

## CHAPTER IV

# RITUALS AND RITUAL SPECIALISTS

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Rituals are an inevitable component of culture, extending from the large-scale social and political processes to the most intimate aspects of self-experience. An important characteristic of ritual is that there is always, in one way or another, a relation to *sacrality* and *religion*.<sup>1</sup> As such the field of Ritual Studies<sup>2</sup> is wide to include themes such as cultural memory, media and communication, religious beliefs, and many others. It clusters around primary realities such as sexuality, death, strife, and failure, and deal with those sectors of experience which do not seem amenable to rational control. Rituals are the prescribed order of performing rites in society and are regularly followed by the members of a society generations after generation. While the ritual specialists are the persons possessing expert knowledge or skill in performing the rituals in a society. Handelman and Lindquist<sup>3</sup> explain that: “A ritual is presumed to be a performance which has multiple layers. Each of the levels are said to have a meaning and each are understood to varying degrees by the participants.” In the context of Assam, H.K. Barpujari<sup>4</sup> commented that there were instances of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ritual Studies: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*; oxfordre.com>religion>view>acrefore; Accessed on 12/01/2018.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Post, “Rituals, Practices and Symbolism,” September 2015; Online Publication DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.21. Accessed on 12/01/18.

<sup>3</sup> Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (ed.), “Ritual in its Own Right.” *Durham Anthropology Journal*, Vol. 13(2), Berghahn Journals, Oxford, New York, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.- III, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 2007, (Third Edition), p. 192.

belief in the presence of supernatural beings in medieval Assamese society and that it finds mention in several medieval Assamese literatures.

Mayong exhibits a fine example of how the interaction between religion and folk medicine has tended the medical and spiritual needs of the society for generations. The folk healer of Mayong known as *Bez* can be defined as an individual who is recognized by the community as a competent person capable of treating a person suffering from physical, mental and social illnesses. The *mantras* used by *Bez* are of two types, viz; one group used for the welfare of the people known as white magic and another group applied for causing harm to others known as black magic. During utterance of the mantras, the gods such as Brahma, Dhanantari, Maheswar, Surya, Chandra etc. are regarded as witnesses to the rituals. It is worth mentioning that the goddess Kamakhya is frequently mentioned in these hymns. The utterances are not intelligible and as such cannot be understood easily.<sup>5</sup> In a study of psycho- physiological effect of *mantras*, it is essential to understand the psychosomatic use of ritual diagrams and formulas in Ayurvedic medicine.<sup>6</sup>

The historians who had visited Assam along with the Muslim invaders had recorded the practice of magic and sorcery in medieval Assam. The *Ain- i- Akbari* written in Persian by Abul Fazal during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605 CE) mentions about the people of Assam practicing divination “by the examination of a child cut out of the womb of a pregnant woman who

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<sup>5</sup> Narayan Das, “*Mayongor Tantra-Mantra*”, Narayan Das and Paramananda Rajbangshi (eds.), *Asamar Sanskriti- Kosh*, Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati, 2014, pp. 517-518.

<sup>6</sup> Arion Rosu, “*Mantra and Yantra in Indian Medicine and Alchemy*”, *Journal Ancient Science of Life*, Vol. VIII, Nos. 1, July 1988, pp. 20-24, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org>, Accessed on 17/01/2019

have gone her full terms of the months”.<sup>7</sup> Another source is the chronicle *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*<sup>8</sup> originally written in Persian language which is a history of Mughal wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the reigns of Emperor Jahangir (1605 - 1627 CE) and Shahjahan (1628 - 1658 CE). Mirza Nathan in the work expressed that the Ahoms “practice augury prior to involvement in a war”.<sup>9</sup> He further observed that the Assamese people practiced sorcery prior to involvement in any war.<sup>10</sup> He mentioned that: “...they send some magic objects floating down the river towards enemy’s side, they take it as a good Omen. If it travels upstream out of its own accord they take it as foreboding something against them and consider it as a sign of their defeat and they do not go out to battle”.<sup>11</sup> In this context, Mirza Nathan<sup>12</sup> recorded that, “...according to that custom, they built one raft of plantain trees which is a well known fruit of India and performed *puja*, i.e., worship of the evils, on it in the following manner”. He further added that,

“...they sacrificed a black man, a dog, a cat, a pig, an ass, a monkey, a he-goat and a pigeon, all black. Their heads were collected together and placed on the raft along with many ripe bananas, pan, betel nut, *chuwa* (*acanthophyllum- squarosum*), various kinds of scents, rice paste coloured red, yellow and green, cotton seeds, mustard oil (*raughan- i- talkh*), ghee (*raughan-i-Zard*) and *sindur* (vermillion) and then the raft was pushed adrift. Though they tried to make it flow down the stream, it did not go and every time it returned towards them. Their augury proved to be inauspicious, and it was therefore, inadvisable on their part to come to the battle”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> H.K Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> Mirza Nathan (tr. M.I. Bora.), *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, Vol.-II, DHAS, Guwahati, 1992, (Second Edition), p. 487.

<sup>9</sup> H.K Barpujari, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Mirza Nathan, (tr. M.I. Bora), *op. cit.*, p. 487.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Local scholars such as Sarbananda Rajkumar,<sup>14</sup> refutes the claims of Mirza Nathan regarding the sacrifice of the ass by the Ahom army prior to a war, since the animal is not found in this region. He further rejected the possibility of human sacrifice prior to war forwarding the justification that the Ahoms had banned human sacrifices at *Kechaikhati-than* at Sadiya and Kamakhya at Nilachala hill. Edward Gait<sup>15</sup> observed that the Ahoms knew the use of superstitions for different practical purposes. He added that during the Battle of Saraighat, all the soldiers and commanders knelt towards the temple and worshipped the goddess and informed as thus: “O Mother Kamakhya, eat up the Moghul and give us victory”.<sup>16</sup> This was supposed to increase the self confidence of the Assamese soldiers. Mir Jumla, the invader from Bengal was accompanied by a scribe named Shihabuddin Talish. The chronicler left behind a document titled, *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah* in which he mentioned that Assam was considered as a land of magic and witchcraft and that the perception was that if anyone goes to Assam they do not return home alive.<sup>17</sup>

That the people of Assam had beliefs in omens is known from the *Dak-bhanita* which contains some aphorisms related to omens. The categories of omens relate to both good and evil in that the positive omens bring good fortune while the negative omen brings misfortune, danger and even death. There is another group of omen which is related to the dreams and its implications in life.<sup>18</sup> The inscriptional records of early Assam also indicate belief on omens. The

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<sup>14</sup> Sarbananda Rajkumar, *Itihase Soaura Chashata Bachar*, Banlata, Dibrugarh, 2000, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> Sir Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2008, (Fourth Indian Reprint)..., p. 292.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> N.N. Acharyya, *A Brief History of Assam*, Omsons Publications, 2007, (Reprint), p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> H.K Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.- III, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

Kamauli grant records that the Daivajna and soothsayers had declared that coming of Vaidyadeva would defeat the other kings of the time.<sup>19</sup> That Ahoms use *mantras* particularly for protection in war has been mentioned in many texts.<sup>20</sup> Sir Edward Gait mentioned in his work that the Ahom rulers had several superstitions and on certain occasions the king deserted the house he was residing because an owl or vulture had perched on that house.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, during the time of war the Deodhais were asked to predict the omens by examining the legs of fowls. The Mughal general Ramsingha even brought the Sikh *Guru* Teg Bahadur from Patna and other five Muslim peers to fight against the magical power of this region.

In Assam the folk healer is known by different names such as *Oja*, *Bez*, *Giani*, *Asurik Chikitschok* etc. During the reign of the Ahoms, the royal physician was known as Bezbarua. They had to provide treatment to the king and other officials. In return of their services they were given the service of some *paiks*. In the Tai Ahom language the *Bez* was called *Changchari* and the Bezbarua was called *Phukechangchari*. It is believed that the Ahoms brought herbs along with different types of seeds, when they had come to the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>22</sup> What is significant is that, apart from the use of traditional herbs as medicines, they also practised many types of incantations and spells for curing the diseases. The practitioners prescribe various kinds of traditional medicines for the treatment and this practice is known as *bejali*.

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<sup>19</sup> Nilima Dutta, *Social Religious and Cultural History of Ancient Assam: A Study Based on Inscriptions*, (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis), Department of History, Gauhati University, 2009, p. 259.

<sup>20</sup> H.K Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. - III, *op. cit.*, p.192.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Edward Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> Ratan Kr. Kakoti, *Ahom Rajatwat Chikitscha Sewa*, (Pratham Buranji) , S.H. Educational Trust, Guwahati, 2009, p. 9.

The folk healers of Mayong are well respected among all other practitioners in Assam although there is a fear about their perceived use of black magic for such remedies. However, the *Bez* in Mayong insists that they are interested to use their traditional knowledge only for the welfare of the society and not to harm others.<sup>23</sup> Some of them revealed that they had the knowledge of incantations and its usage for the purpose of harming people and yet have not practised it on any individual.<sup>24</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. The advent of Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism to Mayong is said to have provided a check towards the practice of black magic since Sankaradeva opposed such practices.

The *Kamratna Tantra* is an 18<sup>th</sup> century work which contains prescribed guidelines regarding the use of incantations. The *mantras* are available in Assamese and Sanskrit languages. The original work written on oblong strips of Sanchi bark was written in ancient Assamese language.<sup>25</sup> The medieval Assamese society believed in ghosts, goblins and in the existence of spirits. The evil spirits were called as *Yakh (Yaksa)*, *Bhut (Bhuta)*, *Do't (Daitya)*, *Bak, Danah (danava)*, *Kandha (Kavandha)*, *Daini (dakini)*, *Khetar (kshetrapal)*, *jigini (yogini)* and *peret (preta)*.<sup>26</sup> It was said that if an individual commits certain activity which was disliked by any of the supernatural entity, the person will be possessed

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<sup>23</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Folk healer & Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015.

<sup>24</sup> Personal Interview with Tilak Hazarika, 65 yrs, Folk healer & Retired Teacher at Ganeshpur LP School, Loonmati on 23/01/2016.

<sup>25</sup> H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

by that invisible entity. It may be mentioned that the *yantras* found at Mayong are mainly connected to Saivism and Saktism.

The *Kamratna Tantra* is a seminal book on Kamrupi Tantric discourse. It contains different aspects of *tantra*, *mantra* and *yantra* composed by traditional practitioners. It deals with various types of charms such as *Vashikaran* (used for subduing), *Vidveshana* (to create enmity), *Uchchatana* (to ward off evil forces), *Stambhana* (to create sensation), *Shanti* (applied for restoring peace and prosperity), and *Marana* (to harm others or to cause physical ailments). The charms of malevolent nature and are known as *abhichara*. It provides the techniques to be adopted to achieve the set goal with the use of *mantras*, *jantras* and medicines. 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.<sup>27</sup> As different *mantras* are applied with different goals similarly the *jantras* also differs according to the specific purpose. Therefore, *jantras* are different designs conforming to the object of worship. *Tantras* are in fact related to the Shakti cult and it bears mystical and magical formulaes. Arthur Avalon<sup>28</sup> has divided the *tantras* into three groups, viz; Bishnu Kranta, Ratha Kranta and Aswa Kranta. The work *Kamaratna Tantra* is included in the Aswakranta group. The *Kamratna Tantra* describes the techniques and methods of preparation of traditional medicines as thus.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Appendix VII, B.

<sup>28</sup> Hemchandra Goswami Tatabhushan and K.N. Sarma (ed.), *Kamratna Tantra*, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, Assam, 1998, p. v. Other texts dealing with such subjects are *Phetkarini Tantra*, *Kaksha Puta* and *Indrajala Vidya*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

“The medicine ought to be prepared while uttering the prescribed incantations; otherwise it is as fruitless as a lump of wood. The herbs are most potent when they are collected from solitary or sacred places or forest, while those growing on anthills, in the vicinity of a well, on gateways, at the foot of tree, beside a temple, or in cremation ground, will not be efficacious even if they are sanctified by incantation, Again the bark, the root and the roots of plants, submerged in water, burnt by fire, and eaten by insects or worms, or having roots in the air, will also produce no effect. ”

The *Kamratna Tantra* suggests that the *mantras*, mystical diagrams and medicines should be practised in particular *tithis* of the month. It notes that: “Acts of subduing should be performed on the seventh lunar day, attracting on the third or the thirteenth, excitation on these on or the sixth, paralysing on the first, the fourth or the fourteenth, charming on the eighth or the ninth, killing on the tenth, the eleventh or the twelfth, and evil - averting on the fifth lunar day or in the full-moon”.<sup>30</sup> The folk healers of Mayong are familiar with the specific guidelines mentioned in the work and expressed that the herbs are collected only under certain conditions.<sup>31</sup> The availability of medicinal plants in this region was noticed by Shihabuddin Talish, the chronicler who entered Assam along with Mir Jumla in 1663 CE and he recorded in *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah*, that a large number of herbs and creepers available in Hindustan and Bengal are available in abundance in Assam.<sup>32</sup>

Kamarupa as such was known as ‘a land of magic and sorcery’.<sup>33</sup> Madhavacarya in his work titled, *Sankara Digvijaya* wrote that a prominent *Advaita* scholar of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE had suffered temporarily from fistula

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview with Kamala Saikia, 69 yrs, Housewife, Folk Healer , Sativeti village, Mayong, on 07/04/2014.

<sup>32</sup> N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>33</sup> H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.-III, *op. cit.*, p. 191.



(*bhagandar*) because of the spell applied by Abhinavagupta of Kamarupa. Besides, the *Katha-gurucarita* also mentioned about two *Baudha tatakiyas* (Buddhist magician) who had cast evil spells on the people while Sankaradeva was living in Belguri. The *Thakuracarita* mentioned a reference in which some people were reprimanded by the younger grandson of Sankaradeva, i.e., Caturbhuj, for applying a charm to drive away evil spirits.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the *Mayamara Satrar Vamsawali* describes how the founder of the Mayamara subsect i.e. Aniruddhadeva had produced an illusionary cobra in an empty pitcher with the help of his magical power in order to prove the authenticity of his statement before the Ahom king Khora Raja alias Chukhampha (1552- 1603 CE).<sup>35</sup>

The *Oja* or *Bez* can identify a person who is possessed by a spirit.<sup>36</sup> Apart from that they can identify the place where the spirit resides.<sup>37</sup> Some spirits and their habitats are: *Bak* (fishing pond), *Yak* (cattle pen), *Kandh* (cremation ground), *Bhut* (deserted cottage), *Buda – Dangaria* (Banayan or other large tree).<sup>38</sup> In medieval Assam, the astrologers and fortune tellers played a prominent role in everyday life.<sup>39</sup> They even occupied an important place in the Ahom court.<sup>40</sup> They were entrusted to prepare horoscope of a newborn child by calculating the probable impact of the influence of the nine planets of the zodiac on the baby, and also remedial measures to be adopted or to ward off negative

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<sup>34</sup> V. Oja, *Thakuracarita*, p. 73; cited in *TCHA*, Vol. III, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>35</sup> H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>36</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Folk healer & Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015.

<sup>37</sup> H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *American Missionaries*, pp. 182-184, cited in H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol.- III, *op.cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Sir Edward Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

effects, if any. The earliest reference to the astrologer or *Daivajna* is found in the Kamauli Grant by Vaidyadeva and there are also references in land grants of the Ahom kings and the literary works of Durgavara and Sukavinarayana.<sup>41</sup> There are references that they were receiving the support of Ahom rulers in medieval Assam. The important officials and the monarchs had maintained astrologers. They were entrusted to calculate the auspicious moments for initiating important military or civil projects. Regarding the belief in the existence of evil spirits, S.N. Sarma mentioned that the Ahom ruler Susengpha or Pratap Singha or Burha Raja (1603-1641 CE) was often possessed by a spirit (*deo*). The king expressed about this frequent association with the spirit (*deo*) and therefore had doubts about his own competence to rule the kingdom. He is said to have made certain offerings to Lord Mahadeva and he got relief from the spirit only after satisfying the deity by constructing a temple.<sup>42</sup> S.K. Bhuyan in the foreword of *Assam Buranji* mentioned about the genealogical background of the chronicler Harakanta Sadar-Amin. The chronicler born in 1813 CE belonged to a well known astrologer family known as Sonamuar Ghar. His ancestor Suryyavar Suryya Vipra who came to Assam during the rule of Sukhampha Khora Raja (1552-1603 CE) is said to have given fine predictions regarding Koch King Naranarayan, and the future of the king and kingdom which eventually came true. As a result, valuable gifts were offered to him along with the title of *Sonamua* or the ‘golden mouthed’. Pratap Singha is also supposed to have deep faith in astrologers. H.K. Barpujari observed, “He once asked Chandibar Daivajna to ascertain by astrological calculations or by thought-reading what was passing in the mind of the king. The

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Assam Buranji (A Chronicle of Assam from the Earliest Ahom Kings to Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha)*, DHAS, Guwahati, 2010, (Fourth Edition), p. 37.

*Daivajna's* calculations being found true the monarch feared that the *Pandit* would be able to ascertain the actual retreat of the king if he ever fled from his capital at the approach of a foreign army. Such an omniscient astrologer was thus a danger to the safety of the kingdom. Chandibar was therefore expelled from the realm.” King Shiva Singha even transferred his kingly responsibility and authority to his chief queen Pramathesvari on the advice of astrologers.<sup>43</sup> There are instances that the Ahom rulers had deputed expert astrologers to the establishment of all important administrative officers and military commanders; and astrologers were always consulted before any military expeditions<sup>44</sup> The persons who had earned expertise in this field were honoured with the title of *Doloi* or *Bardoloi* by the Ahoms and *Khari* by the rulers of Darrang.<sup>45</sup>

In Mayong, as in many other parts of Assam, there is the practice of *mangal - cowa* which uses certain diagrams in circles and lines drawn on the ground to predict the future.<sup>46</sup> There are various ways of prediction and the Ahoms used fowl legs for foreseeing a probable incident of the future.<sup>47</sup> In this context S.N Sharma<sup>48</sup> observed that they had this unique system of their own probably originated from Thailand or Burma. The practice of augury by examining the entrails and hearts of killed animals and birds existed. Sarbananda Rajkumar<sup>49</sup> opines that such practices were quite common among many tribal

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<sup>43</sup> H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. – III, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>44</sup> Sir Edward Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>45</sup> H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *TCHA*, Vol. - III, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Malati Saikia, 74 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Ouguri on 21/01/2016.

<sup>47</sup> H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Sarbananda Rajkumar, *Itihase Soaura Chashata Bachar*, Banalata, Dibrugarh, 2000, p. 11.

communities in Assam. Besides, he has provided a detailed description about the use of bones collected from fowls.

The soothsayers played a role during religious festivals, and when they dance and by continuous beating of drums and cymbals perform certain rituals including drinking blood of fowl, ducks and pigeons offered to them by the devotees.<sup>50</sup> The act of divination takes place when the soothsayer in a state of trance begins to foretell about the prospective happenings in future and prescribes remedial steps to follow.<sup>51</sup> The *Deodhani* (female dancer), and the *Deodha* (male dancer during the worship of Marai goddess Manasa) are two such ritual specialists who are able to foretell the future when possessed by the spirit of the deity in whose favour the prayer is being offered.

The folk healers are also ‘medicine men’ who have to pay attention to an individual whose exact illness is not known. Some of the disorders are believed to originate due to human enmity, some appear due to the displeasure of gods and goddess, some occurs due to natural or physical reasons, while still others may occur due to diseases inflicted by animals. The *mantraputhis* mention the treatment for diseases such as those caused by germs, snake-bite, common cold, stomach ailments etc. The knowledge acquired by the folk healers is gathered through experience of practical application of the traditional medicines.<sup>52</sup> There are some similarities found between the traditional practices of Mayong with other parts of the state. H.K, Sarma observed that the treatment followed in

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<sup>50</sup> H.K. Barpujari, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with Ganesh Ojah, 65 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Burhamayong on 11/01/2018.

Mayong may be categorised in to two groups, viz, the oriental and western.<sup>53</sup> The first group comprises of the Ayurvedic and *Ashurik* treatment, the second group consist of Hekimi, Allopathic and Homeopathy.<sup>54</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>55</sup> However, the folk healers of Mayong are cautious about misuse of the knowledge; therefore, he does not willingly share the knowledge to any unknown individual.<sup>56</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. There is a common hesitation among the folk healers to transmit their knowledge to an individual without knowing his or her background. The prime factor behind this reluctance is the lack of confidence upon the credibility of the new learners.<sup>57</sup> The healers should have a good temperament. In rare cases the duration of training to become an expert may take as long as twelve years.

The *mantraputhis* are regarded as sacred texts and the practitioner has to preserve it with due care and with sanctity. Any disregard of the sacred *mantra* text will invite trouble for him and his family members and they are regarded as *deo-loga* (possessed by deities).<sup>58</sup> Therefore, there is a tendency among the practitioners to hand over the *mantraputhis* to someone if he found to be

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<sup>53</sup> Hemanta Kumar Sarma, *Mayang Anchalar Loka- Sanskriti*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 1993, p. 52.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Personal interview with Tilak Hazarika, 65 yrs, Folk healer and Retired Teacher, Chanaka Ganeshpur L.P. School, Loonmati on 23/01/2016

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with Malati Saikia, 74 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Ouguri on 21/01/2016.

<sup>57</sup> Personal interview with Jagyu Deka, 75 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Burhamayong on 04/02/2016.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

trustworthy to maintain the sanctity before he stops the practice or before his demise. A crucial aspect of the folk tradition is that the *mantras* are not always found on a written form. Therefore, the death of a practitioner leaves a void and with him certain aspects of the valuable traditional knowledge are lost forever.<sup>59</sup> Besides, the practitioners consider the manuscripts of mantras as quite sacred and to be maintained underperforming certain periodic ceremonies and sacrifices. Hence, there is always a psychological pressure upon the family members of the owner to maintain the sanctity in their household. They are aware about the possible ill effects, if they fail to do so. Therefore, there is a tendency among the practitioners to hand over the *mantraputhis* to someone trustworthy. If he fails to search out someone trust worthy or competent enough to maintain those manuscripts, before his death, he prefers to immerse them in water, generally in a river.<sup>60</sup> Sometimes, the family members put them in the river out of psychological trauma due to the liabilities and restrictions attached with them.

The practice of sorcery known as *ban* (*ban*: arrow) which may be of positive or negative nature, was practised in Mayong.<sup>61</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita<sup>62</sup> explains as thus: “...in the art of *bejali*, 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* applied by the *Bez*, which include *Bishali-ban*,

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<sup>59</sup> Lokendra Hazarika, *Mayangar Itihas, Morigaon*, Rodali Prakashan, Jagi Bhakatgaon, Morigaon, 2011, p. 149

<sup>60</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015.

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with Debakanta Saikia, 78 yrs, Farmer, Ouguri on 21/01/2016.

<sup>62</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

*Purush-ban, Godha-ban, Rashmi-ban, Thumuri-ban, and Lengra-ban* etc.<sup>63</sup> The practitioners of Mayong had possess the knowledge to apply different types of *bans* according to the needs.<sup>64</sup>

Though the *bans* are regarded as a medium of sorcery to cause harm to others, there are certain *bans* which are not harmful such as the *Muhini-ban* which are meant to attract an individual. In practising the *ban*, the *Bez* makes a representative image of a man with rice powder and puts a straw on the image which is supposed to be the replica of the victim. Once the *ban* is believed to be a success, the person against whom the *ban* was applied is expected to fall ill, and there would be no remedy for the same which can save the victim from the illness. K.C. Nath mentioned about one of the *mantra* used for fascination by the practitioners in Mayong. The *Muhini Mantra*<sup>65</sup> reads as thus:

*“Sri Krishnai namah dhanantarai namah  
Kat kat katari mat mat muthi  
Moi bastra jarilu amukir hiyat uthi  
Rame anile paan, sitai anile chun  
Lakhmane anile guwa, moi bastra jari disu haat pati lua  
Eai baikya lariba chariba,  
Mahadev parvatir matha kaati bhujan kariba  
Siddhi gurur pau, rakhya kora Kalika Kamakhya  
Dhanantari mau”*

[**Free Translation:** I pay my obeisance to Lord Sri Krisna. Just as the hardness of the knife and the firmness of a fist, I have waved clothes on him/her by being on the heart. Ram has brought betel-leaf, Sita has brought lime, Laxman has brought betel nut, I offer liberally and you take with your hands. If you disobey, you will munch after chopping the heads of Mahadev and Sati Parvati. Let the *Guru* fulfil the prayer and the goddess Kamakhya give protection.]

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Personal interview with Sarat Chandra Nath, 78 yrs, Retired Head Master, Loonmati L.P. School, Rajamayong on 22/01/2019.

<sup>65</sup> Kamal Chandra Nath, *Mayongt Mantra-Sanskritir Sadhana: Eti Samikha*, Saidyasnata Prakashan, Charaibahi, Morigaon, 2009, p. 30.

The variety of objects which are used in the practise of a *ban* by a sorcerer includes the victim's nail, the fallen hair, a piece of cloth, and bones, skin, flesh and scales of fish, animals and humans, along with thorns of certain plants and trees.<sup>66</sup> One or few of these objects are charmed with *mantras* and buried.<sup>67</sup> Generally, Tuesdays and Saturdays are considered as appropriate to initiate a new learner to the craft. The practical knowledge of the use of herbs in their natural conditions is also learnt from the *Bez*.<sup>68</sup>

The *mukhlaga* refers to a harm caused by an individual who possesses an 'evil eye.' Further, it is important to note that the evil effect is not confined to human beings only as on certain occasions; it affects plants and domestic animals too.<sup>69</sup> It is believed that if a healthy person became weak or lost interest in food, or if any disease is afflicted, the reason could be due to the 'evil eye' or *mukhlaga*. Further, a coconut or betel-nut which falls to the ground prematurely is also considered to have occurred as a result of *mukhlaga*.<sup>70</sup>

The diseases like measles, small pox, and chicken pox are considered as having afflicted due to the appearance of the *Ai* or the goddess Sitala.<sup>71</sup> To please the goddess and seek for remedy, the rituals to be performed are *Ag Kara* or *Topola Bandha*.<sup>72</sup> The items which are generally offered are a betel-nut and leaf, along with coins which are tied together in a piece of cloth. This may be

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<sup>66</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015.

<sup>67</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>68</sup> Personal interview with Putuli Saikia, 60 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Hatigarh Kuchiani on 26/12/2017.

<sup>69</sup> Personal interview with Sashiram Saikia, 75 yrs, Farmer, Hiloikhunda on 20/01/2016.

<sup>70</sup> Personal interview with Pranita Saikia, 45 yrs, Housewife, Hatibagara on 10/01/2018.

<sup>71</sup> Personal interview with Mrs. Lata Saikia, 51 yrs, Housewife, Sativeti, Mayong, on 07/10/2017.

<sup>72</sup> Personal interview with Lepi Saikia, 97 yrs, Housewife, Kajali Chawki on 10/01/2018.



accompanied by sacrifice of a pair of pigeons, ducks, goats, and coins or pieces of the metals- copper, silver or gold.<sup>73</sup> She is propitiated by performance of a folk song known as *Ai-naam*. The prayer is conducted by the women of the locality on the third day of the disease.<sup>74</sup> The patient is advised to live in a clean and secluded condition and restricted from consumption of non-vegetarian food items. Each year the youth of each village conducts a *Baatkirtan* in the villages with the belief that it would oust the diseases from the village.<sup>75</sup> Generally a procession starts from the village *namghar* (community prayer house) and goes through the whole villages and ends at the last place of the village.<sup>76</sup> By participating in the procession, they believe that now onwards the villagers would be free from diseases. Dressed in traditional attires, they sing the devotional song or *naam* to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

It is believed that sometimes some persons offer certain medicines with evil intentions, which are called as *ousadh kora* or *kumantra kora*, and this is considered as sorcery.<sup>77</sup> A method of sorcery engages an evil spirit called *Bira*, said to be captured, domesticated and maintained as a pet by a *Bez*.<sup>78</sup> They are believed to take the form of rats and they stay at the residence of the owner. Regular sacrifices are offered on certain occasions to keep them under control. It was believed that a *Bez*, may maintain several *biras* depending upon his capability to maintain them under strict surveillance.

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<sup>73</sup> D.K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

<sup>74</sup> Personal interview with Purnima Saikia, 52 yrs, Ex. A.P. Member of Mayong G.P., Sativeti on 04/04/2014.

<sup>75</sup> Personal interview with Jiten Saikia, 43 yrs, Head Master, Loonmati L.P. School, Sativeti, Mayong, on 07/04/2014.

<sup>76</sup> See Appendix VII, C.

<sup>77</sup> Personal interview with Khangeswar Kalita, 54 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Loonmati on 18/01/2015.

<sup>78</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

The work titled, *Assamese Demonology* mentions twenty-eight different spirits which have their own specific areas of operation.<sup>79</sup> They are said to normally they remain calm but when an individual enters into their domain then they possess that particular individual. Some such spirits are *Dot, Jalkonwar, Khetar, Bak, Jakh, Markuchia, Kandh, Burha-dangaria, Bira, and Goolai*. Due to the possession of the spirits, the individuals who are possessed suffer from psychological or physical disorders which are treated by the folk healers. To prevent from being possessed by an evil spirit, certain norms are to be followed, which is as thus: “...one should not urinate under a *bell* tree, one should not go to the river side alone at noon, one should not open the door to strangers at night unless he calls thrice, one should not catch the leading pair of fishes going upstream in the first rains etc”.<sup>80</sup>

In Mayong, one of the common illnesses which is cured by folk medicine is that of snakebite. A *Bez* can also cure a person bitten by a dog or a cat. The *Dharani Mantra* is applied for such patients and the mantra is as follows:<sup>81</sup>

*“Dharani thapi dharani bapi, moi dharani dharu ati ati  
Sunar nangal rupar phal ,moi dharani dharu Kali jale goi  
Toi thak dharanite pori,moi ahu guru sewa kori  
Dharani Ai dharani bupai, dharani dharani jagat dharani  
Dharani dharilu nau  
Raja ahise chatre dande, raijyak dhariboloi jau  
Rajak dharilu Prajak dharilu, dharilu Dharani  
Chaikoti Bish kari thoisu bondi  
Moi janu sud luk, mur bachan gurue daak  
Jaite dharani dharu toite thaak”*

<sup>79</sup> Benudhar Rajkhowa, *Assamese Demonology*, Patrika Press, Calcutta, 1905, p. 126; cited in Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op.cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>81</sup> Hemanta Kumar Sarma, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

**[Free Translation:** I fervently hold and pray to the earth. I hold the earth with a golden plough and a silver ploughshare with a black net. You lie on the ground and I am coming after paying obeisance to my *Guru*. You are the mother earth, you are the brother earth, and you are the earth of the universe. The monarch has come under an umbrella held open with a pole and I go to hold the kingdom. I have held the monarch, the subjects, and the earth. I have captured six crores of venoms. My words are the words of the *Guru*. Stop there where I have held the earth.]

The sightings of some animals in a particular place, position or time has predictions for the future. A dog groaning for a long period of time with face in the upward direction is a bad omen for that household. A person who happens to see a pair of snakes is a sign that something negative may happen to the person. Cats fighting in a house indicates that the family members would suffer from a disease in the near future. Whenever the cause of a particular disease can not be identified, the act of divination is resorted to in finding out the cause of the illness. The folk healers of Mayong also practise divination.<sup>82</sup> Some of the commonly used modes of divination are that which uses cowries, rice grains, etc. In some parts of Assam, the folk healers use *Bira* spirit for divination of identifying the cause of an ailment.<sup>83</sup> Astrology as a method of divination is practised mainly by priests known as Ganaks.<sup>84</sup> However, in Mayong it is not the monopoly of the Ganaks only as the healers of the area also uses astrology independently and extensively. The causes of diseases are also identified with the positions of planet and stars.<sup>85</sup> They prescribe the remedies according to the problems of the patients. Moreover, they advice other preventive measures to be followed in future, on the basis of their calculations.

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<sup>82</sup> Personal interview with Malati Saikia, 74 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Ouguri on 21/01/2016.

<sup>83</sup> D.K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/6/2015.

Different types of preventive measures are used to resist misfortune and to cure diseases. The *tabij* (amulet), for example is applied as a precautionary measure against different types of sorcery to get protection from spirits.<sup>86</sup> For preparing a *tabij* some objects prepared with the incantations are to be put into a small metal case. The metal case is made of metals such as steel, silver or copper. The patient should tie it with a thread around his neck or in the waist or in the arms as advised by the healers. It contains extracts of locally collected herbs, extracts from the animal world, and a hymn written on it.<sup>87</sup> The commonly used amulets are of cylindrical shape and sometimes they are square shaped. Another commonly used object applied as a preventive measure in Mayong is a *jaap* (a piece of thread charmed with *mantras* to be worn tied at waist, arm, wrist or neck). The *jaap* is made of different colours and knots are tied in them.<sup>88</sup> In certain cases they are used for the protection of a residence to provide protection against the spirits.<sup>89</sup> One of the *mantras* which is extensively used to get protection from the evil spirits in Mayong is the *Bandhani Mantra*. The *Bez* ties a thread in the waist of the person and chants this *mantra* which is as thus:<sup>90</sup>

*“Namu ganapati namu ganapati*  
*Gaursut Bandhilu moi*  
*Adi adbhut*  
*Kachar mahima suni anupan*  
*Jaar naam durga mai*  
*Amukar ga bandhisu moi*  
*Naag pashe bandi hoibi toi*

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<sup>86</sup> Personal interview with Deben Saikia, 72 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Sativeti on 23/05/2017.

<sup>87</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/6/2015.

<sup>88</sup> Personal interview with Bebejia Saikia, 80 yrs, Farmer, Hiloikhunda on 21/01/ 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Personal interview with Ganesh Ojah, 65 yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Burhamayong on 11/01/2018.

<sup>90</sup> Hemanta Kumar Sarma, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

*Mur bachan gurur dak*  
*Moi jimote bandhisu amukar gaa*  
*Seimate jatra hoi thaak*  
*Eai baikya laribi charibi*  
*Durga mair matha khabi”*

[**Free Translation:** I pay my obeisance to Lord Ganapati. I have held the son of Gauri whose birth is wonderful. I have held the body of the person and you shall be captivated by wrapping up with snacks. My words are the words of the *Guru*. Stop there where I have held the body of the person. If you disobey, you will munch the head of mother Durga.]

Besides, the folk healers use certain animal and plant objects to give protection from sorcery and they include teeth of wild boar, nails of animals, rhino horns, and organs of aquatic species etc. along with incantations of *mantras*.<sup>91</sup> *Leta guti (caesalpinia bouducella)*, *kaurmoni (coix lechryma- jobi)*, seed of Rudraksha are believed to have the ability to protect from the evil forces.<sup>92</sup> It is not unusual for the healers to take certain oaths in the name of a divine power to enhance the effectiveness of the *mantras*. One of such oath practiced in Mayong reads as thus:

*“ Eahi baikya lara jebe mahadebar trishulat pari marashatebe*  
*Saatpurush narakat par chandra sakhi, surya sakhi*  
*Maheshar trishulat pari mar mahadebir stanat dhar*  
*Ram lakhmanar munda khawa gu badh stri badh kar*  
*Mahadeu bishnur sapat”*

[**Free Translation:** Whoever disobeys these words, he/she shall perish at the hit of Mahadeva’s trident. His/her seven generations shall go to hell. I take oath in the name of the moon and the Sun; he/she shall perish at the hit of Mahadeva’s trident. He/she shall touch the breast of Parvati. He/she shall slaughter the cow and the wife in the name of the Mahadeva and Bishnu.]

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<sup>91</sup> See Appendix VII, Illustrations E.

<sup>92</sup> D.K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

The 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. Some of the plants used in Mayong<sup>93</sup> and other parts of Assam are as follows: *nayantara (vinca rosea)*, *dhotura (dotura fasteosa)*, *Doran (leucus linifolia)*, *afu (papaver somniferum)*, *dupor tenga (bryophyelum pinnatum)*, *punarnava(boerhaavia diffusa)*, *chatiana (Alstonia scholaris)*, *silikha (terminalia chebula)*, *keheraj (eclipta elba)*, *mahanim(azadiracta indica)*, *lajukilata(mimosa pudica)*, *kothona phul (ervatamia divaricata)*, *siju (euphorbia nerifolia)*, *manimuni (centella asiatica)*, *kothona phul (ervatima divaricata)*, *akon (calotropir gygantea)*, *tagar phul (gardenia florida)* etc. The medicines are prepared by mixing the herbs and are to be applied on the body of the patient, or advised to consume it according to the specific requirements. The herbs used in medicine are collected in accordance with prescribed guidelines.<sup>94</sup> There is another *mantra* which is commonly used for treatment of boils (*narenga*) in the area reads as:

*“Sri shivaye namah bish jaru bish pau, bish  
 Apuni chale, mangshe chale, hare chale jadi  
 Fuhura narenga ainya chit kar; brahmar  
 Chakrat pari mar, lakhmanar math ached kare  
 Mur haak gurur daak, jei pune rakhu  
 Sei pune rai thak tai thak dharanit pari  
 Moi ahu gurusewa kari”*<sup>95</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65yrs, *Bez* and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2015.

<sup>94</sup> Personal interview with Kamala Saikia, 69 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Sativeti , Mayongon 07/04/2014.

<sup>95</sup> Minakshi Tamuli, *Mayangar Loka Sahitya: Mantra Sahityar Bishesh Adhyayan*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, p. 208.

**[Free Translation:** I pay my obeisance to Shri Siva. I drive away pain so that it goes away automatically from the body. You get perished at the hit of the wheel of the Brahma. Behead Laxman. My words are the words of the *Guru*. Stay in the same position as I keep you up. You lie on the ground and I am coming back after paying obeisance to the *Guru*.]

In some cases the folk healer also works as a magician for making his treatment effective and to this end, they also deal with the psychological trauma of patients. A. Kiev opines that,<sup>96</sup> "...the core of their effectiveness seems to lie in their ability to elicit hope by capitalising on the patient's dependence on others and an expectation of help aroused by the healer's personal attributes and his paraphernalia which gained their power from culturally determined symbolic meaning". The Buddhist and Hindu tantric worshippers, tribal population and people of Nath were associated with the origin and spread of the *mantras*.<sup>97</sup> Generally, *mantras* are divided into two groups. Those are intended to bring certain benevolent results are called *Su-mantra* and those used with a malevolent intention are called *Ku-mantra*.<sup>98</sup>

By the use of *mantras* the *Bez* is possessed and thereby acquires the power to act as a medium for divination. The person possessed by the spirit replies the answers on behalf of the spirit.<sup>99</sup> The *Bez* attempts to identify the spirit through his questions and to search out the reason why the spirit has chosen the person only. Thereafter the *bez* compels the spirit to leave that person with a

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<sup>96</sup> A. Kiev, "The Study of Folk Psychiatry" in A. Kiev. (ed.), *Magic Faith and Healing*, cited in D. K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>97</sup> Lokendra Hazarika, *Mayongor Tantra-Mantra-2*, Narayan Das and Paramananda Rajbangshi (eds.), *Asamar Sanskriti- Kosh*, Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati, 2014, p. 519.

<sup>98</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2014.

<sup>99</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Ouguri on 24/06/2014.

signal. The spirit while dispossessing the person makes a loud sound.<sup>100</sup> Sometimes, the *Bez* is forced to apply physical torture to the patient when the spirit is not willing to quit. In such cases, it is believed that the torture done with patient was actually faced by the spirit, not by the person who was under the state of possession. The use of force is restricted in case of possession by evil spirits only. In case of possession by god, he is worshipped with different rituals to appease the deity.

The literal meaning of *mukhbhanga* is breaking of mouth. The *Bez* applies the *mukhbhanga mantras* along with ginger or water to be consumed by the person suffering from *mukhlaga*. The *Bez* blows a knife over the water symbolizing the act of cutting it and along with the use of *mantras*, the patient is made to drink it.<sup>101</sup> There is another *mantra* applied for preventing oozing out blood from the human body known as *Tej Bandha Hua mantra*. It reads as thus:<sup>102</sup>

*“Sunar nangal rugar phal  
Ram lakhmane jurile haal  
Haal baute uthil maati  
Moi tej rakhu sami muthi”*

**[Free Translation:** Ram and Laxman have started ploughing with a golden plough and a silver ploughshare. While ploughing, soil has come up and I prevent blood from spilling out with my firm feast.]

The folk healers of Mayong practice a wide spectrum of methods depending upon the suffering of the people. The use of divination, use of herbal

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<sup>100</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

<sup>101</sup> Personal interview with Kamala Saikia, 69 yrs, Folk Healer and Housewife, Sativeti , Mayong on 07/04/2014.

<sup>102</sup> Minakshi Tamuli, *op.cit.*, p. 205.



medicines, using exorcism, providing protection from the 'evil eye', use of *mantras* for charming, preparing talismans or amulets for the treatment by using hymns and weeds from the treatment of fractured bone, use of hymns for protection of the life of people from the pain of snakebite etc. Some of the practitioners of the area have earned their expertise in two or more fields of this wide spectrum of folk treatment.<sup>103</sup> The use of both herbal treatments through the locally available products as well as the magico-religious methods of treatment is used for both mental and physical disorders.

Female folk healers are also present in Mayong and they are called *Bezni*. The female practitioners who are intrinsically associated with the worship of goddess Manasa or Kali are regarded as *Ai* in the area. However, there is not much information available on the female practitioners. Probably, they did not get due attention because of the increasing patriarchal traditions that influenced the society due to advent of Brahmanical faith. However, even today women folk healers are not totally absent and there are some of them who still practise the craft. In some sense all ritual is gendered since the socially constructed world impacts all aspects of the society. Religious rituals often make gender distinctions in their actions, and many rituals can only be performed by men or by women. Studying ritual is an intriguing way to understand how this cultural mobilization of gender occurs, as many rituals play an important role in establishing, reaffirming, and problematizing gender and provide an outlet for participants to discuss and internalize the meaning of gender differences in society.

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<sup>103</sup> Personal interview with Pranab Saikia, 55 yrs, Farmer, Ouguri on 03/02/2016.

There are particular individuals in Mayong who have become well known in their practise of folk healing. Kachari Bez of Bardia Kachari Gaon was known for *thumuri ban* applied for killing enemies; Jatadhari Ata (Shankar Nath) of Rajamayong knew the *Kaldikhya Mantra* which is applied for destroying enemies; the Sutradhari Ata (Mathau Katani) of the Rajamayong knew the hymns used for flying the *Uran mantra*, Sora Bez (Muhiram Nath) of the Rajamayong knew the hymns used for capturing tigers, Lakhi Bez (Lakhi Timung) of the village Burhamayong knew the hymns applied for making objects invisible i.e. the *Luki Mantra*. Kehtalu Bez (Keshab Nath) of Rajamayong was experts in applying various types of mantras for implementing ban to bring harm others.

The folk healers considers them as rendering service to society; not as a profession for attaining financial or material gains. They believe that purity of mind and body is required for the efficacy of their practices. They follow strict habits like taking bath in the morning and then offering prayers to the almighty before involving in craft. It is important to note that the practitioners are expected to maintain control over their sensual impulses. The practitioners are expected to maintain control over their mind.<sup>104</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 ready to provide assistance to whoever comes to him for help. They are expected to attend to the person without any delay any time of the day or night.<sup>105</sup> The practitioners believe that their activities should be in conformity with the law of nature.

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<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with Ramayan Deka, 58 yrs, Folk Healer and Farmer, Chanaka on 22/12/2017.

<sup>105</sup> Personal interview with Tilak Hazarika, 65 yrs, Folk Healer and Retired Teacher, Chanaka Ganeshpur L.P. School, Loonmati on 23/01/2016.

The folk healers of Mayong do not ask for a fee for their service to treat patients. They have a tendency to provide their services as a noble cause towards humanity.<sup>106</sup> Generally, a pair of betel-nut and leaf is offered as a token of respect. Sometimes, it is accompanied with a nominal sum and the patients give out of their own free will. As such, most of the practitioners are engaged with agricultural works and are not dependent on the folk healing practices for their livelihood. Some of the healers opined that even the nominal amount offered to them is donated away for religious works or community services.<sup>107</sup> Sometimes practitioners ask for a nominal fee which is used for purchasing the required ritual items (amulets, threads etc.).

The *Bez* is bound to take certain oath after learning the trade from the *guru* which is as follows:<sup>108</sup>

“Do not harm others without a cause or for your personal rivalry.

Do not practice the art for money.

Do not accept remuneration for curing snakebite.

Treat snakebite cases with top priority.

Do not disclose the secrets of the art unless you teach someone”

The folk healers follow certain restrictions in their lives to maintain the effectiveness of their practices. For example, they do not engage in the practices when a member of their family dies as the particular period of time is regarded as impure to the *mantras* and herbal medicines. Besides, there are certain restrictions upon participating in funeral programmes too. Similarly, when a new baby is born in the family of the practitioner he should abstain from his practice

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<sup>106</sup> Personal interview with Kuhei Saikia, 49 yrs, Housewife, Chanaka on 24/12/2007.

<sup>107</sup> Personal interview with Prabin Saikia, 65 yrs, Farmer, Ouguri on 24/04/2015.

<sup>108</sup> Dilip Kumar Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

for a certain period. Similarly, there are limitations in participating in the puberty related rituals of girls. Moreover, there are restrictions also regarding the visit to cremation grounds. They also abstain from the food prepared by a woman during her menstruation period. Besides, they are not allowed to practice without taking bath and they maintains fast on certain occasions.

The *mantraputhis* give an idea about the ecological conditions of Morigaon district, apart from other aspects of culture. While discussing about diseases in the erstwhile Nowgong region S.R. Ward in the book titled, *A Glimpse of Assam* had commented that, "...goitre is especially prevalent in Nowgong, elephantiasis and leprosy are frequently met with; small pox and cholera make annual appearance once in five years bearing epidemic".<sup>109</sup> The writer gives a detailed description about the measures adopted the people against such diseases. In this context she observed that, "when ill they depend on charm and incantations for recovery; to cure sick child, a little copper tube is plugged with some root or herbs, and tied around the neck of forearm by the family priest, with some vain repetitions; or a "*bhakat*" is called who fans the child with a leaf of *belongoni*, (a species of fern), while repeating a *sloka* of the *shastra*."<sup>110</sup> Here it is pertinent to mention that a study of the economic condition of the Mayong reveals that according to the *Proceedings of Mayong Gaon Panchayat*, 1407 households out of 2062 are living below the poverty line.<sup>111</sup> The record shows that only forty percent of the population have access to pure drinking water facility and only thirty-five percent of the total population have sanitation

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<sup>109</sup> S.R. Ward (ed.), *A Glimpse of Assam*, Thomas S. Smith City Press, Calcutta, 1884, p. 11.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>111</sup> *The Proceedings of Mayong Gaon Panchayat*, Morigaon, Assam, 2011-12.

facilities. In this context U. Nath<sup>112</sup> observed that, "...this economic scenario reveals it that the people of Mayong have no capacity to take the advantages of modern medical technology which are very expensive. Thus the people have had to largely rely on the *Bez* or *Kabiraj* who provides *mantra* therapy and herbal treatment them at almost free or very low cost." The Mayong Gaon Panchayat lacked in basic civic amenities. It was only in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century CE that road communication network was improved in the area. However, in the context of *Bez* as a profession, it has been informed by the people of Mayong that the youth or the next generation do not have interest in the practise of folk healing or engage as magic practitioners. One of the reasons is that the practices do not offer any economic incentive or improvement in their livelihood.<sup>113</sup>

The coming of Vaishnavite movement in Assam played a key role in reducing the importance attached to magic and rituals. The path preached by Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism was simple and there appeared an ideological difference between the new religious movement and the traditional belief system based on the mantras and *mantraputhis*. Instead of paying obeisance indigenious deities or spirits, some *Bez* started to take the name of Sankaradeva, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. In due course of time, the use of the *mantras* became less popular in Mayong. Yet magic in the form of folk medicine is abundantly practised till today in Mayong.<sup>114</sup>

In the context of magic practices, it may be noted that the term used for magic in Assamese is *jadu* which has wider connotation than the term *bezali*.

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<sup>112</sup> Utpal Nath, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

While *bejali* corresponds to folk healing practices, *jadu* is not confined to treatment of illnesses. It is believed that people of Mayong are experts not only in *bejali* but also in *jadu*.<sup>115</sup> An example of magic is the belief that the practitioners of Mayong could transform themselves into tigers although there is no evidence to prove it.<sup>116</sup> Benudhar Rajkhowa<sup>117</sup> mentioned some practices which may appear as magic. They are as follows:

“(a) The half burnt wooden pegs on which the cooking pot is rested take root and the rice is never done although the fire is full fed.

(b) A man’s seat sticks in him and does not drop off until the mystic recites counter incantations.

(c) A tree stands although cut through and falls only when the enemy whom the mystic wishes to injure comes up to it.

(d) A cooked pigeon when eaten becomes alive inside the stomach and flapping its wings incessantly kills the man.

(e) When a man eats rice and milk that is never digested but takes root in the stomach. He dies within six months.

(f) A rib of plantain leaf is turned into snack.

(g) The leaves of the *Saura* tree are turned into *Khaliha* and *Kawai* fishes.”

The folk healers of Mayong are repositories of traditional knowledge which are part of its cultural heritage. As ritual specialists, the *Bez* of Mayong are well known and considered to be superior in the practice of the craft as compared to others counterparts in Assam. In fact, most of the healers in other parts of the state claim that they have learnt the trade from the practitioners in Mayong. The *mantras* are today preserved in the form of manuscripts although the oral

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<sup>115</sup> D.K. Kalita, *op. cit.*, pp.280-281.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>117</sup> Benudhar Rajkhowa, *Assamese Popular Superstitions and Assamese Demonology*, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, 1973, p. 146, cited in Dilip Kumar. Kalita, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

transmission has reduced due to lesser number of such individuals continuing the tradition. The extensive use of, and belief in *mantras* among the many ethnic communities of the society indicates that the *mantras* have been an intrinsic aspect of the history and culture of Mayong.