The Fall of the Demoness

The god Harki was found in the village of Jaira, in Jumla district of Nepal. Here, a cow offered her milk to a quartz rock every evening. When her angry cowherd attacked the rock, it broke into three pieces and miraculously flew to three places where shrines were built for Harki.

Many centuries later, a woman of the Pariyar caste was making a long journey from her father’s village of Jaira to her husband’s home in the village of Thehe, which is in Humla. Sitting on a hill above a branch of the Karnali, it is the last Khas village in that direction. Hundreds of houses huddle together. Children play on rooftops joined to each other. Steps are carved into a single tree-trunk to make ladders that go from one level to another level. Families divide the same house into smaller and smaller homes rather than move to another part of the country. Often, men migrate to seek work in India and Purang in the Ngari prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The Pariyar woman had seen the powerful gods of the so-called ‘upper castes’ in Thehe – the elder Rampal, with his own shrine, and his younger brothers. But, as a Pariyar, she didn’t have her own god, and the god of others often behaved as the others did: they didn’t respect her wishes, nor were they friendly.

‘Father,’ she begged, ‘give me a drum, so that my son may play it and call upon a god from my village.’
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Her father said, ‘The drums at the shrine of Rampal are too big, but I will give you a drum from the shrine of Harki. Careful! Hide it well. Let nobody see you take it into Thehe!’

She left Jaira with a small tyamko drum hidden under her dress and her son in a wicker basket on her shoulders. They headed up the Karnali towards Thehe.

The travelers in her group were puzzled to hear the sound of a small tyamko drum beating on its own. After a few days of walking, they couldn’t control their curiosity any longer. When they finally reached Thehe, they crowded at the woman’s house and asked what was meant by the omen of the drum that beat on its own.

It was on the fourteenth day of the waxing moon in the month of Magh, in the deepest of winter, when villagers gathered around the young mother, the year-old boy, and the tyamko drum that played itself. The year-old baby had been chosen by the god Harki as his dhami. His name was Aashe Pariyar.

The year-old baby went into a trance and said to everybody, ‘I am the god Harki from Jaira!’

But the other gods already living in Thehe were angry at the new god. What they hated the most was that Harki had traveled there with a woman of the tailor caste, and had chosen her baby as his dhami.

The god Rampal and his younger brothers Betal, Mashto and Banpal banded together to chase Harki away from Thehe. ‘Go away,’ they said to him. ‘You are not needed here, neither are you welcome among us. You have insulted us by choosing to live among people of low caste.’ That wasn’t very polite of them. But Harki replied politely, ‘I will live in Thehe with the people I choose.’

In those very days, Thehe was being terrorized by the demoness Kodiyamal, who lived in a cave deep inside the
river Karnali, just below the village. She traveled as far up north as the plains of Tibet and as far south as the plains of India to snatch children from villages along the river. As horrified villagers watched, blood gushed out of her underwater home whenever she ate a child. Even from under the fast and roaring waters of the Karnali the screams of children could be heard, some in Tibetan, some in Humli, and sometimes even in Urdu. Mothers blocked the ears of their children and tried to hide the bloody foam coloring the Karnali. But the crunching of bones and sucking of marrow echoed through the valley for many days.

The people of Thehe thought that their gods were incapable of defending them from Kodiyamal. One by one, Betal, Mashto and Banpal had greedily accepted sacrifices offered by the villagers and jumped into the river to battle Kodiyamal. But they had come running back after short battles, barely escaping with their limbs intact. With every victory over a god the demoness grew stronger and angrier.

The day after arriving in Thehe, Aashe Pariyar’s mother sat massaging him in the sun when Kodiyamal stretched her tongue all the way from her cave and snatched away another child. The cries of the mother broke the hearts of everybody in Thehe. They waited in dread to hear the crunch and slurp, but no blood was seen. Instead, they heard Kodiyamal burp.

‘Rampal! You are the eldest and most powerful god. You are worshipped before any other. If you can’t protect my child, who can? I promise you the fattest and purest sacrifice!’ the mother cried.

Rampal reluctantly entered the river to fight the demoness, but he too fled back uphill to his shrine to hide in a pine grove.

Aashe Pariyar, as the god Harki in human form, flew from his roof, over the roofs of the Pariyar neighborhood.
He flew south over fields of barley and mustard and hemp until he hovered over the Karnali.

‘Kodiyamal, give up the baby, or prepare for a fight to the death!’ Harki said in a clear and loud voice which everybody heard. The gods Banpal, Betal and Mashto came out of hiding to watch, half-wishing that Kodiyamal would eat this upstart god, but also hoping that Harki would kill the demoness who had defeated them.

What Kodiyamal said in reply is too horrifying to write here, but it was arrogant enough that Harki dived into the waters of the Karnali. Their fight continued until the full moon of the month of Margh shone in the winter skies. After many hours of battle inside Kodiayamal’s underwater cave the river frothed with blood.

As the gods and the people of Thehe watched, the miraculous child flew out from the Karnali carrying the baby that he had torn out from Kodiyamal’s belly.

Having seen Harki’s strength, Rampal, Betal, Banpal and Mashto met to discuss Harki’s place in Thehe. They believed themselves to be superior to Harki, but they had been proven wrong when Harki killed Kodiyamal. After debating through the night, they came to him the next day.

‘You are a strong god,’ Rampal said reluctantly. ‘You may live here. During festivals, people will worship you before they worship me.’ Ever since then, the fourteenth day of the waxing moon, a night before the main festival, has been the day of the god Harki.

Aashe Pariyar, the \textit{dhami} for the god Harki, grew up and battled more demons from around the village, saw a thousand moons, and lived to the ripe old age of eighty-four. Since his passing, the god Harki has chosen men from among the descendants of Aashe Pariyar as his \textit{dhami}. If a person of the so-called ‘upper caste’ treats a Pariyar person
rudely, or cheats them out of wages, they remember that the
god of the Pariyars is a powerful god who killed a demoness
who had defied their four strong gods. The caste system
may treat the Pariyars of Thehe unfairly, but they have a god
among them who loves justice and fights for the weak, and
who doesn’t accept bullying.