefly one, ‘Bangthai’—which he then passed on to his wife, siblings, and children as a new patronym.

- 60 None of these three names of address (nicknames, kin terms, titles) are marked. They are the basis of the ordinary, unmarked interactional order among kith and kin. The notions of substance they entail (love, honor, fame/recognition) are all *impersonal forces* not specific to either domain (kinship or friendship), or to any specific person. The other two names of address in the table above, however, belong to a marked form of address known as *namkari*. And this is something very personal.
- 61 If I address someone by his personal name, I engage in an act similar to the devotional practice of reciting the name of god in Assamese neo-Vaishnavism, or *Ek Xorona Nam Dhormo* (‘Taking Shelter in the Name of One’). Naming calls forth the *person* into existence in a cosmologically singular way, much like devotees call forth each and every aspect of Krishna through his myriad names. As I demonstrated in the previous section, the notion of substance called forth in a personal name is an amalgam of impersonal forces that unite in a name that is locally non-existent and a unique moral model for a person to live up to. Friends address each other by personal name quite casually. Kin, on the other hand, tend to avoid using them, preferring nicknames instead.
- 62 A personal name stands in opposition to the name that indexes lineal kinship: a clanic patronym. As I point out in note 11, a title may or may not be used as a generic patronym, but among the Karbi of Burha Mayong a clanic patronym—whether used as a title or not—is something very static. It really only appears as a term of address among kin and between potential affines in contexts of marriage, when proscriptions about who can and should marry whom become salient. For example, when my host sister eloped with her future husband, clanic patronyms became a common term of address between their two families. My sister is of the ‘Ronghang’ clan and her husband is of the ‘Timung’ clan.¹⁵ Although this marriage is not taboo, in my host father’s eyes, his daughter was ‘marrying down’ in rank. At first, he was unwilling to consent to the marriage. To appease my host father, my host sister’s father-in-law brought a *lau* gourd (*xorbong*) filled with rice beer to my host parents and entreated my host father as follows: ‘Please take this, Ronghang; your daughter will be Timung.’ One could see this as a gift of peace-making between two clans teetering between friendship and enmity. But the act was more. It preserved the integrity of the clans, as well as an openness in a request for alliance and commensalism. Rice beer is, indeed, the notion of substance that a clanic patronym calls forth. It is bio-moral and references containment, surplus, and the heirloom strands of rice grain used by families for generations. It links ancestors in a patriclan, binding them together as *one substantial being*, just as it reaches out in commensal openness to potential affines (who, upon becoming actual affines, are addressed as ‘guests’ [*alohi*]). Rice beer thus expresses

cosmological mutuality in which a particular collectivity came, comes, and will come into being.

- 63 Returning to the paradox of friendship, we can now note what kind of substances both kith and kin truck in. Nicknames are common among friends. If their relationships are really intimate but strained in rank, they might choose to use a kin term (or append a kin term to a nickname). If they are stroking their friend's ego, they might use a title. But in using any of these they nevertheless stay in that gray area where friendship and kinship bleed into one another, where substances of love, honor, and fame circulate. Yet, friends never use clanic patronyms and kin avoid using personal names. Correspondingly, *namkari* carves out two tentatively discreet zones for interactional address: a zone of independent and singular beings (reserved mainly for friends) and a zone of interdependent and mutual beings (reserved mainly for kin). Thus, in this context, the paradox of friendship is disentangled—friends may indeed be conspecific in sentiment/love, honor, and recognition, but they share these substances as independent rather than mutual beings.
- 64 Of course, people who share personal names throw this formula out of whack. As William Mazzarella points out in his contribution to this volume, 'the *aura* of singularity [in a personal name] [...] depends on all the practices that protect that singularity from being called into question or undermined.' Uttering a name sharer's name does just that: it undermines the distinctive aura of a name, its cosmological singularity, by implying a *mutual being* through the *sharing of impersonal forces*. Containment, through proscription and the euphemistic utterance of *mita*, protects that aura by returning the name sharers to a zone of independent singularities.
- 65 Still, something is amiss here. Name sharers share names despite the fact that they can mitigate it by claiming to be friends. Their conspecificity in shared, impersonal forces does not subside. Moreover, taboo containment only reinforces this fact since it is the ground for there being a taboo in the first place.

Fate and togetherness

- 66 At this point we might ask: are name sharers in Mayong actually *friends*? As I mentioned above, there are hardly any name sharers in Burha Mayong. They do, however, exist in the Mayong kingdom as a supralocality. These name sharers, in general, do not like each other. This dislike is not expressed as enmity, but as envy and petty rivalry with entailments of casual competition, one-upmanship, and riposte—the building blocks of 'big man' (*dangor manuh*) politics throughout Northeast India. To the point, in the only reference to the name-sharing taboo I have been able to find in regional ethnographic literature—an article about Garo (Mande) naming practices in nearby Meghalaya (Hvenekilde *et al.* 2000)—the authors reveal a similar phenomenon of schismogenesis. They draw on oral historical narratives that interpret the origins of this taboo in pre-colonial ripostes between warriors of neighboring villages who happened to discover that they shared a name and felt the need to challenge each other's mettle.¹⁶ Speculative or not, such an account emphasizes that the containing act of addressing a name sharer as 'friend' is not presumed to be true in both word and deed. Addressing someone as *mita*

need not imply mutual sentiment and reciprocity in action *at all*, even if it does provide a code for how the relationship should be handled.

67 Here we might take further insight from the analogous phenomenon of ‘ritual friendship’ (or ‘ritual brotherhood,’ ‘fictive kinship,’ etc.), dominant in Central India and Nepal. The term used in Nepal for such relationships is *miteri* (Messerschmidt 1982); among the Gabada of southern Orissa, the term is *moitr* (Pfeffer 2001); and in Chattisgarh, *phul-phulwari* (Desai 2010). In this phenomenon, bonds are intentionally created—most often with people belonging to different castes or places—and both sentiment and reciprocity are actively cultivated. So much so, that ritual friends start acting as if they were siblings, and then pass that relation on to their own next of kin.

68 There is, however, an exception in this literature that is neatly apropos of our discussion. In north-west Orissa there is a phenomenon of ritual friendship called, well, *mita*—almost identical to the ‘rule of *mita-mita*’ in Mayong.¹⁷ Although the literature does not indicate anything as strong as a taboo on shared names, the phenomenon of *mita* friendship in Orissa is strikingly similar enough to warrant a full description:

This form of friendship is generally restricted to people having the same name by birth. People believe that there is a special link between those who share a name. However, the common name is also abandoned in favour of *mita* ‘friend.’ A Brahman might perform a little ritual to underline the friendship, but in other cases people regard each other as *mita* just because of their common name. They may also address each other as *mita*, with or without a ritual [...]and] *mita* must belong to different communities. The *mita* friendship constitutes a relationship between equals comparable to brothers. However, unlike genealogical brothers any difference of age does not matter: there is no distinction between elder and younger brother with all its consequences (Skoda 2004: 171).

69 Here I want to extract two points from *mita* friendship in Orissa that help us to clarify what friendship actually is in Mayong. The first is a similarity. This is that *mita* inevitably belong to different communities. Given that so much work is put into preventing village-based consociates from having the same personal name in Burha Mayong, the event of discovering someone who shares your name is a contingent one that most often occurs beyond the sectors of residence and close kinship. Effectively, name sharers are socially distant strangers, brought together in coincidence. The second is a major difference. In Orissa, *mita* friendship is comparable to brotherhood but disregards distinctions of age and rank. But in Mayong, name sharers cannot avoid age due to the fact that a name also has a temporal unfolding, a particular fate built into it. The wish for telic identity between a name and a person, grounded in the non-aspirational fact that cosmologically pre-determined forces constitute a name, makes a name’s temporality visible in a very real way. And since my name sharer is unavoidably either my junior or senior, by ushering him into existence *viva voce* I also usher in what I could be or could have been.

70 Name sharers thus have something very much in common with kin. They cannot escape the fact that they are bound by something proximal and largely pre-determined, independent of their wishes. This sheer proximity of fate, in turn, creates an obligation to care for a name, and this on the sole basis of being stuck together in an ambiguous situation (cf. Das 2013). Even if Mayongian name sharers see their relationship as one of competition, they nevertheless acknowledge the fear that Mukunda Da spoke of. If my name sharer is doing bad things, then that may very well affect me and what I think of as my singular fate. Better to cut the name. As a consequence, if euphemistic friendship does anything, it sets a record straight: friendship is a way to escape the ties that kinship

binds. Kinship is unambiguous mutual destiny; friendship is not. Addressing a name sharer as 'friend' ultimately might be a socially necessary act of misrecognition (Bourdieu 1980), but the taboo and its containment nevertheless mitigate the uncanny feeling that occurs when one has an occasion to say: there is my name, but there is not my body.

An untying that binds

- 71 Effectively, the taboo I broke wasn't so minor after all. It boils down to the fact that my future is something I am not exclusively responsible for. Nor is it clear that my life is uniquely my own. It is, in fact, a real cosmological possibility that Sean Penn and I share something important. Calling him by name ushers a potential shared destiny into being, implying that his bad and good deeds are potentially my own and vice versa. My future might be his present and his past might be my present.
- 72 Ostensibly, had I 'cut the name' and addressed him as my friend, I would have created between us a kind of 'close distance' (see Mazzarella 2003: 256–57, 2006: 496). In other words, I would have also introduced a nominal, but very real and substantial, difference: even though our embodied destinies might be intertwined, I should treat him otherwise. His embodied actions and intentions are of his own lifeworld, which may be *dizzily close* to my own, but nevertheless remain independent—just distant enough. A word, a single word, thus unties a fate.
- 73 Still and all, this is an untying that binds together all the Seans of the world. Every time I write Sean Penn's name in this paper, I repeat the transgression and raise the stakes. I can't escape him; I can't laugh him off as 'my other brother Sean.' Something of our mutuality forever remains in that aspects of me are unfolding in him and vice versa. For my part, it remains uncertain whether this is good fortune or bad luck.

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NOTES

1. As per Gell's analysis, his transgression revealed a connection between general food taboos and a specific taboo on eating self-killed game among the Umeda. It also brought into sharp focus the absence of a familiar repertoire of bodily techniques: 'With opened eyes, I was enabled to see the significance of the entire absence of auto-cannibalistic habits among the adult population, the absence of such things as nail-biting, moustache-chewing, the swallowing of dried nasal mucus, etc.—practices which among ourselves vary in degree of niceness without ever attaining the status of major sins' (Gell 1979: 135).
2. Mayong is a multi-ethnic village cluster and customary kingdom, approximately forty kilometers west of Guwahati on the southern banks of the Brahmaputra River. The ethnographic material in this article derives mainly from the village of Burha Mayong, a predominantly Karbi village on the western border of the kingdom.
3. For a thorough survey of this literature, see Valeri (2000: Chapter 2).
4. The logic of this double-sided rigidity is as follows. On one hand, as in Saul Kripke's (1980) famous formulation, proper names are 'rigid designators' because the baptismal events that usher them into use necessarily fix their reference once and for all—across all subsequent moments of use in context and in all 'possible' (read: hypothetical or counterfactual) worlds. In one of his examples, if there is a hypothetical world where Hitler was never born, we can still imagine a baptismal speech event where someone could say 'Hitler is the person who was never born in our world,' and the name 'Hitler' would still refer inflexibly to itself (a non-existent person). On the other hand, verbal taboos evince what Fleming (2011: 151-53, *passim*) calls 'rigid performativity,' meaning that the ability for tabooed words to do things in their explicit utterance 'does not depend upon contextual factors or 'felicity conditions,' like the speaker's intentions or the appropriateness of the social context, to have its effectiveness. It requires only the occurrence of the taboo form' (Fleming 2011: 160). For example, to report that so-and-so said 'I now pronounce you man and wife' does not accidentally marry anyone whereas its ceremonial utterance—a felicity condition—allows the statement to do exactly what it says. Yet, to verbally report that so-and-so said the word 'fuck'—or to articulate it as I do here—transgresses the same taboo on uttering the 'f-word' as when so-and-so originally uttered it.
5. Veena Das (this issue) argues that names can foreshadow death in subdued ways. Her two examples show how this can occur through both intentional utterances and intentional silences beyond formal systems of naming. In the first example, Das' informant describes how she intentionally breaks a name avoidance taboo by speaking the name of her deadbeat husband—in verbal interactions with others—so as 'to wish him a bit of death everyday by taking his name' [cf . Trawick 1992: 95 and Das 1968 on spousal name utterance taboos in South India and Bengal, respectively]. In the second example, an informant named Sheela reveals to Das that she is unable to utter the name of a man who once violated her, even silently to herself: 'I cannot even say it aloud to myself. It is like I am holding something in me, tight as a fist, a coiled snake, and if that came out, the world would be thrown into chaos (*duniya utthal putthal ho jayegi*).'
6. See Guenzi (2012) for an ethnographically informed discussion of the Indic concept of *bhagya*, which she felicitously translates as 'allotted share.' Moreover, the connection of cosmological fate to one's personal name is not without comparative instances. Julian Pitt-Rivers describes of first names in Andalusia: 'A person's first name is sometimes called his *gracia* [grace]' (1992: 226).

Cf. the examples of nominal personhood and shield names collected in vom Bruck & Bodenhorn (2006).

7. Being headless, and thus lacking what we might call ‘cephalic personhood,’ *murkond* are violently jealous beings who need the mouths, eyes, ears, and noses of others to satisfy their passions.

8. This same cosmologic is what makes Iñupiat and Inuit kinship a function of name giving and name sharing rather than of parenting and birth (Sahlins 2013: 3).

9. In Northeast India this term signifies ‘ethnicity’ or ‘race’ more than ‘caste’ (see Cantlie 1984).

10. In Karbi cosmogony—as detailed in the oratorical *Mosera* rite—humans were born from fowl eggs. The sin of egg sacrifice, here, unfolds from a proscription against killing the congeners of one’s own tribe, and not from killing or sacrificing a living being. There is, however, some overlap here with the anti-sacrificial tenets of Assamese Vaishnavism, the rituals of which the Karbi of Burha Mayong also partake in.

11. As a testament to the senior chief’s acumen and memory: among the living in Burha Mayong, I know of only one instance of a shared name—Rupeshor Kro and Rupeshor Timung—which is an exception that proves the rule, since the latter is the junior chief (*deka bangthai*) and is always addressed as such and never by name.

12. Kissing here is analogous to touching (Gregory 2011), a form of transmitting positive or negative substances. In this case, the transmission is almost certainly one of positive kinship substance. First, there is the anointing of rice beer (the quintessential clanic substance). Second is the kiss itself, vicariously given by the unmarried boy from the child’s patriclan who holds the hen. Almost an inverted mirror image of the name-sharing taboo, this rite reveals the corporeal sharing and transmission of what unites kin independently of anyone’s wishes or sentiments.

13. For Sahlins (2013: 24), however, the ‘mutuality of being’ that sufficiently defines kinship need not be amiable in practice. If I read him correctly, Sahlins would hesitate lumping ‘friendship’ in with ‘kinship’—first owing to the fact that not all societies around the world have a concept of friendship, and second because ‘mutuality of being’ allows for the possibility of kin to be both friends *and* enemies. To rephrase satirist Robert Benchley: all friendship is relative, although all relatives are not friends.

14. By ‘substance’ here I am referring to a kind of essence (*xar* in Assamese), which may or may not be material.

15. To further substantiate my argument that titles are conceptually distinct from clanic patronyms, my host family uses (‘writes’) the title ‘Kathar’—referencing a priestly affiliation—while their actual clanic patronym, ‘Ronghang,’ references a kingly affiliation. I was often told that since I am now part of their family, I am of the clan of kings. The point is that clanic patronyms can be used as titles, but not all titles are clanic patronyms.

16. Meghalaya, interestingly, has its own regional fame as a place with a hyper-eclectic naming repertoire, where one finds personal names as idiomatic, singular, and referentially foreign as ‘Latrine,’ ‘Submarine,’ ‘Fiction,’ ‘Helpme,’ etc. (see: <http://namasutra.blogspot.in/2014/04/mirth-in-meghalaya.html>, accessed February 6, 2015). We might see this as an alternative solution to having to confront name sharers, a kind of ‘creative refusal’ (Graeber 2013) that consciously rejects the cosmological determinism of naming practices in neighboring areas like Mayong.

17. Oriya and Assamese (Oxomiya) are linguistically related, but it is uncertain what historical or cultural connection the two phenomena share. It seems that they both belong to a permutational continuum of cultural practices concerning friendship, identity, and nominal substance. Current research into historical affinities that stretch from South India, north to the Himalaya, and east into Burma reveal that the stark cultural differences often attributed to Northeast Indian peoples are very much a contemporary phenomenon (see Chatterjee 2013).

ABSTRACTS

This article explores the cosmological entailments of a minor verbal taboo in Mayong (Central Assam). In brief, individuals who share personal names are forbidden from addressing or referring to each other by name, and instead must interpellate each other as *mita* (friend). Through an analysis of names in acts of sorcery and magic, a baptism ceremonial, and nominal modes of address in Mayong, this article demonstrates how confronting a person with a shared name is tantamount to confronting one's own singular destiny in another body and another time. Alongside an ethnographic theorization of taboo that bridges the unmentionable and untouchable divide, this article further demonstrates how the euphemistic norm of address between name sharers reframes the distinction between kinship and friendship as a matter of with whom one can and should share a mutual destiny.

INDEX

Keywords: taboo, names, cosmology, naming, conspecificity, friendship, kinship, fate, Mayong, Assam (India)

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