

## CHAPTER V

# CONCLUSION

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The preceding pages are an attempt at reconstructing the history and culture of Mayong based on the available sources, viz; archaeology, literary, and field study of the living tradition of folk rituals and practices. Mayong is situated in Morigaon district in Assam, and is bounded by the Brahmaputra river in the north, Karbi Anglong district in the south, Nagaon district in the east, and Kamrup Metropolitan district in the west. It is located at a distance of 40 kms from Guwahati and 45 kms from the Morigaon district headquarter. The political and administrative history of Mayong underwent various changes at different periods in history. At present, there is a Revenue Circle, Development Block and Gaon Panchayat by the same name. This research focuses on the Mayong Gaon Panchayat, although the areas within the boundary of the present Mayong Revenue Circle and Development Block will be studied to the extent necessary to reconstruct the history of Mayong. It is significant to note that the erstwhile Mayong kingdom is at present confined to nineteen villages under the jurisdiction of the Mayong Gaon Panchayat and has a total population of 12,044 individuals [*Census of India: 2011*]. Prior to the advent of the British to the Brahmaputra Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, central Assam was ruled by many petty kings and each of the kingdoms existed as a political unit. The modern history of Assam was to witness Nagaon and Morigaon districts being ceded to the East India Company with the signing of The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826 CE).

Mayong is perhaps best known as the 'land of black magic.' In fact, mainly due to the association of Mayong with magic, Assam as such was known to the outside world as a land of sorcerers, and it is said that even invaders thought it necessary to bring with them some religious preceptors to resist the evil impact of the black magic of sorcerers. Mayong exemplifies a place rich in folk belief system although it came to be influenced by institutionalised religions such as Saivism, Saktism, and Neo-Vaisnavism propagated by Sankaradeva and his followers in Assam. It is, therefore, a fertile ground to explore aspects of continuity and change of its history and culture, particularly against the background of it having existed as a kingdom in the past, the socio-economic developments as a Gaon Panchayat, and the cross-cultural interactions in different periods of Assam history. Although there have been some works dealing on aspects of Mayong, the available literature reveals that the history and culture of Mayong has not been documented in a comprehensive manner within the framework of historical methodology. The importance of this approach cannot be overemphasized when the rich folklore tradition of Mayong has most often been uncritically narrated as Mayong History. It is crucial to note that myths and legends must be understood in contradistinction to history. The central issue is to examine why a certain myth became popular at a particular point in time. Folklore narratives must be subjected to a comparative analytical method alongside all available sources for a meaningful understanding of the subject.

The objective of this study is to document the history of this area and to gain insights into the magic lore, *mantras* and folk rituals to understand the implications in contemporary society. The study covers the period from the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE to the contemporary period. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE, that a

Dimasa Kachari<sup>1</sup> prince Suinat Singha had started a line of dynasty which was to rule the Mayong kingdom till the advent of the British. This year of accession to the throne is a significant reference for documenting the history of the erstwhile kingdom. It must be mentioned that the landscape of medieval Assam was dominated by many petty kingdoms which included the Koches, Chutiyas, and Kacharis among others. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE the Ahoms had become powerful and as a result of political turmoil, the Dimasa Kacharis were driven from the fertile river valley towards the southern direction whence they reached Maibong, situated in the erstwhile North Cachar Hills. By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Dimasas further retreated to the Cachar plains and made Khaspur their capital. The emergence of the Mayong kingdom is closely linked to the history of migration of the Dimasa Kacharis who established a long line of kingship in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the year 2005 CE, the coronation ceremony of the present titular king Tarani Singha Raja was organised by following the traditional rituals.

Mayong history prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE may be understood within the general narratives of Nagaon and Morigaon districts in the Pragjyotisha kingdom of Ancient Assam. Mayong history becomes clearer during medieval Assam when it emerges as a petty kingdom and established political relations with the Ahom kingdom (1228-1826 CE). The king was the fountainhead of the monarchical form of government prevalent in Mayong. The *Vamsawali* refers to

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<sup>1</sup> The Dimasas were the ruling tribe of the Kachari kingdom; and they were also known as Dimasa Kacharis. It is believed that some Kacharis left Kamarupa kingdom due to political turmoil and crossed the Brahmaputra river; hence the name Dimasa, meaning “sons of the river”. At Maibang, the Dimasa Kachari kings came under the influence of Brahmanas. By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Brahmanas began to extend considerable influence in the royal court.

different types of officials, who had assisted the king in the decision making process. Suinat Singha, the founder of the kingdom settled many families with particular professions which must have helped in the establishment of the new kingdom. It was during the reign of Ahom king Sutamla or Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663 CE) that Mir Jumla had launched a massive strike in Assam and the Ahom soldiers had resorted to Kajali after the loss of Saraighat and Pandu forts. During the rule of the Ahom King Suhungmung, the kingdom became very powerful and it expanded to include a vast geographical area extending up to Kajalimukh. S.K. Bhuyan<sup>2</sup> commented that Mayang (Mayong) enjoyed complete autonomy in its internal administration, in the same manner as other vassal kingdoms, such as Darrang, Rani, Beltola, Luki, Barduar, Bholagaon, Mairapur, Pantan, Bangoon, Bagaduar, Dimarua, Nelli, Gobha, Sahari, Dandua, Barepujia, Topakuchia, Khaigharia, Panbari, Sora, Dhing, Tetelia, Salmara, Garakhia, Baghargaon and Bhurbandha. The Ahom rulers maintained friendly relations with these vassal kingdoms and each vassal chief was bound to provide a stipulated number of *paiks* to work on the king's account, or deposit the commutation money if relaxation from personal service was granted. During the time of war the vassal *raja* was expected to provide personal service.<sup>3</sup>

The geographical area that once existed as the kingdom of Mayong is at present inhabited by different ethnic communities such as the Kacharis, Karbis, Keots, Koches, Yogis or Naths, and Kalitas etc. The demographic pattern of Mayong may be understood against the movement and re-location of the people in and around Morigaon district as a result of land erosion and regular floods

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<sup>2</sup> S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo- Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, DHAS, Guwahati, Assam, 1949, pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

caused by the Brahmaputra river. There are different views regarding the identity of the original inhabitants of Mayong and one of the dominant views makes Dimasa Kacharis the first community to have migrated and occupied the land. Legends trace the history of Mayong Kingdom to a Dimasa Kachari prince named Sunat Singha, who is said to have left his birth place due to some family feuds and arrived at Mayong in search of new settlement. The people belonged to the Bodo ethnic community and spoke the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Another version suggests that the Karbis were already there in the Bargaon (later Burhamayong) village, when Sunyata Singha had reached Mayong. It is crucial to mention here that many ethnic communities in Assam do not possess a script of their own, and therefore, the oral traditions remain a major source for reconstructing their history. During field study the inhabitants of the village Burhamayong claimed that they are the original inhabitants of the area on the side of the Mayong hill. They claim that the other villages were settled in the area later on different periods of time. Burhamayong village was once known as Bargaon or large village due to its extensive population. The ruling family had shifted from Burhamayong to another place known as Rajamayong.

Culture refers to characteristic patterns of language, customs, beliefs, traditions, and ways of communication shared by members of a society. The culture of Mayong is steeped in magical charms with widespread use of *mantras* for traditional healing practices. They were extensively used for curing diseases in the state.<sup>4</sup> The ritual specialists who practice sorcery and the art of healing are called *Bez* and they are believed to possess supernatural powers. In Mayong

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2008, (Fourth Indian Reprint), p. 292.

society where magic and witchcraft played an important role in the lives of the people, the attempts at finding solutions to disease and health led them to find traditional methods of healing. The *mantraputhis* or *mantra* manuscripts contain hymns, charms and traditional treatment methods for various health related problems such as fevers, rheumatic pains, hepatitis, snake-bite and several other diseases. A *mantra* may be described as a sacred utterance, numinous sound, or word or group of words considered having spiritual and psychological powers. The *mantras* were handed down by word of mouth; though some have also been written down and preserved in written form. It may be mentioned that all *mantras* are not intelligible. Yet, apart from its value as a source for traditional knowledge, there are significant inferences that can be drawn by studying the script, words and language. A comparative study of the *mantraputhis*, with materials collected through oral interviews with the practitioners of the area and with people who experienced the impact of *mantras* helps to fill gaps in the reconstruction of Mayong history. In a largely agricultural economy, the *mantras* were also used to protect the fields from ‘evil eye’, and also for prosperity of home and harvest.<sup>5</sup> A study of the *mantraputhis* reveal that the mention of names of Brahmanical gods and goddesses in the manuscript indicate that the people of Mayong had cultural interaction with people belonging to Brahmanical faith.

The *Bez* in Mayong claim that they are interested to practise their traditional knowledge only for the welfare of the society and not to harm others.<sup>6</sup> However, some of them revealed that they had the knowledge of incantations and its usage for the purpose of harming people and yet have not applied it on any

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015.

individual.<sup>7</sup> They claim that the reason for not practising black magic is because such practices are supposed to bring misfortune to the family of the practitioner and the ill effects include physical ailments, sudden demise of children or insanity to their progenies.<sup>8</sup> It may be mentioned that the advent of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism in Mayong is said to have provided a check towards the practice of black magic, since the preceptor had opposed such practices. The *Kamratna Tantra* is an 18<sup>th</sup> century work which contains prescribed guidelines of *tantra*, *mantra* and *yantra* composed by traditional practitioners and how to use the charms. The medicines are to be prepared from herbs which have to be collected during a particular season and it is to be used along with the prescribed *mantras*. The *jantras* are charms in the form of diagrams depicted or engraved on paper, stones or on metal which is considered sacred and worshipped as an image. As different *mantras* are applied with different goals similarly the *jantras* also differs according to the specific purpose. Therefore, *jantras*<sup>9</sup> are different designs conforming to the object of worship. *Tantras* are in fact related to the Sakti cult and it bears mystical and magical formulae.

The history of Mayong is closely linked to the prevalence and practice of Tantricism. The shrine located on Mayong hill is known as Mayong Kamakhya which associates itself with a myth connected to the well known Kamakhya temple on Nilachala hill. The myth makes Mayong a sacred abode of Kamakhya. The belief is that Narakasura prohibited the performance of Tantric practices in

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<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with Tilak Hazarika, 65 yrs, Retired Teacher , L.P. School, Loonmati on 23/01/2016.

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview with Deben Saikia, 72 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Sativeti, Mayong, on 23/05/2017.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix VII, B.

the Kamakhya temple at Nilachala hill after he was deceived by the goddess in his attempt to marry her. Thus it was at Mayong that Tantric practices were carried out secretly for fear of Narakasura. Kamarupa is one of the best known Shakta shrines in India, and the temple is known for Tantric sacrifices, mysticism and sorcery. The goddess Kamakhya is closely associated with the religious site itself and is often referred to as Kamarupa-Kamakhya.<sup>10</sup> The two principal Sanskrit works viz; *Kalika-Purana* and *Yogini-Tantra* are important literary sources for Sakti worship in Assam. The birth place of Saktism is considered to be in the north-eastern region of India (Assam and Bengal) where it still holds ground. This sect is believed to have been the most widely popular in Kamarupa by the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE to which period is assigned its chief scripture known as the *Kalika-Purana*. The association of Saktism with Tantricism is well established fact. Kamarupa is a well known *pitha*, where Durga (the daughter of Himalaya) is believed to be always present. According to Hindu mythology, the places where pieces of Sati's dead body fell are said to have become *pithas* or *asanas* i.e. holy seats of the mother goddess. There is also a belief that the organ of the divine mother (*Maar-ongo*) fell in the area, after which the land came to be known as Mayong.<sup>11</sup> Yet, another myth narrates that Mayong represents a seat of the goddess where the upper part of her body/chest fell. After the death of Sati at the house of her father Daksha, Siva is said to have roamed the earth with the corpse of Sati. During this period of intense grief the other gods attempted in different ways to console Shiva though in vain. Then, they approached Visnu to bring Siva to sanity. Lord Vishnu with his Sudarshana Chakra cut the lifeless

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<sup>10</sup> D.C. Sircar, *The Sakta Pithas*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Lokendra Hazarika, *Mayangar Itihas*, *op. cit.*, p.11.



body of his consort Sati into fifty-two pieces which fell to different areas of earth. Each of these places came to be known as a Sakti *pitha*. In each of the *pithas* she is believed to be constantly living in some form together with a Bhairava i.e. a form of her husband, Siva. The religious crystallization seems to have taken place originally on the basis of a group of four *pithas* at a time which may coincide with the appearance of the early *Tantras*. The four main *pithas* represent the four cardinal points of the earth, and Kamarupa enjoyed a privileged position.

The pantheon of gods in Mayong history reveal that Brahmanical deities were worshipped much in the same way as the early history of religion in Ancient Assam. The prevalence of Sakti worship is indicated by sculptural remains found in Mayong.<sup>12</sup> The coming of neo-Vaisnavite faith in medieval period led to setting up of *Sattras* and *Namghars*. The Paramartha Parishad established by Sri Sri Sonaram Talukadardeb propounded a simplistic religious philosophy. It was a protest against the elaborate rituals of Brahmanical faith and became popular in the area. In this context it is noteworthy that the advent of Vaisnavite movement in Mayong may have played a major role to check the spread of black magic in the society.

The knowledge acquired by the folk healers is gathered through experience of practical application of the traditional herbs generation after generation.<sup>13</sup> The individuals who are interested to learn about the folk medicines of Mayong are bound to approach a *Bez* for learning the trade.<sup>14</sup> The folk healers of Mayong are cautious about any kind of misuse of their knowledge. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix VII, A.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview with Ganesh Ojah, 65 yrs, Farmer, Burhamayong on 11/01/2018.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with Tilak Hazarika, 65 yrs, Retired Teacher, Chanaka Ganeshpur L.P. School, Loonmati on 23/01/2016

a *Bez* does not willingly share the knowledge to any individual not known to him.<sup>15</sup> A learner must have the patience and dedication to get the confidence of the *Bez* and the period of learning may vary from a few months to a few years. The duration of apprentices varies depending upon the ability of the learner to grasp the trade. Therefore, it may vary from a few months to a few years. In this context Dilip Kumar Kalita had mentioned about one of his interviews with a *Bez* of twenty three years old who had claimed to be learned as an apprentice for twelve years, since the age of eleven years old and observed the experience as incredible.<sup>16</sup>

The healers of Mayong get respect in the area for their service in the society. That the women folk healers also played the same role as the male folk healers, which may indicate about the importance attached to women in a largely traditional society in the erstwhile Mayong kingdom. The practice of sorcery known as *ban* (*ban*: arrow) which may be of positive or negative nature, was practised in Mayong. Dilip Kumar Kalita<sup>17</sup> explains as thus: “...in the art of *bezali*, it is an act of magic work upon somebody with the help of *mantras* and certain objects through rituals. The act of inflicting magic is likened to shooting of arrows against the victims.” It is believed that there are different types of *bans* practised by the *Bez* which include *Bishali ban*, *Purush ban*, *Godha ban*, *Rashmi ban*, *Thumuri ban*, *Lengra ban* etc. For instance the *muhini bans* are applied for fascinating others. In practising the *ban*, the *Bez* makes a representative image of a man and puts a straw on the image which is supposed to be the replica of the

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<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with Malati Saikia, 74 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Ouguri on 21/01/2016.

<sup>16</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

victim. Once the *ban* is believed to be a success, the person against whom it was applied is expected to fall ill, and there would be no remedy for the same which can save the victim from the sufferings. The objects used in this field by a sorcerer includes the victim's nail, the fallen hair, a piece of used cloth, dried flesh of birds and animals, skin of certain animals, bones of fish, animals and men, along with thorns of certain species of plants and trees.<sup>18</sup> Some of these objects are charmed with hymns and then buried in sorcery. Another technique of sorcery deploys an evil spirit called *Bira*, said to be captured, domesticated and maintained as a pet by a practitioner. They are believed to take the form of rats and they stay in the house of the owner. Sacrifices also are offered occasionally to keep them under control. The *Bez*, as the owner of the *bira* possesses the authority to depute a *bira* against a particular individual. It was believed that a *Bez*, may maintain several *biras* depending upon his capability to maintain them under strict surveillance. D.K. Kalita refers to two instances of damages caused by *biras*, one at Sualkuchi near Guwahati and another at Diphu in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Treatment of diseases is one of the main functions of the folk healers of Mayong. The practitioners use traditional knowledge of local flora and fauna as medicines which include fruits, flowers, herbs, animal fat, animal flesh, and various types of fish.<sup>19</sup>

The persons involved in the practice of healing were bound to maintain a self controlled and ethical life. They believe that improper use of their traditional knowledge will bring misfortune to them and their family.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, they emphasise on considering it as a service to the humanity; not as a profession for

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix IV.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Khangeswar Kalita, *Bez* and Farmer, Loonmati on 18/01/2015.

financial or material progress. They believe in the purity of mind and body is required for the efficacy of their practices. The practitioners take bath in the morning and then offer prayers to the almighty before involving in the chosen field. It is important to note that the practitioners are expected to maintain control over their sensual impulses. They practitioners are expected to have control over their minds; else there is every possibility of misuse of the knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Their temperament should be a mild one. They believe that they should not misuse the power of their knowledge for the benefit of their trifle personal material gains. They are expected to be readily available to provide assistance whoever comes to a *Bez* seeking his assistance.

Traditional festivals constitute, symbolically, a renewal of the past in the present, a way of recalling the origins - whether mythical or historical, of a community. Apart from entertainment, festivals help to stabilize society and also act as a training ground for both youths and adults. The traditional games and competitions often constitute its energizing moment which display and encourage skills such as strength, endurance, and precision, required in daily work and martial engagements. Gender dynamics and issues of women's roles in society are also implicit in the performing arts and economic participation of the societies. The communities in Mayong celebrate many festivals which include Bahag Bihu, Magh Bihu, Kaati Bihu, Domahi, Goshai Uliua Mela, Maal Goshai Puja, Ambubachi or Saath, and Holi etc. These festivals may broadly be categorized according to their primary characteristics, duration and spatiality - into religious, agricultural, and socio-cultural festivals.

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<sup>21</sup> Personal interview with Ramayan Deka, 58 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Chanaka on 22/12/2017.

The Goshain Uliua Utshab is a festival which was sponsored by the titular king of Mayong and began to celebrate from the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. The festival has been celebrated from the fourth to the sixth day of the Assamese month of *Bahag*. It was initiated by Sarascha Chandra Singha, the tenth king of the Mayong dynasty. The king had visited the holy place of *Nabadeep* for pilgrimage and on return from the trip; he installed the statue of Basudeba at the royal house, performed rituals by the royal priest and began to worship it.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, another, four statues were handed over to four competent persons of the Yogi community of the village for maintaining it in their respective houses. These four persons were known as *Medhis* and were entrusted with the responsibility to keep the images in safe custody and perform religious rituals. Thus, the five statues, which are worshipped in five different places are brought together once a year and worshipped together on the occasion of the Goshai Uliua Utshab or *Mela*. In the second day i.e. the fifth day of *Bahag*, these statues are being carried to the *Panchagoshai thaan* (shrine of five gods) at Hatimuria village. Here, the four statues maintained by the four medhis of the Yugi community are carried to the *Bamun Goshai thaan* at the Rajamayong village altogether. At the same time the people of the Karbi community carries the statue of the Basudeba *Goshain* from the house of the king. They are adorned in their traditional attire. Moreover, they perform traditional dance of the Karbis with the sword and shield. When the procession arrives at the *thaan* of the Rajamayong village, the procession is joined by those other statues in the palanquin. It is important to note that the fairs which were organised in various petty kingdoms in central Assam were

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<sup>22</sup> Manthir Saikia, "Mayongar Rajaghararia Parampara- Eak Sangkhipta Abalukan", in Utpal Nath (ed.), *Kalshila*, A Souvenir, 12<sup>th</sup> biennial conference of Morigaon Jila Sahitya Sabha held at Mayong, 2010, pp. 29-32.

integrated symbolically each year through the performance of the festival. These kingdoms where the festival took place were Mayong, Gobha, Dimarua, *Saturaja* (7 kingdoms) and *Pachuraja* (5 kingdoms).

The *Junbeel Mela* associated with the *Magh Bihu* is secular in character. It is celebrated under the auspices of the Gobha King. It provides an opportunity of assimilation among the people living in the plains with the people living in the hills. The barter system is an important feature of the *Junbeel Mela*. Some other important *Melas* of the central Assam are *Goshain Uliua Mela*, *Bangia Mela*, *Eakhorahi Mela*, *Talou Mela*, *Borno Mela* etc. The *Junbeel mela* is celebrated on the banks of the rivulet named Jun and it is believed that it was initiated by the first Gobha king. The festival is attended by people and king of the neighbouring kingdoms including the king of Jayantias.<sup>23</sup> The Jayantias king visits the festival in order to collect taxes. The Tiwas living under the Pachurajas celebrate the *Bihu* on Tuesday and Wednesday instead of the Sankranti. While the Tiwas living at Gobha and Nelli performs it on Saturday and Sunday. The Gobha kings follow a matrilineal system and lineage is traced through son of the sister of a ruling king. The Gobha people lived in the hills and in fact migrated from places where the Jayantias settled. The Tiwas, Jayantias and others from the nearby hills of Meghalaya participate regularly in the *Junbeel mela*.<sup>24</sup> Up to the rule of the Gobha king Komal Singha, the Jayantia king had regularly participated in the *Junbeel Mela*. There is another version that till the annexation of the Gobha

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<sup>23</sup> S.K. Bhuyan (compiled, ed. and trans.), *Jaintia Buranji (A Chronicle on Ahom - Jayantia Political Relations with Short Accounts of the Neighbouring States)*, DHAS, Guwahati, 2012, (Third Edition), pp. 82-83.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with Deep Singh Deoraja, 28 yrs, Titular king of the erstwhile Gobha kingdom, Rajakuchi, Jagiroad on 06/01/2018.

kingdom by the British, the Jayantia king had regularly visited this festival. The *Junbeel mela* has always an important role in the economy of the region. The people living under other petty kingdoms of the region were also influenced by it.

The community fishing forms an important activity among of the people of Mayong as well as other kingdoms in central Assam. Fishing is done collectively at the time of *Magh Bihu*. In the Gobha kingdom people used to participate in community fishing at the rivulets called *Jun Beel* and *Khala beel*. The king of Dimarua<sup>25</sup> performed it on the banks of the rivulet *Parakhali beel* on the day before *Bihu* or *Uruka*. The *Maroi puja* was an important popular festival in Mayong and some other petty kingdoms of this region. In the Dandua kingdom also *Maroi* or *Manasha puja* was quite popular. The *mantras* were extensively used in this *puja* and both Hindus and Muslims participated in it. The kingdom of Kumoi had also organised *Maroi puja* where there have been instances of participation by the Muslims in Assam. The festival for worshipping of Sun god is celebrated as *Saat Puja* in different parts of the country. In Mayong, the festival is mainly celebrated among the new settlers from Bihar in the Chanaka village. The worship of goddess Kali is also performed in Mayong and there is a separate Kali-than at the Rajamayong village in Assam. It is possible to assume that the public rituals seek to repeatedly instil in the minds of the people the constant need for a stable, peaceful relation among the once existed petty kingdoms. The complex and intricate relationships between the units are worked out in these festivals.

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<sup>25</sup> Personal interview with Holisingh Rahang, 50 yrs, Titular king of erstwhile Dimarua kingdom, Bamphar, Khetri, Kamrup on 06/01/2018.

In the spring season, the festival of *Bahag Bihu* is celebrated at Mayong. The festival is known for the agricultural activities and is organised during the harvesting season in Assam. The *Ambubachi* is celebrated every year in the month of *Ahar* from the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the month, and is called *Saath mela*. The main ritual takes place at Kamakhya temple when the shrine remains closed for the days when the goddess is believed to have menstruation. Another important festival of the area is the *Holi* or the festival of colour. According to the *Gurucharit*, the *Holi* festival was first introduced in Assam by Sankaradeva. In Mayong, *Holi* is celebrated with full vigour. On the day people offer the colours to the bed or seat in the *Namghars* and *Sattras*. The womenfolk arrange *Ghosha Kirtan* and play with colours. At night in certain places people arrange *Bhaonas* or traditional dramas. In Mayong the *Holi* festival arranged at Garanga temple is a major attraction for people from other parts of Morigaon and nearby Kamrup district. People extensively use colours in the festival. Before applying the colours there it is a tradition to give the colour on the foot first as a token of respect and then only apply it on the face or in the head. An important festival of the Karbi community which is associated with agriculture is the *Ranker puja*. It is celebrated on the first Tuesday of the month of *Fagun* and dedicated to their god Dehal. The god is worshipped for the welfare of the cultivators to enhance the productivity of land and seeking the welfare of all. This festival is dedicated to the gods such as, Burha Goshain, Mahadeu, Nualukar, Balia Mahong, Namseng, Baragopal, and Bamungoshai etc.

For the people of Mayong, Krisna occupies an important position among the gods in the Hindu pantheon. Janmastami is celebrated each year on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the month of *Bhada*. Besides, religious prayers and *Naam Prasangas* are



performed in all *Naamghars* of the area during the entire month of *Bhada*. The month is considered sacred as Sankardeva had born during this month in 1449 CE. In connection with the festival different cultural programs are arranged in the village *Namghars* of the area. The inhabitants of the respective villages assemble in the village *Namghars* with the objective to celebrate the occasion. The *Nam Prasanga* and classical dramas are arranged in this connection. The Neo-Vaisnavite movement was initiated by Sankardeva in Assam. The spiritual movement initiated by him during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE had touched even the remotest areas of the state. Mayong was also influenced by the ideology propagated by Sankaradeva and the *Sattras* and *Namghars* have been established in Mayong. He attempted to wipe away the social evils by his activities and ideology set during his lifetime. He was born at Barduwa in the erstwhile Nagaon district; and Mayong was a part of the same district.

In Mayong the festival of Lakhmi Puja is organised more extensively in comparison to the Durga Puja. There is a large temple for worshipping goddess Lakhmi at Hatimuria. The Viswakarma puja is also celebrated in Mayong. People of different professions like craftsman, artisans and smiths pray for attaining success in their respective fields. The celebration of Durga puja gained popularity in the region with the coming of some new settlers from eastern Bengal and Nepal. Through a process of assimilation it has become another feature of the cultural life of the area. The goddess Durga is known by different names such as *Dashabhuj*, *Mahishmardini*, *Kaityaani*, *Dikkarabashini* etc. The festival is performed in the autumn season. The festival for worshipping of Sun god is celebrated as *Saat Puja* in different parts of the country. In Mayong, the festival is mainly celebrated in Chanaka Ganeshpur village. The festival of light

i.e. *Deepawali* is also celebrated in Mayong. The *Raas* festival is celebrated in the autumn season and cultural programmes are organised in different villages of the area. Lord Ganesha is also worshipped as *Ganapati*, *Bighneswara*, *Bighniraj* or *Vinayaka*. The rock-cut Ganesha images found in the area indicate the antiquity of the cult in the society.<sup>26</sup>

There are certain other rituals which are intricately connected with the agrarian life. The rituals like *Guch dia*, *Nara Singa*, *Na-Khua*, *Bhekuli Bia* etc. are connected to the folk belief system of Mayong. The *Na Khua* is generally performed in the month of *Aghun*. Prior to the festival, the peasants don't give cereals to others; nor sell the crops. Certain communities prepare traditional liquor from the new grains and guests are invited. The food prepared from the new crops is served to the guests. The goddess *Sitala* is worshipped to give relief from diseases in the summer season. The *Garakhia Sewa* is organised for taking the blessings of five, seven or nine young boys by the family of a patient in the belief that they will bless and cure the patients. *Garakhia Sabah* festival is celebrated at the grazing fields or in a village under a large tree where *naamkirtan* is performed.<sup>27</sup> Since the agrarian society of Mayong is dependent upon the rain for agriculture, the *Bhekuli Bia* rituals are intended to bring abundant rainfall.

The early history of Mayong may be understood against the background of political and cultural context of Pragjyotisha kingdom in ancient Assam. Mayong emerges as one of the petty kingdoms of medieval Assam during the

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<sup>26</sup> See Appendix VII, A..

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview with Prasanna Medhi, 49 yrs, Teacher at Pakariapar L.P. School (Pabhakati), Sildubi on 22/01/2019.

time of the Ahoms when it maintained diplomatic relations with the neighbouring kingdoms<sup>28</sup> and also the Ahom dynasty. The administrative organization has been restructured with the advent of the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, and is now a Development Block in Morigaon district of Assam. The available sources such as the *vamsawali* and inferences from *Buranji* and archaeological evidence reveal that Mayong existed as an independent kingdom since the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, the line of kings continued to rule up to the advent of the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, and the last titular king of the erstwhile kingdom was crowned in 2005 CE. The demographic pattern of Mayong reveals a multi-ethnic composition and the Karbis claim that they were the original inhabitants of Mayong. However, the Dimasa Kacharis are credited with having established a long line of kings, as recorded in the *vamsawali*.

It may be surmised that due to ecological implications of the flood-prone place, being situated on the banks of the river Brahmaputra and affected by regular floods and land erosion - the Kacharis, Karbis, Keots, Koches, Kalitas, Tiwas or Lalungs, and Naths or Yogis etc. came to settle in Mayong at different periods of history. This movement of people to Mayong facilitated cross-cultural interaction of the various communities and have resulted in the co-existence of the different groups without any conflict. The social organization of Mayong society does not indicate prevalence of a strong clan system although several ethnic groups are there in the area. In this respect, it is important to mention that

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<sup>28</sup> Personal interviews were carried out with other titular Kings of Central Assam bordering Mayong. They expressed about their friendly relation with the kingdom of Mayong. But, there is no documentary evidence found to substantiate the claim. The *Vamsawalis* of these kingdoms focused on their respective genealogical list only. See Appendix V.

the folk healers known as *Bez* are not confined to any one particular ethnic group of the area. They are found scattered among all the ethnic groups.

Religion may be regarded as a cultural tool by means of which man has been able to accommodate himself to his experiences in his total environment.<sup>29</sup> Mayong is known for Tantric practices and this is known by archaeological evidences and also certain items preserved in the Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre. The history of religion of the erstwhile kingdom indicates a similar pattern as that worshipped in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa which relates to gods and goddesses such as Siva, Sakti and Visnu along with other miscellaneous deities such as Ganesa, Indra, and Varuna etc. The *mantraputhis* or manuscripts of *mantras* are an important source for Mayong history and culture. The text contains names such as Gauri, Parvati, Gusani, Kamakhya etc. which reveals that the people of the area were familiar with these manifestations of the goddesses. Goddess Manasa was also worshipped in Mayong which is supported by the sculptural remains.<sup>30</sup> Regarding the worship of the goddess in Assam E. Gait observed, “The worship of the goddess of Manasa was done in an elaborate way in some parts of the country during pestilence and diseases.”<sup>31</sup> There is another shrine of Manasa at Baghara known as *Ananta-than*. Apart from these, there are four Umalingana<sup>32</sup> images found in three different sites which bear certain distinct features of their own. The sculptures are found carved on open rock surfaces of Mayong hill at Burhamayong, Chanaka and at Kachashila hill. Thus Shiva and Shakti worship was popular in Mayong. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE,

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth K. Nottingham, *Religion and Society*, 1954, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix VII, Illustration B..

<sup>31</sup> Sir Edward Gait, *op.cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> See Appendix VII, Illustration A.

Sankardeva's Vaishnavism began to influence the cultural lives of the people of Mayong, and the *Sattras* and *Namghars* came to be established, viz; Kalshila Sattr, Sildubi Sattr, Daipara Sattr, Khulagaon Sattr, and Misamari Sattr. Prior to his accession to the throne, Ahom king Lakhmi Singha was known as Kalshiliya Gohain.<sup>33</sup> It is believed that the king was born in the Kalshila Sattr on the bank of the Brahmaputra river at Mayong. The *mantraputhi* titled *Narasimha - mantra* indicates that people were aware of Narasimha, an incarnation of Vishnu. There is also a Narasimha temple at the Hiloikhunda village on the bank of the Brahmaputra river, and a Vishnu temple at Kajali chawki at the confluence of the rivers Brahmaputra and the Kalong.

The healers of Mayong get respect in the area for their service in the society. That the women folk healers also played the same role as the male folk healers, which may indicate about the importance attached to women in a largely traditional society in the erstwhile Mayong Kingdom. It is true that the scientific inventions have widened our knowledge about the causes of different types of physical and psychiatric disorders. The increasing knowledge in the science and technology has attracted the attention of every society in the world. Despite of that the folk healers are trying to provide basic needs in the field of health care services in the area. Apart from it the economic factors also attached to that practice. The folk treatment is easy to afford and the people of all economic status can't bear the modern treatment easily. Therefore, the economic weakness also helps to have a deep root in the area. But, it is not the only reason behind the consistent insist of the people in this tradition. Scientific analysis of the herbal

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<sup>33</sup> S.K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji (A Chronicle of the Tungkhungia Kings of Assam)*, DHAS, 1990, (Third Edition), P. 57.

medicines and techniques may be protected under Intellectual property rights. As we know that the traditional knowledge refers to knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities in different parts of the globe. Which are developed from experience gained over centuries and adapted to local culture and environment and it transmitted orally from generation to generation. Therefore, the study of the herbs and methods of application in Mayong may get protection under the traditional knowledge system. Such protection may provide a contribution towards sustainable development in the region along with the protection of the medicinal plants. It is interesting to that most of the local and indigenous communities are situated in such areas where the vast majority of the world genetic resources are found.<sup>34</sup> The Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL), has a database with 34 million pages of formatted information on some 2, 26,000 medicinal formulations in multiple languages.<sup>35</sup>As awareness is growing in different parts of the globe the societies that held the traditional knowledge have demanded the recognition of their knowledge as an intellectual property. Therefore, the traditional knowledge of Mayong can also be protected under the law to preserve it for posterity.

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<sup>34</sup> Srividya Ragavan, "Protection of Traditional Knowledge", Article in Mnnosota Intellectual Property Review, Vol-2, Issue-2, Article-1 (2001); at <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/mjlst/vol2/iss2/1>, accessed on 24/01/ 2019.

<sup>35</sup> World Intellectual Property Organisation Magazine, "Protecting India's traditional knowledge", 2011, at <http://www.wipo.int/wipo-magazine/en/2011/03/article-0002.html>; accessed on 24/01/2019.