

CHAPTER III

MAYONG CULTURE: SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

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Culture¹ as a way of life comprises the totality of a community's heritage of ideas, language, beliefs, customs, social organizations, symbols, crafts and material artifacts. As a system of values and norms, it shapes and influences people's perception of themselves, their relationships with each other and with the rest of the world. Culture is necessarily dynamic rather than static, often changing as people respond to the contingencies of time and history. Ecological settings determine many aspects of social and cultural practices and a community develops adaptive strategies to satisfy their needs for clothing, food, and shelter. A. Kroeber² explains as thus: "Culture consists of patterns explicit or implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditions (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture system may on the one hand, be considered as the products of action, on the other a conditioning element for future action". Oral traditions are a major component of culture that comes from living close to a certain landscape, they are often shaped and built on various stories from the land; either about the creation of a mountain, a previous event or even a possible future event. Such principles and values encourage a spirit of harmony between people, their natural environments and their spiritual

¹ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, Gordon Press, New York, 1974 (Reprint).

² A. Kroeber, "The Nature of Culture", Chicago, 1952; Cited in Ananda Mahanta *Study of Human Culture - A Theoretical Approach*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1987, p. 5.

identities. Culture in relation to tradition links the past to the present. Therefore, an analysis of culture requires understanding of the historical context since the continuity of culture is generally related to traditions.

Assam is inhabited by many ethnic communities and Mayong may be said to exemplify this multi-cultural ethos which is the result of a long history of migration of people within Northeast India and also in the larger ambit of Southeast Asia. The process of acculturation³ between the Brahmanical tradition and the indigenous folk tradition is evident in the cultural life of Mayong although they have largely preserved the indigenous way of life. It must be noted that the inhabitants of the erstwhile Mayong kingdom belong to various ethnic groups such as the Kacharis, Karbis, Keots, Naths or Yogis etc. and this was the result of the ecological setting of Mayong, being situated near the Brahmaputra river which has impacted the lives of the people in many ways including land erosion which necessitated movements of people. Their folk traditions are woven in the tales of their place of origin or cultural aspects of their history. These narratives when used critically are useful particularly for Northeast India since majority of the ethnic communities do not possess a written script of their own and their histories will have to be reconstructed from such myths and legends.

The Kacharis who are believed to be the original autochthones of Assam and have settled in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley comprise a large section of the population of the erstwhile kingdom of Mayong.⁴ The first

³ S. Mahanta, *Archaeological Remains of Tezpur in a Historical Perspective*, (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis), Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2013, p. 66.

⁴ S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Kachari Buranji (A Chronicle of the Kachari Rajas from the Earliest times to the Eighteenth Century AD with Special Reference to Assam - Cachar Political Relations)*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1984, (Third Edition), p. ii. The descendants of the Bodo race in the Brahmaputra valley and North Cachar hills, excepting the Garos, Koches and Tripurians are generally known as Kacharis.

superintendent of Cachar, Captain Fisher opined that, "...the original seat of this rude tribe was at Kamrup, but gradually acquired an empire over Assam, Sylhet, Mymensingh and valleys to the east of the Brahmaputra. They belong to the Bodo family of the Tibeto - Burman branch of the Tibeto - Chinese group of languages'.⁵ It is important to note that the Kacharis did not attempt to unite all the various branches under one political fold. S.K. Bhuyan in the introductory chapter of the *Kachari Buranji* had observed that the Kacharis living in upper Assam would not transfer their allegiance from the Ahom monarch to the Kachari king at Dimapur or Khaspur, though the latter belonged to the same ethnic group. The Kacharis scattered in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley, in fact, owed their allegiance to the kings under which jurisdiction they lived. The villages like Manaha Kachari Gaon, Bahakabori Kachari Gaon, Kalbari Kachari Gaon, Pabhakati Kachari Gaon, Burha Pabhakati Kachari Gaon were inhabited by the Kachari people and the name of the village itself indicates their ethnic identity.⁶

The Karbi population living in the area claim themselves as the original inhabitants of the area.⁷ They are mainly settled in the Burhamayong village of the area where Suinat Singha had established his capital. The *Vamsawali* records that there was a ruling king named Jaysingha in Mayong at the time of arrival of Suinat Singha but nothing more is known about him.⁸ The Karbis have assumed important posts in the administrative structure of the Mayong kingdom and they include *Patar*, *Patar Senapati*, *Thakuria*, and *Bangthai*.⁹ They have twelve *phaid*s or clans among the Karbis and the *Karbi Bangthe* is considered as the

⁵ H.K. Barpujari, *TCHA*, Vol.-II, Publication Board, Assam, 2016, (Fourth Edition), p. 391.

⁶ Dhanya Ram Roy *A History of Mayong*, Olympia Publication, Guwahati, 2017, p. 67.

⁷ Personal interview with Biren Bangthai, 42 yrs, Self- employed, Burhamayong on 12/01/2018.

⁸ *Vamsawali*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁹ D.R. Roy, *A History of Mayong*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

most important in the community.¹⁰ They play an important role in the *Goshai Uliua Utshab* sponsored by the royal family of Mayong. There are several important shrines are there in the Burhamayong village, *Viz*, the *Kechaikhathi-than*, *Bhagavati- than*, *Bamun Goshai- than* and the *Nua Goshai-than*. The inhabitants of the village believe that once human sacrifice was offered in the *Kechaikhathi-than* of the village.¹¹ The Karbis practice a system of installing stone slabs to identify the burial ground of the deceased person.¹² It is a popular belief that the Karbis living in Burhamayong were the earliest settlers of the area.

The Keots are another numerically large inhabitants of Mayong. They mostly inhabit the villages of Sativeti, Ouguri, Hiloikhunda, Chanaka, Hatigarh Kuchiani, Loonmati, Hatibagara, Kajoli Chawki, Khatargaon etc. It may be noted that the Keots are categorized as caste Hindus in Assam. Nabin Chandra Sharma suggests that, based on linguistic analysis, the word *keot* may have been derived from the Sanskrit word *kaivartas*, which is a community of fishermen. No one has studied about the origin of this community from the anthropological or cultural perspective.¹³ He attempted to explain this with a reference from the *Brahmabaibarta Puran* according to which the *kaivartas* were the offspring of a *khetriya* father and a *Sudra* mother. The first reference to the Keots appears in the *Kotha Gurucharit* and also in the copper plates issued by the Ahom kings. The Keots are divided into two groups based on their professions, *viz*; Jalowa Keot

¹⁰ Personal interview with Jadab Chandra Teron, 73 yrs, *Karbi Bangthe* (Karbi chief), Burhamayong on 11/01/2018.

¹¹ Personal interview with Hemakanta Deka, 69 yrs, *Gaon Burha*, Burhamayong on 11/01/2018.

¹² H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.-III, *op. cit.*, p. 197; Appendix VII: C.

¹³ Nabin Chandra Sarma, *Asamar Sanskritik Itihas*, Vol. - II, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 2013, (Second Edition), p. 42.

and Halowa Keot.¹⁴ The first group earns their livelihood by fishing, while the later earn their livelihood with the use of plough, which means agrarian economy. S.N. Sarma observes that the *Keots* occupy the position next to the Kalitas.¹⁵ The Keot populations of Mayong belong to both the two groups. Apart from the already mentioned villages, the *keot* population of the area were scattered in some other villages like Katahguri, Lehpati, Phaliamari, Pakariaguri, Eastern Sildubi, Kalatali, Ujatari, Mantari (eastern part of Chanaka).¹⁶ Most of these villages are located on the banks of the Brahmaputra river and Pakaria. Naturally, the alluvial soil and the scope for livelihood in fishing activities helped in growing their settlements. It is noteworthy that most of the Keot population of Central Mayong had migrated from the northern banks of the Brahmaputra i.e. Darrang in search of better livelihood.

The Koch population is also a major group of the society in Mayong. The *Darrang Rajvamsawali* describes the Koches as the progenies of Siva.¹⁷ There is a popular belief that the Dimasa Kachari royal family of Mayong was converted to the Koch community.¹⁸ The present titular king of Mayong also expressed his observation that the descendants of the Kachari kings in the area became known as Koches. Thus, the association of the royal family with this community had increased their importance in the history of the kingdom. The people from the Koch community always occupied important positions under the rulers of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.- III, op.cit., p. 173.

¹⁶ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, (Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation), Department of History, Vinayaka Missions University, Salem, Tamilnadu, p. 80.

¹⁷ Nabin Chandra Sarma, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Mayong viz; Baruahs and Medhis.¹⁹ He observed that the important officers like *Deka Raja, Medhi, Tamuli Medhi* were always appointed from the Koch community.²⁰ The Koches are settled mainly in the villages of Rajamayong, Hatimuria, Sildubi, Loonmati, Chanaka, Burhamayong, Dhekiabari and Bardia. Tirtha Saikia²¹ mentioned that some of the Koches living in Burhamayong and Hatimuria are converts from the Dimasa Kacharis, and that the Koch population in the Chanaka village migrated from Barachuba area of Darrang while those in Loonmati migrated from the Bardaulguri of Darrang. There were several other petty kingdoms in central Assam in which the ruling families were from the Koch community.²²

The Naths or Yogis, also known as Nath Yogis are a prominent group in Assam.²³ Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who had visited Kamarupa in the 7th century CE mentioned about Nath cult of the region in his memoir 'Si-yue-ki'.²⁴ This indicates the presence of the cult in Kamrupa when the Chinese traveler had visited during the reign of Bhaskarvarmana in the 6th century CE. The Nath Yogis were worshippers of Siva in the phallic form, and they give importance to the practice of *yoga*. In Bengal, they obtained royal patronage during the reign of the Pala kings. The places where Nath Yogis are settled include Mayong,

¹⁹ Paban Kumar Bishaya, *A Study of the History and Administrative Set up of Mayong Kingdom*, (Unpublished Minor Research Project), University Grants Commission, North Eastern Regional Office, Guwahati, 2015, p. 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Tirtha Saikia, *A Study on the Socio- Economic Condition on the Koch Population of Mayong, Morigaon (Assam)*, (Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation), Vinayaka Missions University, Salem, Tamil Nadu, 2009, pp. 33-34.

²² Personal interview with Narayan Chandra Raja, Brother of Titular king Dilip Kumar Raja of Baghara kingdom, 40 yrs, Teacher at Morigaon H.S. School, Baghara on 12/03/2019. There is a *vamsawali* or genealogical account which claims that they are progenies of King Arimatta.

²³ Prafulla Kumar Nath, *Asomor Nath Sampradayor Sanskriti*, Chandra Prakash, Guwahati, 2013, p. 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Charaibahi, Barangabari, Jaluguti, Natuagaon, Lothabori, and Mikirbheta which are situated in Morigaon district. At Mayong, the Naths are mostly concentrated at the village of Rajamayong, the residence of the royal family which was also the seat of the administrative organization of the erstwhile kingdom. P.K. Bishaya states that the Naths held important administrative positions under the Mayong rulers.²⁵ The Nath Yogis living in the area were divided into several branches such as *Panimara-jak*, *Kona-jak*, *Godha-jak* and *Barua-jak*.²⁶ During the rule of King Sarascha Singha, they were appointed as *Medhis*, *Katani Barua* and *Bharuoi Bishaya*.²⁷ The people of this community were known for cultural activities including various performing arts, practice of *mantras*, and folk medicines. There are some well known *Bez* of Rajamayong village belonging to the Nath Yogi community.

Another community who are settled in Mayong is the Kalitas though they also inhabit many other parts of the Brahmaputra valley. The origin of the Kalitas is uncertain, but since the 14th century CE they seem to have attained a respectable status in the Assamese society in the same way as the Kayasthas.²⁸ There are two groups of Kalitas, *viz*; Bar Kalita and Saru Kalita.²⁹ During the reign of King Bakat Singha an epidemic spread in Mayong and the people of this community moved to Konwargaon from Kalitapara in Hatimuria village, where they settled. During the reign of Sarascha Singha, he had settled some families in

²⁵ Paban Kumar Bishaya, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁶ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. - III, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

the villages of Kamarpur and Hiloikhunda.³⁰ The Kalitas settled in these two villages were entrusted to supply iron war materials and cannon balls and two persons named Kahidhar and Mahidhar of Hiloikhunda village were appointed to look after it.³¹

The presence of the community of Hiras and Kumars are particularly important in the context of Mayong economy since the terracotta artefacts extensively found here indicates a sizeable number of Hira community settled and practicing the craft.³² The Hiras prepared the utensils with bare hands while the Kumars used the potter's wheel. They types of utensils produced were for daily use and also for religious rituals. The artisans decorated the utensils and terracotta images with floral designs.³³ During the reign of Sarascha Chandra Singha, one Nidhiram Hira, son of Nanda Hira was appointed as *Hira Thakuria* who was to look after cultural affairs.³⁴ The Hiras settled mainly in a place called Hirabari which was situated in the eastern and southern direction of the Rajamayong village.³⁵ Besides there was another settlement in the southern direction of the Burhamayong village by the side of Mayong hill. There is a reference in the *Vamsawali* about some *Kamars* (blacksmiths), *Kumars* (potters), *kahars* (bell metal workers) and *marias* (metal workers) who were brought from

³⁰ D.R. Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, *op. cit.*, 76.

³¹ D.R. Roy, *A History of Mayong*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³² Lokendra Hazarika, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³³ See Appendix VII, C.

³⁴ P.K. Bishaya, *A Study of the History and Administrative Setup of Mayong Kingdom*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

³⁵ Ramesh Chandra Nath, "Mayongar Thair Namar Etibritya", in Utpal Nath (ed.), *Tantram, A Souvenir of the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Mayang Anchalik College*, Morigaon, 2017, p.122.

lower Assam and made to settle on the banks of the Kalong river.³⁶ The remains of broken utensils are mostly found in the plains near the Brahmaputra river and in the highlands of the area.³⁷ They made objects which were for domestic use and ritual purposes and they include *charu*, *mola charu*, *ghat*, *chaki*, *tekeli*, and *kalah*.³⁸

The coming of Brahmanas to Assam is attested by the Doobi and Nidhanpur copper plates and during the medieval period they came even from faraway places such as Gauda, Kanauj and from other parts of North India.³⁹ In Mayong, the Brahmanas are said to have come for the first time during the reign of King Sarascha Chandra Singha (1590-1615 CE). The king himself was a staunch follower of the Brahmanical faith and the priests occupied an important position as ritual specialists. They were settled at *Bamun Chuba* in the Hatimuria village. The names of the four heads of the *Brahmana* families were Harishchandra Sarma, Gajakanta Sarma, Santadhan Sarma and Jugal Sarma.⁴⁰ They were appointed as *Deoris* in different temples. But later on, these families migrated to other places. The last *Brahmana* family migrated to Baghara during the reign of Narayan Singha, and settled there.⁴¹

The Kaivartas who resided on the banks of the rivers were known as Nadiyals (*Nadi*: river) and fishing was their main source of livelihood. Since the

³⁶ *Vamsawali*, p. 32.

³⁷ Lokendra Hazarika, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁸ Dhanya Ram Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

³⁹ H.K. Barpujari, *TCHA, Vol. - III, op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁴⁰ D.R. Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁴¹ Personal interview with Narayan Chandra Raja, 40 yrs, Brother of Titular King Dilip Kumar Raja of Baghara kingdom), Teacher at Morigaon HS School, Baghara on 12/03/2019. The rulers of Baghara kingdom brought some Brahmana families from Kanauj.

middle of the 17th century CE large numbers of Kaivartas became disciples of the Dihing Sattra.⁴² In Mayong, the Kaivartas resided in Kalshilapar and Hatimuria villages and they earned their livelihood from the Brahmaputra and Pakaria rivers. It is said that during the reign of Sarascha Chandra Singha one Tanguram Kaivarta owned six rivulets (*beels*).⁴³ Some of the important rivulets (*beel*) which were within the territorial boundary of the kingdom were Pakaria, Hahchara, Kalshila, Morabeel, Gosaindubi, Bheheni, Kanjuli, Haduk and Garanga.⁴⁴

The Kayasthas were scribes who carved out principalities for themselves under the control of the Kamata Kings. Sankardeva himself belonged to this community and enjoyed the office of the chief among the Bhuyans.⁴⁵ They were mostly settled in the Kholabhuyan village situated in the eastern side of the kingdom.⁴⁶ The importance attached to this community is that most of the *mantraputhis* found in Mayong were composed in Kaithali, a script which was used by the Kayasthas in medieval Assam.⁴⁷ However, at present, there are no Bhuyan families living in the village. The area is occupied by immigrant Muslims from eastern Bengal who entered the place after India's independence. Some other Hindu Bengalis settled in the villages of Murkata and some Hindu families from Nepal have settled in Murabari village in the southern side of Rajamayong village.

⁴² H.K. Barpujari, *TCHA*, Vol. - III, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁴³ D.R. Roy, *A History of Mayong*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ H.K. Barpujari, *TCHA*, Vol.-III, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁴⁶ D.R. Roy, *A Study of the History of Mayang with Special Reference to the Archaeological Remains in Mayang*, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.

⁴⁷ See Appendix III. List of *Mantraputhis*.

Language is an important component of understanding culture and identity. Golak Chandra Goswami discussed the language used in the central region of the Brahmaputra valley comprising of Morigaon, Darrang and portions of Kamrup district and opined that the dialect used in these areas had certain distinct characteristics which reveal a separate identity.⁴⁸ The languages spoken by the people in Mayong include Assamese, Bodo, Bengali Karbi, Nepali, and Tiwa reflecting the demography of the place. The languages spoken have influence of the Kamrupi dialect.

Religious beliefs and ideas are often part of the system of values and ideas embedded in culture which acts as the main driving force in formulating cultural landscape. Among different sociologists of the Functionalist school of thought, an influential tradition of religion is found in the writings of Emile Durkheim.⁴⁹ Durkheim suggests that religion is a social product and that it is linked to the social structure because it arises from it. It acts as an integrative force and reinforces the bonds of social relationships through the enactment of various rites and rituals. Different communities have different ways of preserving their cultural identity either through the oral or the written tradition. At one level, culture is a vehicle or a carrier of religion. Archaeological studies of religion, for example, increasingly recognize religion as an organizing principle in social life, rather than as a separate sphere of activity. Therefore, entire artifact assemblages rather than specifically artifacts, can be interpreted according to the ways that they simultaneously create, display, and constrain notions of self according to

⁴⁸ Jibakanta Nath, *Mayangia Upabhasa*, Saswata Prakashan, Morigaon, 2013, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Emile Durkheim, (tr. Joseph Ward Swain), *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1965; cited in Rena Laisram, *Early Meitei History, Religion, Society and the Manipuri Puyas*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2009, p. 31.

religious ideas. The intersection of religion and culture often has a profound impact on construction of identity at the individual and collective level.

Saktism is the cult of worshipping a female goddess as the chief deity and different names imply diverse manifestations of the same goddess such as Candi, Chamunda, Devi, Durga, Kamakhya, Kali, Kalika, and Tara. This sect is believed to have been the most widely popular in Kamarupa by the 12th century CE to which period is assigned its chief scripture known as the *Kalika Purana*. The association of Saktism with Tantricism⁵⁰ is well known. However, Tantricism as such has four principle ramifications: Saktism, Saivism, Vaisnavism and Buddhism. It is known for the use of spells, gestures, diagrams and various sacramental rites which accompanies Saktism but may exist without it. The Sakta worshippers use human skulls as drinking vessels. One of the best known Shakta shrines in India is the Kamakhya temple which is known for Tantric sacrifices, mysticism and sorcery. The two principal Sanskrit works viz; *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* are important literary sources for Sakti worship in Assam. There are references to iconographic descriptions of Sakti cult; yet, archaeological data, belonging to a period earlier than 9th-10th centuries CE of the goddess is rare. Buddhist tantricism is said to have been prevalent in Assam which has left an impact on its cultural history.⁵¹

There are references to Gauri, Parvati, Gusani, and Kamakhya in the *mantraputhis* which reveal that the people were familiar with worship of Sakti

⁵⁰ Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Motilal, Banarsidass, Delhi, 2007, pp. 46-47.

⁵¹ Bobby Das, *Buddhism in Assam: From the Earliest Times to 13th century AD*, (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis), Department of History, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, 2014, p. 50.

and its manifestations.⁵² The origin of Sakti worship at Kamakhya is associated with the legend of Sati, spouse of Siva and daughter of the Puranic god-king Daksha. Besides the *Mantraputhis*, another source for the study of history and culture is the archaeological remains scattered in different places in Mayong. There are four Umalingana⁵³ images found in three different sites. The sculptures are found carved on open rock surfaces in Burhamayong, Kachashila hill and Chanaka hill. At Kachashila hill there are two Umalingana sculptures which are found at the top of the Mayong hill while the image at Burhamayong was discovered at the side of the hill. The sculptures depicted on two separate rocks are facing two opposite directions. The first image in the vicinity of the Siva *linga* is facing the north direction towards the Brahmaputra river. The second image is found on a separate rock in a distance of about ten feet, and faces the south direction. Here, the second image seems to be more polished and developed in style than the first one. In the first image the front view can be seen for both Uma and Maheswara. Uma is sitting on the left hip of Maheswara. Maheswara is depicted with two hands; the right hand is folded towards the right direction while the left hand seems to be placed on the right shoulder of Uma and the elbow touches the face of the goddess. The left hand of the goddess is folded on her left side. The *vahana* or vehicle is missing. Moreover, there is no representation of *makaras* (vehicle of goddess Ganga), *kirttimukha* (headgear), the trident or the *dambaru* (small hour-glass drum). Maheswara is depicted with mouth open probably to give impression of speaking which is not the case with

⁵² See Appendix III, List of the *Mantraputhis*.

⁵³ Appendix VI Illustration: A, 1-4.

the representation of the goddess. This depiction is considered as distinct to Mayong.

The second image has both the divinities looking at each other in an amorous position with Maheswara having two hands, one folded in the upward direction and the other hand appearing to hold the face of the goddess. In the top of the image, the headgear *is* seen but is not very distinct. Uma Maheswara is shown with matted hair and differs from the first one. The right hand of Maheswara is depicted without any bracelet, and the left hand of Uma is shown wearing four bangles and also holding another object in her hand. The *vahana* of Maheswara is absent.

The Umalingana image found at Chanaka Ganeshpur at the foot of the Mayong hill are depicted in an amorous position. Ganesa is also depicted and there are two *gandharvas* in flying mode. Below, the *gandharvas* there are four curves and below them the divinities are found sitting on the lotus position. Here, on the right side, one hand is holding the *dambaru* (small hour-glass shaped drum) and the other hand is holding the face of the goddess. The trident is placed in upright position on the left hand side of the goddess. The hair of Maheswara is matted. The divinities are seated above two animals; a bull in a sitting position and a horse in a running position. The Umalingana image found at Barghat on the banks of the water fountain at Burhamayong village has similarity with the Uma-Maheswara image of Daboka.⁵⁴ In both of the images lotus seat is seen and the goddess is seated on the left side of the god. Interestingly, the depiction of *makaras* (door-keepers) in the image found at Mayong has similarities with the

⁵⁴ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. - I, Plate: VII. Figure: 13, Uma- Maheswara, Doboka, Nagaon, p. 507.

north Indian tradition. There is also the representation of crocodiles in the image at Mayong which has led some scholars to believe that crocodiles may have been familiar to the people and may have been found in the waters of the Brahmaputra river. The difference found between the two images at Daboka and Burhamayong is that the *stela* is rectangular in shape and the top is rounded has a beaded border with diamond shaped rosettes edged by flame pattern. At Burhamayong the image is covered with five curves and there are two door-keepers on two sides above the divinities. The headgear at the top of the arch at Burhamayong has a lion's snarling face with fearsome bulging eyes, and tongue hanging out. It may be noted that the headgear is a common representation in the iconography of the Buddhist and Hindu temple architecture in South East Asia.

Tantras had a major role in popularizing the worship of Siva and Sakti. Scholars consider it as an attempt to synthesize two cults Saktism and Saivism.⁵⁵ Lord Siva is considered incomplete without his consort. Such composite images of Uma Maheswara are also found in Barganga, Deopani and Tezpur in other parts of Assam. There are some other sacred sites of Sakta worship in Mayong which includes a *yonipitha* discovered by the side of the Mayong hill near the Sativeti village, an *Ai-than* at Hatimuria village, and another Kechaikhati at the Rajamayang village. Dilip Kumar Kalita⁵⁶ informs that that there are many Sakta shrines and temples in Mayong and they are popularly known as *thans viz; Kechaikhati, Bhagavati, Manasha, Aai* etc. Almost every village has a shrine of the Mother Goddess, in one of her manifestations. Guneswar Deka observed as

⁵⁵ Rumi Patar, *History of Sakta Pithas in Assam (Upto 18th Century)*, (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis), Department of History, Assam University, Silchar, 2015, p. 228.

⁵⁶ Dilip Kumar Kalita, *A Study of the Magical Beliefs and Practices in Assam with Special Reference to the Magical Lore of Mayong*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1992, p. 273.

thus: “There is a Devikunda with Yonimudra with five seats for the five deities of Kachashila, a hill in the Mayong area.”⁵⁷ Further, similar Umalingana images have been discovered at Burhamayang village by the side of the Mayong hill. The Karbis of Burhamayang believe that they are protected by the *Kechaikhati Deoshal* shrine in their village.⁵⁸ This shrine does not possess any idol but there are seven swords fastened upright to a wooden pillar similar to a sacrificial post which are believed to be connected to ancestor veneration.⁵⁹ Earlier, the Karbis had the exclusive right to worship in the shrine but later it was opened to all communities.

The worship of Siva seems to have been in vogue in Assam from great antiquity.⁶⁰ In this context S.L. Baruah⁶¹ observed that, “.... prior to the advent of Naraka, who was Aryan or Aryanised, the principal deity in Pragjyotisha was Shiva.” The dynasty founded by Pushyavarmana in the 4th century CE and which continued up to the middle of the 7th century CE were worshippers of Siva. King Bhaskarvarmana (594 - 650 CE) was a follower of the Saiva faith but maintained a liberal approach towards all other religious sects which was observed and recorded by the Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang. The pilgrim who had visited Kamarupa in 643 CE observed that although the ruler was not a devotee of Buddha, he showed respect for the Sramanas of learning.⁶² It is important to note

⁵⁷ Guneswar Deka, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

⁵⁹ Personal interview with Ekadakh Keleng, 70 yrs, Farmer, Burhamayang on 11/01/2018.

⁶⁰ Maheswar Neog, *Religions of the North-East*, Publication Board, Guwahati, 2008, p. 1. Siva is known as the god of the *yogis*, self-controlled and celibate. Siva is the destroyer of the world, following Brahma the creator and Visnu the preserver, after which Brahma again creates the world and so on.

⁶¹ S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2005. p. 81.

⁶² Sarat Mahanta, *Concise History of Assam*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2013, p. 20.

that the name of Siva and his various manifestations are frequently mentioned in the *mantraputhis*. The *Rudrakarati Mantra*, *Dharani Mantra*, *Harakata Mantra*, *Bandhani Mantra* has reference to Siva. This reveals that Siva was widely worshipped in Mayong. The *Ushah Shular Mantra* which is used for the treatment of pain in chest and back mentions Siva as follows:

*“Shar Khai Shar Kahu
Shiva Chaitanya Chakra Pak
Chali ja toi Lankar Paar
Hara Bisha Hara
Amukar Bisha Biyadi
Panikritya hoi par...”*⁶³

[**Free Translation:** Be wiped out with the hit of the arrow of Siva Chaitanya. Go far away, pain, go far away from his/her physique. Get dissolved like water.]

The *Kalika Purana* text, devoted mainly to the Sakti cult informs that the places sacred to the deity Siva far outnumber the spots sacred either to the Devi or to Visnu. Siva is generally worshipped in temples and elsewhere in his phallic symbol (*linga*). If the *Yogini-Tantra*, a 16th century CE text is to be believed, the number of *lingas* in Kamarupa exceeds a million.⁶⁴ There are also a number of icons representing him in his various manifestations such as Isana, Mahesa, Lakulisa, six or ten armed Nataraja and Bhairava and in composite forms of Uma-Mahesvara and Hari-Hara which have been discovered in different parts of Kamarupa. There are many temples in Kamarupa, though there are not many Siva images in them. There is a Siva temple located at the top of the Kachashila

⁶³ Lokendra Hazarika, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁶⁴ N.D. Choudhury, *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam from the Earliest Period to A.D. 12th Century*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1985, p. 106.

hill in Mayong. The Mahadeva-Parvati-than at the top of the hillock in Burha Burhi testifies the worship of Siva-Sakti by the people of Mayong.

A terracotta plaque of a skeleton-like dancing figure found at Kachashila hill at Mayong resembles in its design to the terracotta plaque found at Kukurmuta.⁶⁵ In both the images the attempt was made to depict a dancing position of a skeleton where the right hand was folded in the upward direction and holding an object. The left hand is depicted in the downward direction with a *mudra*. In both the images, on the back side of the left hand a trident is depicted in upright position. The head of the sculpture is bending towards his right hand possibly indicating a *mudra*. The ribs and bones of the figure are clearly depicted. The long hair extends up to the waist. In the upper portion of the plaque and above the dancing image there appear five designs in a row. It is suggested by some scholars that the trident possibility relates to Siva in his dancing position and the object in the right hand is the dambaru of Siva. Another terracotta female figurine was found at Kachashila.⁶⁶ The figure looks upwards and the body is slightly bent towards the left. Her headdress is well depicted. But the hands were found in a broken condition. The image has not been identified.

Ganesa, also known as Ganapati and Vinayaka is a widely worshipped deity in Assam. However, no independent cult of Ganapati developed in Assam.⁶⁷ Ganesa is revered as the remover of obstacles and is also invoked as patron of letters and learning. Rock-cut images of Ganesa was discovered at Baha, on the banks of the Kalong river, at Chanaka village on the banks of the Brahmaputra

⁶⁵ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA, Vol.-I*, p. 509, Plate XLII, Figure. 77, (Terracotta Plaque with skeleton like dancing figure, Kukurmuta, ASM)

⁶⁶ See APPENDIX. VII. C., Plate: 11.

⁶⁷ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.- I, op. cit.*, p. 325.

river, at Burhamayong near the Barghat, at Hatimuria village on the banks of the Brahmaputra river, at Gobhali village by the side of the Mayong hill),⁶⁸ and near the Sativeti village by the side of the Mayong hill.⁶⁹ There is a spring of water by the side of the image of Ganesa near Sativeti and the locals believe that if they pour water on the image, rain comes even during dry seasons. Therefore, they use to put water on the image during the time of harvesting.⁷⁰ Ganesa is often mentioned in the *mantraputhis* and Ganesa temples in Mayong are more in number compared to those dedicated to other deities. The biggest icon is also that of Ganesa which is that of the temple in Baha, and this is true even of all the Ganesa images discovered in Assam.⁷¹ Moreover, regarding the features of the image engraved on granite rock it was observed that not only the size of the image but also the intertwining serpent depicted across the body of the deity seems to indicate tantric influence.⁷² In central Assam, in the erstwhile Nagaon district several Ganesa sculptures have been found in Davaka, Yogijaan, and Akasiganga etc. In the Vasundhari Parvat near Chaparmukh, there are two images of Ganesa on granite, although in other places there are images in stone, terracotta and wood.

Assam witnessed the worship of a number of miscellaneous gods and goddesses, either as consorts or associates of the main deities, *viz*; Surya, Karttikeya, Indra, Agni, Kubera, Brahma, and Manasha etc. The *Rudra Karati Mantra* refers to different minor gods as thus:

⁶⁸ The image was said to have been discovered after digging in the site following a dream explained by a local inhabitant of the village.

⁶⁹ See Appendix. VII, A..

⁷⁰ Personal interview with Mukesh Saikia, 39 yrs, Self employed, Ouguri on 10/11/2017.

⁷¹ Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

⁷² *Ibid.*

“Rudrarupe sakhate Rudra utapati...Takodekhi polai jaai sabe debagon

Indrapai Chandrapai, palai digpal, Kubera Varuna palai poshila patal...”

(Free Translation: At the wrathful appearance of Lord Shiva, all the deities like Indrapati, Chandrapati and others have run away and Kubera and Varuna have fled into the abyssal depth.)

There is a shrine of Manasa at Baghara known as *Ananta-than* in Mayong where the goddess is worshipped. The people of the Rajamayong village believe in *Pancha Devata* or five deities viz; *Bhagabati, Kachaikhati, Har-Parbati, Ganesha and Burhi Ai*. These deities are also worshipped by practitioners of magic in the form of *Bahira Puja* solely for maintaining effectiveness of their magic. In this *puja* the magician offers a black pigeon and *joha* rice along with other offerings.⁷³

Scholars opine that Mayong was a place where Buddhist tantricism prevailed and the five carved seated figures in meditating posture are interpreted as five Buddhas. According to this view, Mayong was once a centre of Vajrayana sect of Buddhism which engaged in tantric practices.⁷⁴ However, there is another view which suggests that the images are of five Pandava brothers. The existing images in *Alingana murti* may indicate about the influence of tantric influence in the area. Regarding the prevalence of Buddhism in Mayong, Guneswar Deka⁷⁵ pointed out the sacred site of a cave on the Mayong hill is known as Bairagi-than and is associated with Buddhism. Bairagi-than is believed to be a Buddhist shrine associated with Meenanatha. Regarding the influence of Buddhist philosophy

⁷³ Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.273.

⁷⁵ Guneswar Deka, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

upon the inhabitants of this region, there is an oral tradition which mentions one Amritprabha of Assam who is said to have married Meghavahana, the king of Kashmir during the 1st century CE. He is said to have constructed a lofty *vihara* (Buddhist monasteries) called Amritabhavana for the benefit of the foreign *bhikshus* (male Buddhist monastics).⁷⁶ But, it is not clear whether she was influenced by the faith prior to her marriage with the Kashmiri king or afterwards.

Vaisnavism signifies that particular theistic religion of which Vishnu is the chief deity of worship. Pragjyotisपुर is one of the chief Vaisnava religious centers in Eastern India.⁷⁷ The association of Vaisnavism with this place is well attested by the traditional account in which the ruling house of Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa trace their lineage to Vishnu through Naraka.⁷⁸ The *Kalika-Purana* refers to five places in Kamarupa which is considered to be sacred to Vishnu.⁷⁹ The *Yogini Tantra* includes a Vishnu-*pitha* in the list of nine *pithas* or sacred regions of Kamarupa.⁸⁰ The adoption of Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism⁸¹ and the resultant establishment of *sattras* brought a new perspective in the traditional society of Mayong. It was after the death of King Sarascha Chandra Singha, that the Dimasa Kachari royal family became divided into three branches or *phaidis*

⁷⁶ S.K. Bhuyan, *An Assamese Nur-Jahan or A Sketch of the Life of Queen Phuleswari Devi*, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1995, (Second Edition), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁷ Pranabananda Jash, *History and Evolution of Vaisnavism in Eastern India*, Roy and Choudhury, Calcutta, 1982, p. 61.

⁷⁸ M.M. Sharma, 'Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman', in *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Gauhati University Publications, Gauhati, 1978, p. 50.

⁷⁹ B.K. Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1961, p. 10.

⁸⁰ Maheswar Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Department of Publication, University of Gauhati, Gauhati, 1965, p. 87.

⁸¹ Sankaradeva (1449-1568 CE.) preached *Bhakti* or devotion to one god i.e. Vishnu-Krishna and the *Bhagavata Purana* became the most influential and authoritative work.

viz; *Chari-bhagi*, *Na-bhagi* and *Chaidhya-bhagi* respectively.⁸² The basis of division was the lineage of the three sons of the first Mayong king Suinat Singha viz., Muhit Singha, Moniram Singha and Sarascha Chandra Singha. Muhit Singha had four sons and the descendants of these four sons came to be known as *Chari Bhagi*. Moniram Singha had nine sons and the descendants of these sons came to be known as *Na-bhagi*. Sarascha Chandra Singha had fourteen sons and their descendents were known as *Chaidhya-bhagi*. It was during the reign of King Sarascha Chandra Singha that all the three *phaidis* had embraced Vaisnavism in different *sattras* and became a follower of the Brahmanical faith. Dhanya Ram Roy observed, “Since then, the royal family of Mayong gave over their *Kachari Kol* and became Koch”.⁸³ It may be noted that by the second half of the 16th and 17th centuries CE, Vaisnavism had become popular in the Brahmaputra valley and Mayong also became influence by the widespread Bhakti tradition.

There are extensive archaeological remains of temples dedicated to Visnu and his *avatars* (incarnations), and icons of the deity throughout Assam which prove that Vaishnavism was fairly popular in Assam. Inscriptions also prove the prevalence of the cult in the pre-Ahom period. The earliest of all the inscripational records issued by the kings of early Assam is the Umachal Rock inscription of Maharajadhiraja Surendravarman identified with king Mahendravarman (C. 470-494 CE).⁸⁴ The record refers to the construction by this king of a cave-temple of lord Balabhadra (also known as Balarama, the eight incarnation of Vishnu).⁸⁵ Different incarnations of Vishnu like Krishna, Narasimha, and Baraha are

⁸² Dhanya Ram Roy, *A History of Mayong*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ H.K. Barpujari, (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.- I, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2004, (Second Edition). p. 49.

⁸⁵ M.M. Sharma, ‘Umachal Rock Inscription of Surendravarman’, *op. cit.*, p .2.

frequently mentioned in the *mantraputhis*. For instance, the *Shakti Shel Mantra* starts with the invocation to Krisna and is given as follows:⁸⁶

*“Srikrishnai namu
Shakti Shelat jabe Lakhman parila
Pache Ramchandra uthi Bilap Karila
Hari Hari Kaika Gaila pranar Bhaiai
Muka ite ghur Shuka Sagare Pelai...”*

(Free Translation: I pay my obeisance to Lord Sri Krisna. When Laxman fell on the *Shakti Shel*, Ramachandra began to wail by uttering the name of Hari that his beloved brother Laxman has breathed his last, thus leaving Ramachandra in the sea of grief...).

A *Narasimha Mantra* recorded in *mantraputhi* indicates that the people were familiar with Narasimha, an incarnation of Visnu. There is also a Narasimha temple at the Hiloikhunda village, and a Visnu temple at Kajali chawki. Krisna is often depicted with his *gopis* (cowherds). Regarding the influence of Vaisnavism at Mayong Dilip Kumar Kalita opines as thus:⁸⁷ “After 1564 the Vaishnava religion gained popularity in this area. A *Sattra* of the *Mahapurusia* sect was established in Kasasila in the year 1964.” The various *Sattras* established in Mayong include Daipara *Sattra*, Khulagaon *Sattra*, Kumuraguri *Sattra* and Misamari *Sattra*.⁸⁸ The people were gradually initiated into Vaisnavism with through the active participation of the *Sattra* institutions and the initiation into caste Hindu was performed through three stages.

An esoteric cult known as *Ratikhowa*, believed to be a corrupt form of Vaishnavism was practiced in Mayong.⁸⁹ As the name suggests, the practitioners and followers of the cult perform the rituals secretly at night. The *Ratikhowa* sect

⁸⁶ *Shakti Shel*, Verse: 1, Custodian: Pranab Saikia, Village: Ouguri, Mayong.

⁸⁷ D.K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ D.K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

was propagated by the believers of the *Kaal Samhati* sect.⁹⁰ The *Kaal Samhati* was founded by Gopal Ata of Bhawanipur and he was one of the twelve apostles deputed by Madhavadeva, a Neo-Vaishnavite saint. One Sundaradeva associated with this fold is believed to be the founder of the *Ratikhowa* sect. There are several other such sects who perform rituals secretly and they include *Gopidhara* or *Bhakat Sewa*, *Bati Bhagua*, *Purnadharia*, *Gopikhela* etc.

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. These festivals may broadly be categorized according to their primary characteristics, duration and spatiality - into religious, agricultural, and socio-cultural festivals. These festivals served to remind the communities of their customs and traditions and it was also a platform for reinforcing communal bond among the participants. There were many types of festivals which were celebrated in Mayong, Gobha, Dimarua, *Saturaja* (7 kingdoms) and *Pachuraja* and (5 kingdoms).

⁹⁰ Neo-Vaishnavism split into four *sanghatas* or sub-sects after the death of Sankardeva: Brahma Sanghati, Purusa Sanghati, Nika Sanghati and Kaal Sanghati.

The Goshain Uliua Utshab festival which initiated at Mayong under the royal patronage of Sarascha Singha, the tenth king of Mayong in the 17th century CE. The festival is celebrated from the fourth to the sixth day of the Assamese month of *Bahag* (April). The king visited the holy place of *Navadwip* for pilgrimage and on return he installed the statue of Basudeba at the royal house, performed rituals by the royal priests and stated the worship of the deity. Four statues which were handed over to Medhis or priests of the Yogi community and they were to keep the images in safe custody and perform regular rituals. During the festival, the five images of the deities are brought together once a year to the courtyard of the palace and worshipped as Goshai Uliua Utsab or *Mela*. The images are brought to the site of worship in different decorated palanquins, each carried by two youths in traditional attire. The procession to the palace is accompanied by the people of respective *khels*⁹¹ to the beats of drums and other musical instruments such as *khul-taal*, *sankha ghanta* etc. The four images are placed on both the sides of the statue of Basudeba, which has already been placed in the courtyard of the palace after which the rituals are performed. On the second day i.e. the fifth day of *Bahag*, these statues are taken to *Panchagoshai-than* (shrine of five gods) at Hatimuria village and to *Bamungoshai-than* at Rajamayong. It is significant that the prerogative of carrying the sacred idol of Basudeba from palace is given to the Karbi community which may explain the centrality of the Karbis in Mayong history and culture. The rituals include the traditional dance of the Karbis with sword and shield and the performers are dressed in the traditional attire. At the *than* of the Rajamayong village, the all the

⁹¹ The *Paik* and *Khel* system was the foundation of Ahom administrative and socio-economic structure. The *paiks* (corvees) were grouped into divisions called *khels*.

sacred idols unite and from there the procession proceeds to Hatimuria village.⁹² When all are seated at the site of festival, garlands are offered and the ritual of *naam-prasanga* takes place.

The third or last day i.e. the sixth day of *Bahag* in April is the most important day of the festival when the sacred idols on the palanquins are taken in procession to the old capital of the kingdom, i.e. Burhamayong. People assemble at *Bhagawati-than* in Burhamayong village and the king is greeted with betel-nut, with a *sarai* (traditional item made of bell metal) after which the procession starts on foot towards Burhamayong accompanied by music. The procession covers six villages on the way and generates a festive environment in Mayong. People greet the procession on their gates with their offerings, flowers and garlands. The procession which is gradually joined by people from different villages becomes a large congregation. When the procession arrives in the northern boundary of Burhamayong, the Karbi residents of the village again welcomes the procession by performing their traditional song and dance which exhibits a glimpse of the cultural life of the area. At *Bhagawati-than*, religious ritual of *naam-Prassanga* and traditional songs and dances are performed. The purpose of the festival is to showcase the king as the legitimized ruler of the people who is also the authority to maintain the deities. The procession and joining by people from the villages integrates the kingdom in a symbolic way. The role played by the Karbi community reflects the importance attached to the community in the multi-ethnic society of Mayong. The Karbi community also celebrates an agricultural festival called *Ranker Puja* on the first Tuesday of the month of *Phalgun* (February-

⁹² Utpal Nath, “*Mayongor Aitihashik Goshai Uliua Utsav: Ek Chamu Abalukon*”, in Bijay Teron and Niranjana Baruah (eds.), *Panchagoshai*, Souvenir, 347th Aitihashik Burhamayong Goshai Uliua Mela and Rangali Bihu Utsav, Morigaon, 2015, (Second Issue), pp. 15-16.

March) and dedicated to their god Dehal. The god is worshipped for the welfare of the cultivators to enhance the productivity of land and to seek the welfare of the community. This festival is also dedicated to other gods such as, Burha Goshain, Mahadeu, Nualukar, Balia Mahong, Namseng, Baragopal and Bamungoshai.

The people of Mayong used to participate in the *Junbeel Mela* associated with *Magh Bihu* and celebrated under the auspices of the Gobha King.⁹³ The festival provides an opportunity of interaction among the people living in the plains with those of the hills. A secular festival, the barter system was an important feature of the *Junbeel Mela*.⁹⁴ The people of Mayong participated in community fishing which also forms an important activity of the other kingdoms in central Assam. Fishing was done collectively at the time of *Magh Bihu*. The people of Gobha and Dimarua kingdoms also maintain community fishing.⁹⁵ In the spring season, *Bahag Bihu* is celebrated in Mayong as in other parts of Assam. It starts on the last day of the Assamese month of *Sankranti*. The first day known as *Garu Bihu* dedicated to the domesticated cows; and in the morning they are washed in the ponds or in the river. The ritual includes smearing of mustard oil, raw turmeric etc. on their body and use of certain branches of plants accompanied with uttering sacred verses. In the evening, the cows are welcomed with new sets of ropes in the cowshed. The next day which is the first day of the month of *Bahag* is known as the *Manuh Bihu* when the young seeks blessings

⁹³ Personal interview with Phulsingh Konwar, 67 yrs, Member of the Royal family of Gobha kingdom, Kamarkuchi, Amlighat, Jagiroad on 05/01/2018.

⁹⁴ Dhiraj Patar, *Morigaon Jilar Utsav- Anusthan: Ek Samikshatmak Adhyayan*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2013, p. 86.

⁹⁵ Personal interview with Holisingh Rahang, 50 yrs, Titular king of Dimarua kingdom, Bamphar, Khetri, Kamrup on 06/01/2018.

from parents and other elders of the house. This festival along with the *Magh Bihu* or the *Bhogali Bihu* bears certain similarities with the *Makar Sankranti* or *Pausa Sankranti* celebrated in different parts of the country. The *Kati Bihu* is associated with the bounty of the paddy fields and earthen pots are illuminated in the field and under the *tulsi* (holy basil) plant. The importance attached to *tulsi* plant which is associated with Krishna worship indicates the influence of Brahmanical faith.

The Ambubachi festival is celebrated every year in the month of *Ahar* (June) from the 7th 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. After the period of four days the entrance of the temple opens again. People from all parts of the country visit the Kamakhya temple to pay their offerings to this festival. It is symbolic of the fertility cult where the earth is considered to be ready for harvesting after the festival. The people of Mayong perform all the restrictions and rituals associated with the festival. There are restrictions during the festival days for ploughing land, cutting trees, plucking fruits etc. The festival of Holi is celebrated in Mayong with full vigour. On the day people offer the colours to the seat of deity at the *namghars* (congregational halls) and *sattras* (monasteries). The womenfolk arrange *Ghosha Kirtan* and play with colours. At night in certain places people arrange *Bhaonas*, the traditional drama introduced by Sankaradeva. At Mayong the Holi festival is extensively arranged at Garanga temple.

For the people of Mayong, Krishna occupies an important position among the gods in the Hindu pantheon. Janmastami is celebrated each year on the 8th day

of the month of *Bhada* (August-September). In connection with the festival different cultural programs are arranged in the village *namghars*. The *namprasanga* and *bhaonas* are arranged. There is a temple dedicated to goddess Lakhmi, the consort of Visnu which is situated near Hatimuria village. Lakhmi Puja is celebrated with much fanfare as compared to Durga Puja. The goddess Durga is known by different names such as *Dashabhuja*, *Mahishmardini*, *Kaityaani*, *Dikkarabashini* etc. The festival is performed in the autumn season. Viswakarma puja is also celebrated particularly by artisans who pray for attaining success in their respective fields. The festival for worshipping of Sun god is mainly celebrated in Chanaka village. The goddess Kali is worshipped in Mayong and there is a *Kali-than* at Rajamayong village. The festival of *Deepawali* is also celebrated in Mayong. The *Raas* festival is celebrated in the autumn season and organised in Rajamayong village. Ganapati, Bighneswara, Bighniraj or Vinayaka are other names of Ganesa and this popular deity is also worshipped in Mayong.

Traditional festivals are still given prominence in Mayong. There are some rituals connected to agriculture such as *Guch-dia*, *Nara-singa*, *Na-khua*, *Bhekuli-bia* which are connected to the folk belief system of Mayong. The goddess *Sitala* is worshipped to give relief from diseases in the summer season.⁹⁶ *Garakhia Sewa* is 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. *Garakhiya Sabah* festival is celebrated at the grazing fields or in a village, under a large tree where *naamkirtan* ritual is performed. The *Bhekuli-bia* rituals are intended to bring

⁹⁶ Personal interview with Lata Saikia, 51 yrs, House wife, Sativeti village, Mayong on 07/10/2017.

abundant rainfall. The *Na-khua* has the tradition that cereals should not be given or sold prior to the completion of the festival. Some communities' uses local rice beer prepared from the new grains and guests are invited. People enjoy a meal together which is prepared from the new crops are served.

The first day of harvesting of the *saali* crops is known as *Guch-lua*. Normally, it is performed in any one day of the *Ahar* month. It is the women who perform necessary rituals in the paddy fields. However, woman going through the monthly menstruation are considered impure and not allowed to participate in the rituals. After the end of the tilling season in the paddy field, the peasants celebrate it as an occasion in the form of the *Haal-utha*. The *Dhanor aaglua Utsab* relates to the first time a paddy is harvested for a season and is accompanied by offering prayers in the field. Three branches of paddy crop are cut which is brought and stored in the granary. There are certain guidelines for carrying the paddy home such as maintaining silence till he reaches the destination and ritual is complete.

Like most traditional societies, the socio-economic life in Mayong was centered on agriculture. Rice was the main agricultural produce though they also cultivated like the mustard seed, sugarcane, pulses, sesame, ginger, turmeric and varieties of vegetables. The *Kaivartas* who lived in Hatimuria and Kalshilapar were dependent upon fishing for earning their livelihood. In medieval Asam, artisans who were involved in iron smelting were known as *loh-shalias*.⁹⁷ The *Kamars* or blacksmiths were involved in the manufacturing of iron objects.

⁹⁷ Sudeshna Purkayastha, "Iron Industry in the Brahmaputra Valley: *Loh Shalias* and the *Kamars* (Late Medieval to Mid Colonial Period)", *The Indian Historical Review*, XXXIV, No. 1, January, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 152-66.

Barter system was prevalent and the iron brought by the Garos was exchanged with agricultural products like rice, mustard seeds etc. with people from Upper Assam. The village where the *Kamars* (Blacksmiths) were settled came to be known as Kamarpur.⁹⁸ Kajalimukh is well known for the clay which is used for making the musical instrument called *khul*.⁹⁹ The archaeological finds in Mayong related to both religious and secular sites imply that the artisanal activities were prevalent along with the primary agricultural economy. Fishing was a profession which was also carried out since some villages were regularly submerged by the floods of the Brahmaputra river.

In the context of colonial Assam, Guneswar Deka referred to an agreement signed on 12th February, 1794 CE, between Captain Welsh and Ahom king Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795 CE). In this agreement the sum of revenue was mentioned which was to be collected from the rulers of Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon. The rulers of Mayong and Panbari had to pay a sum of Rs 400 jointly.¹⁰⁰ A.J. Moffat Mills recorded that Narayan Singha of Mayong had paid a sum of Rs. 2457 to the government.¹⁰¹ The information received from field survey conducted for the present research revealed that people of several villages regularly used to shift from the northern banks of the Brahmaputra river in the early decades of the 20th century to Mayong in search of pasture land. Interviews were conducted in the villages of Ouguri, Sativeti, Hatibagara, Chanaka and it was communicated that several families in these villages were dependent on

⁹⁸ *Vamsawali, op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ Jayshree Kalita and Dhanmoni Kalita, “*Chandrapurat Paryatanar Sambhabaniyata aru Ear Bikash*”, in Ghanashyam Saikia (ed.), *Souvenir, Silver Jubilee Celebration of Sri Sri Bishnu Yagna at Kajali Chawki Bishnu Temple*, Kajali Chawki, Morigaon, 2009, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Guneswar Deka, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁰¹ A.J. Moffat Mills, *Reports on the Province of Assam*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 1984, (Second Edition), p. 479.

cattle rearing. Land erosion being the major factor, the shortage of pasture lands forced them to move to Mayong.¹⁰² During the first half of the 20th century CE barren lands in Mayong even attracted people from Kamrup district, especially from Hajo and Ramdia.¹⁰³ The interviewees informed that even in contemporary times, the titular king of Mayong was approached for establishing new settlements in Mayong.¹⁰⁴ Migrations have been taking place from East Bengal and Nepal in the last decades of the 20th century CE. They were settled in Murkata and Murabari villages.

Women in Mayong society were active participants in the economy along with the male counterparts. Shihabuddin Talish, who had accompanied Mir Jumla during the invasion Assam, remarked that, "...the wives of the *rajās* and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody and they move about the market places with bare heads."¹⁰⁵ Biographical literature of medieval Assam mentions that women participated in economic and religious activities without any discrimination.¹⁰⁶ Such observations are taken by many scholars to indicate that the women during this period led a comparatively free life without customs such as *purdah*.¹⁰⁷ However, that the society by the 16th century CE followed patriarchal norms is known from *Mayong Vamsawali* which is a book of royal genealogy recording a dynasty through the male line. By this time the Mayong

¹⁰² Personal interview with Jiten Saikia, 43 yrs, Teacher, Loonmati L.P. School, Sativeti village, Mayong on 07/04/2014.

¹⁰³ Ramchandra Nath, "*Mayongar Thair Namar Etibritya*", in Utpal Nath (ed.), *Tantram: A Souvenir of the Silver Jubilee Celebration of M.A. College, Morigaon*, 2017, p. 119.

¹⁰⁴ Personal interview with Paresh Kalita, 55 yrs, Social activist and farmer, Bardia on 12/01/2019.

¹⁰⁵ Sir Edward Gait., *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2008, (Fourth Indian Reprint), *op. cit.*, p, 149.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.- III, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

society was influenced by Brahmanical ideology and as such changes would have taken place in the traditional norms and customs which earlier gave women a respectable place in the society. The presence of *Bezni* or female folk healers in the society as a continuity of the earlier reveal the position that women enjoyed in the traditional setup.¹⁰⁸ The menace of witch-hunting which targets women are also not practiced in Mayong so that they enjoyed some sort of social security. Thus women freely participated in the festivals and other religious functions. In spite of the advent of Brahmanical religion which follows rules of purity and pollution, the people of Mayong were not affected by social evils such as child marriage, female infanticide, *sati* etc. were not known. In general, the women enjoyed some privileges of the traditional society although the patriarchal norms of the Brahmanical faith were to gradually relegate to the background.

Divination is popular in Mayong and is practiced through ritual manipulation of a system of signs and symbols, such as tea leaf patterns of the sequence playing cards within a deck, or by examination of the lines in the palm of the hand and omens of various sorts. The belief is that the practitioners can discover things that are unknowable by any other available means. Divination is also frequently used to foretell the future and to ascertain what has occurred in the past-to extend comprehension in time as well as space. In the context of Assam, B.K. Kakati,¹⁰⁹ observed that the *mantras* compiled in early Assamese language bear the distinct stamp of Vajrayana tenets. In the opinion of B.K.

¹⁰⁸ Personal interview with Malati Saikia, *Bezni*, (Folk Healer) and House wife, Ouguri on 21/01/2016.

¹⁰⁹ B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2003, (Fourth Edition), p. 188.

Barua,¹¹⁰ “As a frontier region Assam appears to be a veritable asylum for all kinds of uncanny beliefs and superstitions. Since early times the province happened to be a meeting ground of the Austric, Dravidian, Aryan and Sino-Tibetan speakers, and thus the aboriginal beliefs, cults and myths of these diverse communities mingled together and formed the foundation of the *Tantras*.” Mayong is still known as a ‘land of magic and *tantric mantra*,’ although traditional healing practices are confined to few ailments such as snake-bite. The *mantraputhis* are texts which have distinct Brahmanical influence since the deities invoked by the healers are of the Hindu pantheon.

The multi-ethnic society of Mayong may be understood against the history of migration which occurred over a period of time due to the geographical location of Mayong. Saivism and Vaisnavism are the two main religions that influenced many aspects of Mayong history and culture. Sankaradeva’s Vaisnavism may be said to have brought about a factor of socio-cultural integration among the various ethnic communities such as the Karbis, Koches, Kalitas, Kaivartas, Keots, Nath Yogis etc. through the active support of the *namghars* and *sattras*.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.