

Ghori: an echo of deity and the Ethos of Kaliabor Region of Assam

Saswati Bordoloi

PhD Research Scholar, Dept. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University,
Assam, India

Abstract. Temples are regarded as the most sacred place among all the artefacts. The temple in India is originated as a place of cult centre or a place of worship. Temples are represented as a social organisation and a centre for economic and cultural activities. 'Shakti-Dham' Kamakhya temple of Assam, India has a glorious place in the religious field. Possession in Assam is a powerful kind of performance exists in many ways. 'Ghori' or 'Goxani Utha' is one kind of powerful performance has occurred in the Kamakhya temple of Silghat, Assam. This paper discusses aspects of spirit possession in relation to a particular festival celebrated annually in Kamakhya temple of Silghat, and the social ethos and folk beliefs of Kaliabor region and its impacts on society as well.

Keywords: Ghori, Goxani Utha, Kamakhya temple, Kaliabor, Folk beliefs

Correspondence author: Saswati Bordoloi, saswatibordoloi@gmail.com, Guwahati, India



This work is licensed under a CC-BY-NC

Introduction

'Mandir' or temple is a place where people can take a mental peace by worshipping or offering to gods and goddesses. Temples are regarded as the most sacred among all the artifacts, hence occupy a special place among Hindus. The temple in India originated as a place of worship or a cult centre (Sharma and Das p1). The temples are represented as social organization and also a centre for economic and cultural activities. The Kamakhya temple of Assam has a glorious place in the religious field. It is situated in Nilachal hill, Kamrupa district of Assam (Assam is situated in the North Eastern side of

India). But there is another *Sakti pith* (Goddess site) *Kamakhya* temple is also situated in the eastern side of Assam. It has also a glorious place in the religious as well as in the field of folklore. This paper an attempt has been made to highlight the festivals, ethos, and folk beliefs associated with the *Kamakhya* temple of Silghat.

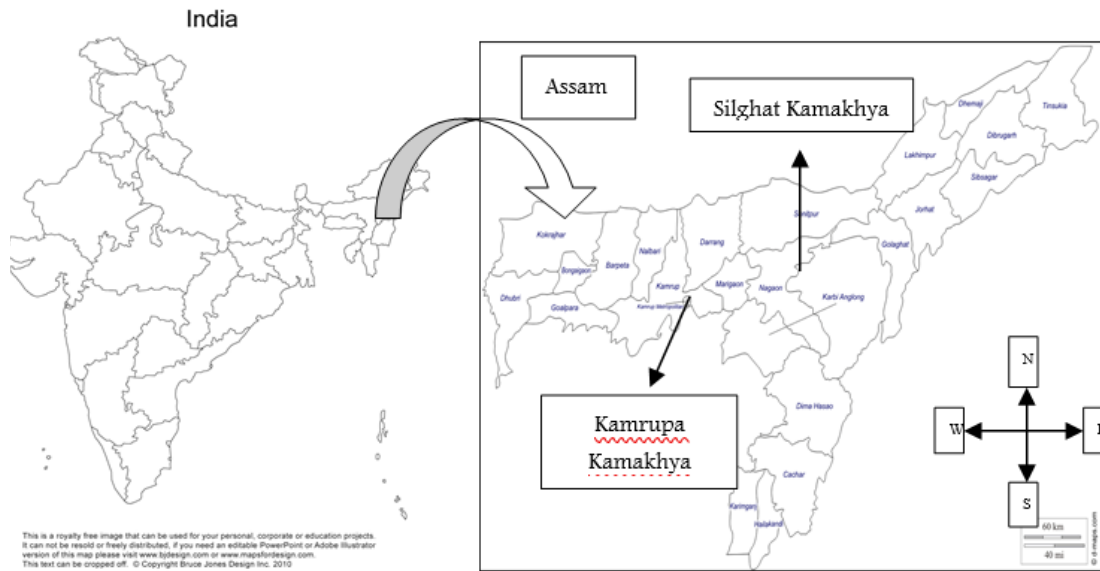


Fig. 1 Map of Assam

Methods

This paper is based on both the primary and secondary data. The method used was observation by visiting the Kamakhya temple and village, meeting the priest's family and villagers together with Ghori and asking questions based on a previously scheduled questionnaire. Secondary data sources are books, e-journals and e-sources etc. The collected data were analyzed using quantitative techniques for a clear exposition.

Result And Discussion

The Shakti pith (Goddess site) Kamakhya temple of Silghat: a brief history

Assam is a land of different tribes and cultural assimilation of different ethno cultural groups. This state is very rich in both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. A close look at the map of India reveals Assam as the first state of India's North-Eastern region. This Northeastern state of India shares its international borders with China, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. There is an ancient tradition of the mutual compatibility and history of the far-spreading river and its valley surrounded by mountains (Bhushan 65). Assam is a land of full natural passes, mountains, dense forests, jungles, huge and

terrible pits, inhabited lands, and slopes. It presents an attractive and pretty image due to its unique and incomparable natural beauty (Bhushan 67). Assam has a patriarchal society however women have their appropriate place. During various festivals, females dance and sing along with their male counterparts (Bhushan 81).

The *Kamakhya* temple is located in the eastern side of Assam in Kaliabor region. Kaliabor is a sub-division of Nagaon district of Assam situated at a distance of 54 km east of Nagaon town. Kaliabor occupies an important place in the annals of Assam history. The name '*Kaliabor*' owes its origin to the word "*Tun-Rung-Dam*", which means 'A Place of Black Big Trees' in the Tai language (*Tun* = Black, *Run* = Big, *Dam* = Tree). It is surrounded in the North by the Mighty Brahmaputra, in the South by lofty hills of Karbi Anglong district, in the East by Kaziranga National Park, which is world famous for one-horned rhino under Golaghat district and in the West by Samaguri under Nagaon Sadar Sub-Division.

The *Kamakhya* temple of Silghat (see figure 1 left) and the *Kamakha* village were established by the Ahom king Pramatta Singha in 1745. According to oral history, the king brought 15 families to serve in the temple and he donated the land to them. The Brahmin families were belonging to the famous *Kendukalai* clan of *Kamakhya* temple (see figure 1 right) at *Nilachal* hill (Valk). The priests who serve in the temple are the successors of those Brahmin families. The different role has played by other twelve families' successors, who were brought by the king for different temple related works. Some are treasures, others cook, prepare the ritual offering the '*prasad*', some play '*dhol*, '*khol*' (musical instruments), perform sacrifice ('*boli*'), and some clean the temple premises (Valk).

Oral history says, after wedding Lord *Shiva* and Goddess *Parvati* was staying here and the wedding night Goddess *Parvati* proved herself as she was *Sati* (form of Hindu Goddess *Durga* or *Bhagavati*) by showing the ten forms. The single form of *Kamakhya* crafted by lord *Viswakarma* and kept in *Nilachal* hill. It has found in history, Salastambha king Vanamala Dev (837-855 AD) who was live in the northern side of Brahmaputra River, he dreamt a dream and followed his dream and brought this image of *Kamakhya* from *Nilachal* to *Kamkut* (recent place of *Kamakhya* temple of Silghat). In 1745 Ahom king Pramatta Singha saw this place and image in his dream. He visited the place with his compatriots and rebuilt the temple. The king also brought and placed the image or the idol of Lord *Ganesha* and Goddess *Durga* (Valk).



Fig 1 Kamakhya temple of Silghat (left) and Kamakhya temple of Kamrup (right)

The festivals of Kamakhya temple of Silghat

Festival is an outer expression of a society. Festival is a hallmark of the intangible heritage (Hafstein). Folklorization deals with what have always been its ultimate objectives to change the ways in which people look at their own culture and how they define and practice it. People's life style and culture reflects through the festival. Performances are highly valued in a society, thus Beverly mentioned "most festival provides the opportunity for individual religious devotion or individual performance and this opportunity is a primary motive for the occasion" (Stoeltje 261). People are actively engaged in festivals. The active and huge number of participations means a lot in the festival. It can be described a combination of participation and performance in social phenomena. A festival shares a message of experience of group of people or society. The shared experience may be connected with myth, music or drama and it can be based on present social circumstances or may be connected with past. "Because festival brings the group together and communicates about the society itself and the role of the individual within it" (Stoeltje 263).

Durga Puja (Fig 3) is the biggest festivals of India. Mother Goddess *Durga* (Hindu Goddess) always remains a symbol of strength and power in Hindu mythology. It is popularly known that the creation of this Goddess was mooted with the motive of slaying the unbeatable demon called *Mahisasura*, who tried to destroy the peace of the deities living in heavenly creating mayhem his way ward and barbaric activities (Sharma and Das). *Durga* worship was held in Assam from ancient times. This religious festival is celebrated with great pomp and ceremonies and this tradition is been followed in the present days as well. During October-November month this festival is also celebrated in Kaliabor region and is worshipped Goddess *Durga* in *Kamakhya* temple at Silghat.



Fig 2 Goddess Durga



Fig 3 Goddess Kali



Fig 3 Goddess Basanti

Figure 2 show the picture is during Durga Puja festival, while figure 3 show Durga with form of Goddess *Bhagavati*. Another important festival of *Kamakhya* temple is *Kali Puja* (Fig 3). This festival is occurred generally in the moth of November. *Diwali*

the festival of light of India is associated with this *Kali Puja*. In the month of mid March (during the starting of spring session) *Basanti* (one form of Goddess Durga) *Puja* (Fig 3) is occurred in *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*. These three are main festivals of *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*.

The *Ghori*: an echo of deity

Possession in Assam is indeed a powerful kind of performance that in many ways subverts traditional gender identity (Urban). The *Ghori* is an important part of *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*. *Ghori* is an Assamese term, it's another form in Assamese language is 'Goxani utha' or 'Goxani Lombha' (Spirit Possession). The dance of *Ghori* is similar to *Deodhani nac* or *Deodhani nritya* of *Kamakhya* temple of *Nilachal* hill (Kamrup). The word *Deodhani* is derived from Sanskrit language and its meaning is 'sound or echo of the deity'(Burley). The dance of the *deodhas* is not erotic, but it is sensual in the broadest sense: in the sense, that it is emphatically bodily and earthy, assaulting the sensory organs of both performers' spectators. It is an energetic performative portrayal of divine possession (Burley). The energetic performance of *Ghori* is also similar with *Deodha*. The author mentioned in his article "in terms of possession of a person being entered by a deity which becomes reinterpreted at more "refined" cultural levels"(Burley). It can be said "a conception that emphasizes the practitioner's role in, for example, visualizing an image of one or more deities and thereby, as it were, manifesting the deity within the practitioner's mind." (Burley)

The *Ghori* is being active during *Maha Astami* (8th day of the ritual) and *Maha Navami* (9th day of the ritual of *Durga Puja*). But I observed on the tenth day (*Dasami*, 2019), the *Ghori* was active. Later on, the main priest has informed that the Goddess was informed something very important related to the ritual and the temple, hence she came into his body. A field work was done by me in 2013 and the informant (the *Ghori*) (Fig 9) informed that one day he dreamt a dream and one old lady was appeared in his dream and asked him to messenger of Goddess *Kamakhya* (Hindu Goddess, and form of *Bhagavati* and *Durga*). The *Ghori* (Nabin Bora is a *Ghori* of *Kamakhya* temple) informed that Goddess has chosen a pure soul and those who can do properly the work. The *Ghori* informed about the incident to the priest of temple and they offer a 'topola' (a holi plate) in front of Goddess *Kamakhya* and every festival of *Kamakhya* Temple (*Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja* and *Basanti Puja*) he has performed a role of messenger or can say a role of 'sound or echo of the deity'. Before possession, the *Ghori* behaves like a normal one but he informed just a moment of possession he feels a deep heart beat and he cannot control himself like a normal one and immediate he runs (his walk becomes faster) to the front of the image of Goddess *Kamakhya*. I observed this situation (2013 to 2019, and 2021. In the year of 2020, I was not in India, hence was not able to visit the *Kamakhya* temple) and after a moment he came from inside (where image or idol of Goddess *Kamakhya* is there) with a different mood.

The priest gives a garland on his head and he started to dance and in between he shouted like mourning. No one is allowed to come front of *Ghori* during possession time and not even allow entering the inside the room known as '*Garbha Griha*' where *Murtis* (images/statue/idol) of Goddess *Kamakhya* and *Durga* have. During dancing, the *Ghori* is completely in unconscious mind and has used the *Boli kata da* (holy sword) and the assigned people do the *Boli* (sacrifice the animal) during this moment. People start to play (who is appointed for the role of playing) *Dhol*, *Khol*, *Doba*, *Kaah* and *Taal* (see figure 8) and sing the devotional song:

Kamakhya Barada Devi
Parvata baxini
Tumihe Janani Maata
Durgati Naxini

(Goddess *Kamakhya*, who lives in the hill, you are the mother who can remove all the negativity.)



Fig 4 Ritual of *Navapatrik* inside the temple



Fig 5 The Priest is caring the *Navapatrika* for *Bisarjan*



Fig 6 Last Day of ritual People are ready to go for *Bisarjan* the *Navapatrika* in mighty Brahmaputra

Nava patrika puja (ritual of nine different plants) figure 4,5 and 6 is an important part of *Durga Puja*. But in the temple of *Kamakhya (Silghat)* only *Nava patrika puja* has occurred instead of statue or idol worship. The nine elements are beautifully covered by a red *saree*(cloth) and has worshipped from *Sashthi* to *Dasami*. There has a special significance of the seven (*Saptami*), eight (*Astami*) and nine (*Navami*) days in the *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*.



Fig 7 Nabin Borah, The *Ghori*



Fig 8 (musical instrument *khol* (left) and *taal* (right))

The ethos and folk beliefs related to *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*

Every society has the ethos and folk beliefs, and the tradition as well, and these ethos's, folk beliefs are transferring from one generation to another orally. A society can't stand without this orally transmitted ethos and folk beliefs. Even these elements of folklore reflect a society, a community. These elements are an integral part of society. People have been practicing this ethos from generation to generation, and there is no written evidence of these practices. The server mentioned in his article that "folk beliefs that have traditional as well as the local folk beliefs include beliefs and practices"(Sever). These practices have some ethics and value that tie into a society. Lauri Honk stated - "This much used and vaguely defined term has been applied to quite different traditional items. So that it might have a practical value, one should be able to define it based on some formal criterion. This criterion can be found in the fact that a belief normally states a matter in the form of a direct and general statement"(Honko). The *Kamakhya* temple has an important part of the *Kamakhya* village (the next village of *Silghat*, three kilometres far from the *Kamakhya* temple), and the name of the village has been adopted after the establishment of the *Kamakhya* temple. According to villagers of *Kamakhya* village, they are blessed by the Goddess *Kamakhya* and the temple. They respect the temple and all the festivals associated with the temple.

According to the villagers, a few years back the younger generations denied accepting the existence of Goddess *Kamakhya* and the *Ghori* tradition. Nabin Borah, the *Ghori* informed me, before the *Durga Puja* festivals, the Goddess asked to present all the younger in the temple. They followed accordingly, and during the *Ghori* dance, the possessed *Ghori* beat the entire younger one with the holy sword, but after a moment they noticed their bleeding automatically stopped from their wounded place, and after the incident, they believed the existence of Goddess *Kamakhya* and the '*Goxani parampara*' or '*Ghori parampara*' (the tradition of divine possession) as well.

According to another belief, one man brought the *deva badya* (divine instruments) *dhol* from the temple to his home, but after reaching home, the man heard the sound of *Goxani* (the Goddess *Kamakhya*, *Goxani* is an Assamese term of Goddess) in front of his gate and according to the villagers the Goddess cursed him for bringing the divine instrument from the temple to his home for practicing, which was not allowed, and after that incident, the villagers stopped to play *dhol* and *Bihu* dance during *Bohag Bihu* the main festival of the Assamese community. Another belief says, no one is allowed to see the conversation between *Ghori* and Goddess during the possession. But one woman was trying to peeping the situation in her menstrual period, and the Goddess punished her by turning her face badly and from this incident also the divine existence has been proved in front of the villagers.

These beliefs tie the society and these beliefs have stood upon the faith of Goddess *Kamakhya* and the temple. Villagers' faith is based on religion and these beliefs, and that's why here Sever says - "The religion, which has aimed a peaceful and contented betweenness of mankind during the period extending from the first ages until today, has maintained its power as a uniting and regulating power in the social life" (Sever). Because the ethos is born over religion and beliefs. The villagers give respect and follow the traditions which are associated with the Goddess *Kamakhya* and the *Kamakhya* temple. The female singers '*aayoti*' tries to please the Goddess *Kamakhya*. The male singers and the instrumental players also sing the devotional song during the divine possession and try to please Goddess *Kamakhya*. Without traditional attire, the villagers do not enter the temple. The priests and all the helpers take vegetarian feasts during festivals. The main priest takes fasting during the main festivals. Only associated people are allowed to touch the holy swords and divine instrumentals. Only priests are allowed to dress up the idols of Goddess *Kamakhya* and Goddess *Durga*. The women are not allowed to see the changing clothes of Goddess *Durga* on *Dasami Bisarjan* or *Vijaya Dasami* (the last day of *Durga* Puja). Only males are allowed to go for *Devi Bisarjan* or *Vijaya Dasami* ritual on a boat wearing traditional attire *dhoti* (cotton attire) and long sleeve *kurta* (shirt). Not even photographs and videos are allowed during divine possession. These ethos's have been following from generation by generation and villagers have been following happily and respectfully.

According Beverly J. Stoeltje's one statement, where the folklorist has mentioned very distinctly the structure of festival and characterized in event structures and social structures of participation. this statement relates with the activities of *Kamakhya* temple. The opening ceremony, dance, music, feast etc. are the essential part of a festival. Most of the festivals are associated with religion and the numbers of participants are shown the involvement, inner sight and emotions thru every festival. In fact, a festival is a portrait of everyday life of a society. In the festival of *Kamakhya* temple the opening ceremony is started with *aam paator mala* (garland of mango tree leaves), dance (when the *Ghori* dance in front of image of *Kamakhya* and *Durga*), *Dhol*, *Khol*, *Doba*, *Kaah*, *Taal* etc. musical instruments are used during dance. The *Aayoti* (ladies) in the figure 9 show

sing the holy song (*Naam*). The devotees can get the *Prasad* (which is offered fruits etc to the Goddess) and also *bhog* (this is also has offered to Goddess).

Valdimar stated festival is a hallmark of the intangible heritage. The traditions, the ritual, the ethos, the knowledge skill of villagers is associated with intangible heritage and everything is clearly reflected through the festivals of *Kamakhya* temple of Silghat. Beverly J. Stoeltje stated "Festivals are collective phenomena and serve purposes rooted in people's life. Systems of reciprocity and of shared responsibility ensure the continuity of and participation in the festival through the distribution of prestige and production." (Stoeltje 261). I have observed and found that this quote of Stoeltje is similar with the activities of festival of *Kamakhya* temple. A strong participation of people I have been observing since 2013 to 2019, and 2021 during *Durga Puja* (month of October).



Fig 9 The *Aayoti*, inside the temple

Conclusion

Kamakhya temple of Silghat has a remarkable place in Nagaon district of Assam, India. But somehow it is still unknown for a huge number of people of Assam. People from across India and even from outside of India still do not know properly about this temple. Most of the people know about the largest *Kamakhya* temple, which is situated in *Nilachal* hill, Kamrup (Guwahati). Although *Kamakhya* temple of *Kamkuta* hill, Silghat a prestigious temple and have associated a mythological story with this temple and even a relation also has with *Kamkhya* temple of Kamrup, but still somehow it is not so much known to all. Even people do not know about the *Ghori* or *Goxani utha* tradition. A huge number of people know about *Deodha nritya* (the dance of *Deodha*) of *Kamakhya* temple, Kamrup. I have observed, it is limited only within Nagaon district or can say a smaller number of people know about this prestigious temple. But from my observation and study want to add that this temple has a historic and archeological value. The songs

related to Goddess *Kamakhya* and *Durga* have a prestigious place in the field of folklore. The devotional songs should be preserved properly.

Acknowledgements

I hereby acknowledge my PhD exchange program supervisor Prof. Ülo Valk and senior research fellow Anastasiya Astapova of University of Tartu, Estonia, who reviewed my draft and helped and guided as well. I also send my gratitude to the informants and villagers of *Kamakhya* village along with the priests of *Kamakhya* temple who helped me to write this manuscript.

Notes

1. In *Navapatrika puja* three crops, three fruits and three flowers are worshipped. Three crops are like *dhan* (rice), *haladhi* (turmeric) and *mankachu* (one leafy crop); three fruits are like *kol* (banana), *bael* (stone apple or wood apple) and *dalim* (pomegranate) and three flowers are like *Ashok*, *Jayanti* and *Aparajita* (these are the local names). *Navapatrika puja* (worship of nine elements like crops, fruits and flowers) can be said that a symbol of worshipping the earth and its elements.
2. The nine days are known as *Navaratra*, where people worship Goddess *Durga* but main ritual is started from *bel baran* (a ritual, where the stone apple tree is worshipped) day and it is known as *Sashthi* (6th days) and is ended at *Dasami* (the tenth day). There is a mythological story behind this *Navaratra*. To kill the *Mahisasura* the demon, Goddess *Durga* (form of *Sati*, wife of Lord *Shiva*) was coming from heaven. The entering day of Goddess *Durga* to *Prithvi* (earth) is known as *Mahalaya* (First day of *Navaratra*) and she was started *yuddha* (the fight) with *Mahisasura*. The fight was ended at *Dasami* with the dead of *Mahisasura*.
3. The plate is filled with *Manani* of betel nut and betel leaves.
4. *Boli* is a *Parampara* (tradition) at *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*. But not only *Silghat*, this tradition has been running from the very ancient period in different places of Assam. Specially in *Durga Puja*. But sometimes in *Kali Puja* (during November) also this tradition has occurred. People do sacrifice specially goats, buffalos, ducks and pigeons. People sometimes instead of doing sacrificing the pigeons, they offer in front of the deities and leave them inside the temple. In *Kamakhya* temple of *Silghat*, people do sacrifice the *Chagoli* (goats) and *Komora* (white gourd).

5. *Khol* (one kind of drum), *Doba* (one kind of drum), *Kaah* (one kind of cymbal) and *Taal* (one kind of cymbal) are folk musical instruments of Assam. People usually play during worshipping or praying time. But the *Khol* is used in *Sattriya* dance (a dance form) and *Borgeet* (one kind of song) introduced by Saint Sankardeva.
6. Bhaskar Pratim Barthakur, successor of priest (Tarun Barthaur) family has given this song. He and his younger brother Jyotirmoy Barthakur played a very prestigious role during these days. They (both are well educated, Bhaskar is an engineer) happily played their roles like playing musical instruments and offering *Prasad* and *Bhog* etc.
7. The *bhog* is prepared by rice and *dal* (split pulses)

References

- Bhushan, Chandra. *Assam: Its Heritage and Culture*. Gyan Publishing House, 2005.
- Burley, Mikel. "Dance of the Deodhās: Divine Possession, Blood Sacrifice and the Grotesque Body in Assamese Goddess Worship." *Religions of South Asia*, vol. 12, no. 2, Apr. 2019, pp. 207–33, <https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.36287>.
- Hafstein, Valdimar Tr. "Intangible Heritage as a Festival; or, Folklorization Revisited ." *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 131, no. 520, 2018, pp. 127–49, muse.jhu.edu/article/691715.
- Honko, Lauri. "Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, vol. 1, no. 1/2, 1964, p. 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3814027>.
- Sever, Mustafa. "Religion and Folk Beliefs." *Journal of World of Turks*, vol. 3, no. 1, Apr. 2011.
- Sharma, Navamallika, and Madhusree Das. "Priests and Practices: Understanding the Socio-Religious Scenario of Kamakhya Temple." *Clarion: International Multidisciplinary Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2015.
- Stoeltje, Beverly J. "Festival." *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, 1992, pp. 261–71.
- Urban, Hugh B. "Dancing for the Snake: Possession, Gender, and Identity in the Worship of Manasā in Assam." *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, Nov. 2018, pp. 304–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hiy011>.
- Valk, Ülo. "Shrines, Stones, and Memories: The Entangled Storyworld of a Goddess Temple in Assam." *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 4, Oct. 2017, pp. 508–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2017.1371503>.