

University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya
University of Tartu

Symposium

Genres of Belief from a Folkloristic Perspective

February 4-5, 2013, Guwahati

Abstracts

Ri-Bhoi and Tartu, 2013

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Ri-Bhoi, Meghalaya, India

In memoriam Kailash Dutta (1976–2012) and Parag Moni Sarma (1967–2012)



Parag Moni Sarma and Kailash Dutta in Silghat, Assam (January 24, 2012).

Indian folkloristics suffered a great loss on April 28, 2012, when the lives of two young Assamese folklorists – Kailash Dutta and Parag Moni Sarma – ended prematurely in a traffic accident on the Guwahati – Tezpur road. Kailash worked as Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Parag was Professor at the same department.

We have lost two good friends and talented scholars who were dedicated to their research and their students. We will cherish their memory and highly value everything they accomplished.

Program

DAY- 1

Monday February 4

9.00–9.30 Opening

9.30–11.00 PLENARY SESSION

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Kishore Bhattacharjee

Some Aspects of Belief in North East India from the Folkloristic Perspective: Key-Note Address
Dinesh Baishya (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Genres of Enchantment: Understanding Magic from the Folkloristic Perspective
Ülo Valk (University of Tartu, Estonia)

The Weretiger Tradition of the Khasis: An Encounter of Reckoning
Desmond L. Kharmawphlang (North Eastern Hill University, India)

11.00–11.30 Tea/coffee

11.30–13.00 PLENARY SESSION

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Dinesh Baishya

Photographing a Demon: On the Crossroads of Mythology and Technology in the Modern World
Alexandra Arkhipova (Russian State University of Humanities, Russia)

Fieldwork as a Means of Contextualising Archived Belief Narratives: Theory and Praxis
Sandis Laime (University of Latvia, Latvia)

Archived Genres of Belief: Strategies of Textualising Votian Belief Narratives
Ergo-Hart Västriik (University of Tartu, Estonia)

13.00–14.00 Lunch

14.00–16.00 PARALLEL SESSIONS:

SESSION A

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Ergo-Hart Västriik

Authorities, Practices and Belief
Kristel Kivari (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Belief, Discipline and Subversion: Gender and Russian Vedism
Irina Sadovina (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Exorcism as a Healing Power: A Study in the Khasi Context
Monica Rimeki Kharmawphlang (North Eastern Hill University, India)

The Donyi-Polo Revival in Arunachal Pradesh: Examining the 'Formalisation' of Animist Practice
Claire Scheid (University College Cork, Ireland)

SESSION B

Venue: Technical Session Room 1, Academic Block

Chair: Sandis Laime

Non-Verbal Communication in Belief Legends
Reet Hiimäe (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Spirits, Gods and Man: The Lepcha Context
Nilly Lepcha Karthak (North Eastern Hill University, India)

The Family Python: Experiencing the Supernatural
Pamri Ramshang Kasar (North Eastern Hill University, India)

Tiwa Ethnic Belief, Folk Music and Dance Performances
Pallavi Dutta (Gauhati University, India)

SESSION C

Venue: Technical Session Room 2, Academic Block

Chair: Rabindranath Sarma

The Transformation and Adaptation of Community People through Cultural Politics in Bangladesh
Alim Al Razi (University of Rajshashi, Bangladesh)

Whose Language, What Culture? Two Voices from NEFA Crossing Linguistic Boundaries
Rajiv Kr. Sarma (Gauhati University, India)

The Sociological Perspective of *ThangNarsaw*
Pabok Diengdoh (Synod College, India), Riialariti Syiem (Riialariti Initiatives, India)

The Aboriginal Institution of Karadji: From Sorcery to Medicine Man – Can he Survive?
Shabeena Yasmin Saikia (Gauhati University, India)

SESSION D

Technical Session Room 3, Academic Block

Chair: R.K Sharma

Mythological Origins to Contemporary Perpetuation: The Historical Paradox of the Tai Ahom
Banasree Phukan (Pandu College, Guwahati, India)

Some Aspects of Belief and Practice among the Traditional Mishing Society: A Case Study
Promanita Bora (Dibru College, Assam, India)

Beliefs Surrounding Hudumdeu Worship in the Koch-Rajbongshi Society of Western Assam
Sanghita Chakravarty (Gauhati University, India)

Discourse of Ecology: The River Spirits
Mridusmita Mahanta (Sonapur College, India)

SESSION E

Venue: Technical Session Room 4, Academic Block

Chair: Margaret Lyngdoh

Black Magic in the Tea Tribes of Assam
Dipen Bezbaruah (Pub Kamrup College, India)
Jilmil Bora (D.K. College, Mirza, Kamrup, Assam)

Beliefs and Dreams: A Comparison between the Seng Khasi and the Dimasa Tribes
Deepshikha Carpenter (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Belief Related to Matrilineal Society among the Tribes of Meghalaya
Saptadeepa Roy (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)
AlpanaChoudhury (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Witch Hunting: A Blind Belief
Babli Choudhury (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya)
Manoj Kumar Nayak (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya)

16.00–16.30 Tea/coffee

16.30–18.00 PARALLEL SESSIONS:

SESSION A

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Alexandra Arkhipova

The Blood Libel Legend: Types of Narratives
Svetlana Amosova (European University at St. Petersburg, Russia)

“We are Being Watched, Constantly!” or the Contemporary Belarusian Panopticon
Anastasiya Astapova (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Legends of Church De-/Construction: Mixing Balkan and Eastern Slavic Motifs
Evgeniya Litvin (St. Petersburg State University, Russia)

SESSION B

Venue: Technical Session Room 1, Academic Block

Chair: Merili Metsvahi

Theorising Performance in Folklore and the Indian Concept of Rasaesthetics

Purabi Baruah (North Eastern Hill University, India)

War Jaintia: Propitiating the Deities
Rimika Lanong (North Eastern Hill University, India)

Akpatyr Prayer: The Sacred Place at BolshojKityak and the Ceremony of Prayer
Tatiana Alybina (University of Tartu, Estonia)

SESSION C

Venue: Technical Session Room 2, Academic Block

Chair: Reet Hiimäe

Constructing Women: Womanhood in Assamese Folk Narrative
Gitali Saikia (HCDG College, Sivasagar, India)

Belief Narratives, Witchcraft and Women: The Case of Rabha Society
Gargee Chakraborty (Gauhati University, India)

Religious Beliefs in Rabha Society
Jayanta Kr Saloi (Lakhipur College, India)

SESSION D

Venue: Technical Session Room 3, Academic Block

Chair: William Westerman

Supernatural Beliefs among Assamese Muslims
Mehjabeen Rahman (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

The *Meitei* Community and Manipuri Muslims: Dialectics of Influences in Folk Beliefs
Jiaul Islam Choudhury (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)
Md. Maqbul Ali (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Popular Miraculous Narratives Related to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) and the Beliefs of Muslims
Ali Akbar Hussain (Suren Das College, Hajo, India)

18.15 Film “Magic and Witchcraft of Assam” (by Dinesh Baishya)

DAY-2

Tuesday February 5

9.00–11.00 PLENARY SESSION

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Ülo Valk

The Study of Magic
Kishore Bhattacharjee (Gauhati University, India)

Estonian Werewolf History
Merili Metsvahi (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Perspectives on Irish Fairy Belief
Dmitry Nikolayev (Russian State University of Humanities, Russia)

Binding Words and Powerful Things: Verbal Communication between Christian Missionaries and
Nenets Pastoralists in Arctic Russia
Laur Vallikivi (University of Tartu, Estonia)

11.00–11.30 Tea/coffee

11.30–13.00 PARALLEL SESSIONS:

SESSION A

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Meenaxi Barkataki- Ruscheweyh

Narratives of Supernatural Experiences from a Folkloristic Perspective and Their Influence on
Assamese Society
Keemee Das, Gopashree Bora (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

The Tradition of Beliefs and Narratives in Assamese Society
Nilima Hazarika (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Bringing Life to an Assamese Folk Belief Narrative
Upala Barua (Cotton College, Guwahati, India)

SESSION B

Venue: Technical Session Room 1, Academic Block

Chair: Alaka Sarma

Fishing Community Origin Narratives: A Case Study in Kamrup District
Avijit Kumar Dutta (Pragjyotish College, India), Sanjay De (Nowgong College, India)

Fish in Beliefs Amongst Some Communities of North East India
Dipjyoti Deka (Sonapur College, India)

Folk Remedies and Magical Beliefs Practices for Different Medicinal Plants by the People of
Assam
Bedabati Chowdhury (Dasgupta) (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

SESSION C

Venue: Technical Session Room 2, Academic Block

Chair: Dinesh Baishya

Reflection of Folk-Beliefs in Assamese *DākarBacan*
Khagesh Sen Deka, Montu Sakia (Pub Kamrup College, India)

Some Popular Narratives in the Proverbs of Goalpara District: An Analytical Study
Barun Kumar Saha (Pragjyotish College, India)

Proverbs among the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh
Nabam Nakha Hina and Techii Jiri (Rajiv Gandhi University, India)

13.00–14.00 Lunch

14.00–16.00 PARALLEL SESSIONS:

SESSION A

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Laur Vallikivi

Folk Beliefs in Khasi Oral Tradition: Text and Practice
Aibiang MameThangkiew (North Eastern Hill University, India)

Spirit Propitiation: Esoteric Funerary Rites among the Lyngngam and Nongtra
Margaret Lyngdoh (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Examining Narratives and Trauma through Folktales: A Selective Study of the Folktales of the Khasis
Joshua Shannon Rynjah (St. Mary's College, India)

Magical *BajraXil*: An Object of Charm, Sorcery and Divine Power
Manjil Hazarika (Indian Archaeological Society: Himalayan Languages Project/University of Bern, Switzerland)

SESSION B

Venue: Technical Session Room 1, Academic Block

Chair: Dmitry Nikolayev

Belief Narratives: Local Beliefs of the Meitei Ethnic Community
Ranibala Devi Khumukcham (Manipur University, India)

Life in the Underworld: A Study of Man and the Supernatural Union
G. Badaiasuklang L. Nonglait (North Eastern Hill University, India)

Spirit Possession and the Restless Dead: A Supernatural Experience that Changed a Life
Bhupen Rabha (Central University of Jharkhand, India)

Beliefs and Practices of Magic in Mayong: From Past to Present
Utpal Nath (Gauhati University, India)

SESSION C

Venue: Technical Session Room 2, Academic Block

Chair: Anastasiya Astapova

Belief in Mantra: A Psychological Analysis
Pahi Baishya (Gauhati University, India)

Folk Belief in the Context of Disaster: *Bordoichila*
Pallabi Hazarika, Fahmida S. Borah (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Beliefs, Narratives and Social Discourse: a Study in the Vaishnavite Institutions of Assam
Shantana Saikia (Gauhati University, India)

Supernatural Elements in the Folk Tales of Assam with Special Reference to Lakshminath
Bezbarooah's *Burhi Aair Sadhu*
Nayanmoni Baruah, Babita Das (Pub Kamrup College, India)

SESSION D

Venue: Technical Session Room 3, Academic Block

Chair: A.N.S. Ahmed

A Study of the Archaeological Sites of Mayong: With Special Reference to the Legends and
Traditional Beliefs Relating to Them
Dhanya Ram Roy (Mayang Anchalik College, India)

Folklore of Kamakhya: With Special Reference to the Ambubachi Mela
Swati Baishya (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)
Asha Devi (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Magical Practices in Assam: With Special Reference to the Folk Medicinal Practices of Nalbari
District
Dipamani Haloi Mahanta (Gauhati University, India)

Mythological link to Assamese Folk Culture: The Behula and Deodhani Dances
Siddiquir Rehman (Education Research and Development Foundation, India)

SESSION E

Venue: Technical Session Room 4, Academic Block

Chair: Zoza Karanovic

Beliefs Regarding Child Rearing in Traditional Assamese Society
Prafulla Chandra Mahanta (Regional Institute of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)
Anindita Mahanta (Guwahati Medical College, India)

Religion and Supernatural Beliefs: Oral Traditions and Narratives in the Context of North East
India
Tasrina Iqbal (Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, India)

Sabrina Iqbal Sircar (Gauhati University, India)

Migration of Belief: A Study of Sitala Tales and Lore in Assam

Manabendra Sarma (B. Borooah College, Guwahati, India)

Namrata Sarma (University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

16.00–16.30 Tea/coffee

16.30–18.00 PLENARY SESSION

Venue: Conference Hall, Administrative Block

Chair: Desmond L.Kharmawphlang

How to Get the Genie back into the Bottle: Healing as a Strategy to Propagate Rangfraism among the Tangsa in North East India

Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (University of Göttingen, Germany)

The *Adi-Dharam*– A Religious Belief of the Tribes of Jharkhand

Rabindranath Sarma (Central University of Jharkhand, India)

Toward a Unified Schema of Folklore and Belief Studies

William Westerman (GoucherCollege, Baltimore, USA)

18.00 Closing of the symposium

A Note from the Chancellor of the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya

I am happy to learn that the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya in collaboration with the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu is organising this international Seminar on the topic of 'Genres of Belief from the Folkloristic Perspective'.

The University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya's objective is to venture into teaching, training and research in specialised areas of science and technology along with the humanities and social sciences. USTM aims at the advancement of knowledge to meet the changing needs of society. It also aims to collaborate with the universities around the globe in the field of research and training. We encourage exchange programmes for students and teachers of our university with any university of the world. The university is committed to empower and nurture young people of the region. The underprivileged must get equal opportunity in the field of education in general and higher education in particular. In due course, we hope the university will develop into a centre of excellence in the field of science, technology, social science and other disciplines of knowledge. The University must be able to empower the youth of India's North East in particular.

I wish this seminar would be a curtain raiser towards cooperation with world-class universities. I wish research scholars of this region will be enriched with the knowledge of the scholars from different countries who are taking part in this seminar.

M. Hoque
Chancellor, USTM
Chairman, ERDF

Genres of Belief from a Folkloristic Perspective: An Introduction

Research in belief narratives and vernacular religion belongs to the rising trends in international folkloristics. Earlier views about the decline of the supernatural and disappearance of magic in connection with social progress and the spread of education have become redundant. Instead, deities, spirits, ghosts, witches and other agents of the supernatural are actively present in the vernacular religions of many countries – both in urban and rural settings. As these beliefs and related practices have been socially marginalised and to some extent stigmatised, they might not seem as prominent as public forms of religion. However, as these expressions of belief rarely become a part of institutionally controlled knowledge systems, they manifest strong folkloric variation, flexibility and adaptability to the changing social settings. In contrast to religious perspectives, folkloristics looks at beliefs and rituals as elements of culture, not as the manifestation of the transcendental realm of the divine or demonic. Hence, attention focuses on individuals and communities as creative carriers of culture, including vernacular traditions of the supernatural – so often overlooked in academic study of religion, which often fails to see the vibrant cultural reality beyond holy scriptures and institutionally approved forms of faith.

The aim of the Genres of Belief from a Folkloristic Perspective symposium is to discuss current research in belief narratives and other genres of belief, magic and vernacular religion in general. Papers will address theory and methodology of research, emic and etic categories in studying belief, narratives about supernatural experience, magical practices, belief narratives and society, documenting folklore and related topics. The range of cultures to be covered is wide, extending from Estonia to Belarus and Ukraine, from Russia to Mongolia and China, from Ireland to USA and Australia, from Latvia to India and Bangladesh. Several papers will analyse beliefs and religious practices in North Eastern India, which is famous for its ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and for the oldest folklore department in the country, established at Gauhati University in 1972. Both Kailash Dutta and Parag Moni Sarma, to whose memory the symposium is dedicated, studied folkloristics and wrote their dissertations at this department. Both were deeply interested in the social and religious dimensions of folklore, which are also the focus of our discussions today.

We know well from world history that the roots of many scientific disciplines lie in magical practices and in the firm belief in the supernatural powers, whose presence has been confirmed both by holy scriptures and folklore. Today's scientific mind takes a critical and analytical perspective of

this realm of expressive culture – and here is no basic difference between the humanities and natural sciences. Instead of being a realm of cutting-edge experimental investigations or metaphysical thinking, the supernatural in culture has become an object of research for several disciplines, including folkloristics. However, creative fantasy, awareness of the infinity of the unknown world and of the limits of tangible reality is something that connects beliefs in the supernatural with the scientific mind-set. It is remarkable that the young University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM), is striving towards excellence in many disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences. This commitment is confirmed by its decision to sponsor the Genres of Belief from a Folkloristic Perspective international symposium, which aims to illuminate some unknown and under-investigated realms of cultural expression. Holding the symposium at USTM has become possible thanks to the active support of the Vice Chancellor Mr M. Hoque and Professor Dinesh Baishya, the Dean of Media and Cultural Studies, USTM. In the name of the participants I express deep gratitude to them, to Dr Md.Maqbul Ali and to the whole local organizing committee.

Ülo Valk,

Professor of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu

Vice-president of the ISFNR

Some Aspects of Belief in North East India from the Folkloristic Perspective

Key-Note Address

Dinesh Baishya, baishya.dinesh@rediffmail.com, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India

Vast archives of indigenous knowledge and expertise deposited in the form of folklore in traditional societies all over the world are spilling into oblivion, leaving humanity in danger of losing its past and perhaps jeopardising its future as well. Depositories of folklore are vanishing as indigenous people have been threatened for centuries as development encroaches on their land and traditions. Folklore also disappears because the young who are in contact with the so-called modern world have embraced the view that their traditional cultures are illegitimate and irrelevant. Thus a state of cultural holocaust is prevailing in most of the indigenous societies, where a deplorable socio-economic and cultural situation threatens people.

The North Eastern part of India is a rich depository of folklore. This part of India is a hot spot of cultural diversity. There are hundreds of ethnic groups of people in this region who have conserved their rich traditional culture to the present day fighting against all odds. In NE India there are hundreds of tribes, sub-tribes, clans and sub-clans. All these ethnic groups of people have their own languages, dialects, beliefs, myths, legends and other forms of folklore.

Among NE Indian states Arunachal Pradesh is very rich in ethnic diversity. In this state alone there are hundreds of tribes and sub-tribes who maintain very rich linguistic and cultural diversities. For example Changlang is a very small district of this state. The total geographical area of this district is only four thousand six hundred square km. Its population is only one lakh twenty thousand (2001). With this population it has three major tribes. The Tangsa is a small tribe of this district and of the state. The Tangsa have seventeen sub-tribes, for example the Lungchang, Tikhak, Mukhlom, Mungrey, Kimsing, Havi, Mossang, Longri, Ponthai, Longphi, Sangwal, Rongrang, Tongling, Thamphang, Jugli, Langching and Sangkrek. These ethnic groups of people maintain their own language or dialect and traditional culture along with very rich folklore. As with this tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, there are many tribes in other states in NE India. The list of tribes and sub-tribes that maintain very rich linguistic and cultural diversity, and also a very large body of folklore, is a very long one.

North East India is a folkloric heaven. The region is unbelievably rich in folkloristic materials. This region encompasses a most extensive field covering diverged categories of folkloristic materials like folk art, folk craft, folk beliefs, folk costumes, folk tales, folk songs, folk rituals, folk festivals, folk tools and instruments, folk recipes, folk medicine, folk games, folk science and technology, folk material culture, folk customs, and folk vocabularies, etc. But this rich body of folkloristic knowledge is declining at a rapid rate and may die out silently in the very near future.

Most traditional societies, tribal or non-tribal, maintain a rich diversity of supernatural beliefs. In North Eastern India every tribe and non-tribal group of people believe in large numbers of gods, goddesses, spirits and ghosts. Let us take an example of supernatural beliefs in traditional, non-tribal, Assamese society. There are large varieties of established gods, goddesses, deities, ghosts and spirits in traditional Assamese society. The people believe that these gods, goddesses, ghosts and spirits cause diseases and these diseases can only be cured with some ritualistic performance. Both the tribal and non-tribal societies of Assam believe that small pox or measles appeared only because of the pox goddess *Aai* or *Aai Xakal*. She is also called *Xitala Devi* or *Aai Goxani*. When pox appears no medicine is administered, only the rituals are performed with great veneration. *Aai naam* (a song) is performed by the women folk in an extraordinary holistic way.

Manasa Devi is a popularly revered snake goddess. It is believed by Assamese society that she can cure snake bite and also can bring good luck to the worshiper. Therefore Manasa worship is widely practised in many parts of Assam. A large number of folk songs are performed during Manasa worship.

There are large numbers of spirit and ghost names prevalent amongst non-tribal Assamese Society. People in traditional Assamese society believe that these spirits or ghosts are responsible for causing diseases. These spirits or ghosts have names like *bira*, *prêt*, *buradangoria*, *prasuta*, *markuchia*, *kubir*, *ghorapak*, *jakh* or *jakhini*, *daaini*, etc. People believe the ghost *bira* causes abnormal behaviour in a person; *prêt* causes itching, boils and fever, *buradangoria* causes headache and pain in the body, *prasuta* causes diseases in pregnant women, *markuchia* causes diseases or death in children, *kubir* causes severe aches and body pain, *ghorapak* attacks fishermen and causes diseases, *jakh* or *jakhini* attacks children and women and also causes diseases.

There is a very wide belief in *daaini* amongst tribal people in Assam. *Daaini* is a witch and can cause diseases and also death for people. Although there was no case of hunting of a *daaini* in earlier times now the case of *daaini* hunting becomes common. Anthropological and socio-cultural research are required to look into this problem of *daaini* hunting in tribal and non-tribal society.

Every tribal community believe in many such established spirits and ghosts. They also perform rituals and mantras to get rid of the attack of these spirits or ghosts. The Bodos of Assam perform community worship for their deities. The Garza is a community deity of the Bodos and is extensively worshipped by them. The Bodo believe that the deity Garza lives in a sacred grove. There are eighteen different varieties of Garza deity, namely *lakshi garza*, *asu garza*, *gao garza*, *change garza*, *garza chibchin*, *maoria garza*, *chaoria garza*, *chemchali garza*, *dasmali garza*, *chamo ramo garza*, *khalo daano garza*, *nalo dano garza*, *dawang garza*, *malan garza*, *thiya garza*, *gu gu garza*, *otharo xanti garza*. Again there are thirteen different gods who are worshipped in the *Garza Puja*. Bodos also perform another community worship known as *Kherai Puja*. The deity of the *Kherai Puja* is Bathou, the king deity. There are other members of the Bathou family. The Bodos worship ten different deities of the Bathou family in the *Kherai Puja*. Apart from these two main deities the Bodos also believe in different spirits or ghosts who cause diseases. Some of these spirits or ghosts are *Kubir*, *Khethra*, *Garmazi*, *Aaglamazi*, *Gyanburha*, *Gyanburhi*, *Jahara-Jahari*, *Bira*, *Than Thin Daaini*, etc. Again they also classify *Kubir* deity in different varieties. These are *Ranga Kubir*, *Baga Kubir*, *Jal Kubir*, *Nal Kubir*, etc. Like the Bodos all tribes of Assam and NE India believe in hundreds of varieties of deities, spirits and ghosts. They also believe that these spirits or deities are responsible for causing different ailments in the human or animal body. There are different varieties of mantras to cure these ailments and to be free from spirit attack. The most important part of this belief system is that, apart from the administration of mantras, folk healers also use folk medicines, both herbal and non-herbal. This body of knowledge is enormous in this part of the country.

The Transformation and Adaptation of Community People Through Cultural Politics in Bangladesh

Alim Al Razi, razialim@yahoo.com, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

In Bangladesh different types of folk performances are arranged throughout the year. Some of them are also arranged for amusement and recreational purposes only. Most of them are both secular and non-secular (devotional) performances. *Monihazra Puja* is one of them. To celebrate *PohelaBoishakh* as a new Bangla year and say goodbye to the previous year, the community people of Nagar Vadgram village arrange traditional performances named *BaidyarGaan*, *Kali Katch*, *Pori Katch*, *Hor-GoureeNatch* and *Monihazra Puja*. Generally, these are arranged to express the worship of the gods. Although they arrange *BaidyarGaan* and *Monihazra Mela* in the religious aspect, they are performed completely in secular form. A *Baidyar* troupe visits every courtyard to ask money by presenting dance and song. In the *BaidyarGaan*, the sorrow, pain and deep feelings of female *Baidya* is exhibited for the long absence of the male *Baidya*. Young people present the performance in a team at the *PohelaBoishakh* observance. In the afternoon they had arranged a sanguinary performance about evil. Although it was not their ritualistic presentation, I would like to say that it was a great performance to represent the worst deeds of the influential social body. In this article the following questions have been sought throughout the work: how did they perform for one and half hours at a stretch? What are their beliefs? What was their hidden transcript? Do they have any personal aspiration which was not fulfilled yet? Moreover, this article figures out a way in which their practice been emerged into the locality. Who are the direct patrons of these performances? Who plays a major role in selecting the issues for representation in the performance? The moral and social value of the performance has been sought in this article. People's endeavours through transformation and adaptation have been sketched out by following the demographic and historic biography of the performances.

Akpatyr Prayer: The Sacred Place at Bolshoj Kityak and the Ceremony of Prayer

Tatiana Alybina, oriole87@yandex.ru, University of Tartu, Estonia

Akpatyr was a powerful man, the hero of the Mari people who lived in ancient times. There is a legend saying that when Akpatyr was old, he asked people to bury him at the place where the arrow he shoots will fall. Since 1998 traditional communal prayer ceremonies have been organised here

every year at the beginning of August. People from surrounding villages and Mari people from other regions visit the Akpatyr *kumaltysh* ('religious ceremony') and bring different presents to the place or "to the Akpatyr grandfather".

However, local people know more about the place and traditions of asking Akpatyr to help in difficult times. They say that if you have some need, you can go to Akpatyr at any time of the year, and that if you ask him about help, you should promise to bring him something (as a rule, a towel, shawl, duck, cock or sheep). After one year, when the request comes true, people fulfil their promise.

I visited the Akpatyr *kumaltysh* in 2011 and also went there in summer 2012, although this time I was staying in the village some days before the prayer ceremony. So I had a week-long expedition and gathered information about local folk religion holidays and observed how village people prepare for the last prayer ceremony in summer – Akpatyr *kumaltysh*.

The Blood Libel Legend: Types of Narratives

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The paper is based on fieldwork materials about Jews collected among the population in Latgalia (Latvia) and in the Ukraine. The interviews were collected between 2009 and 2012.

The Blood Libel legend was widespread in Europe from the Middle Ages. The blood libel is a subcategory of a Jewish ritual murder. A small Christian child is usually said to be murdered and the blood is supposedly utilised in the ritual context, e.g. added to unleavened bread (matzos) for the Passover. Due to its long history and dissemination, this legend has been subject to quite abundant research (e.g. Dundes 1991; Buttaroni and Musial 2003; Biale 2007; Belova 2006; L'vov 2008 and others).

The legend, known generically as the blood libel or the ritual murder accusation contains a number of different nuances. On the basis of fieldwork materials we can see the main blood libel story types. Among them there are stories about methods for obtaining blood: (1) for ritual purposes Jews kill an innocent Christian person (a child or a girl), there may also be a description of the weapon in

this case (usually a barrel spiked with nails); (2) Christians donated their blood voluntarily or due to the fraud of Jews, who do not kill people; (3) Jewish doctors use the blood of donors. The stories about the purposes of obtaining blood can be divided into the following: (1) Blood is used to prepare matzos; (2) Jews are born blind and their eyes should be smeared with blood to see the light. In this paper I will analyse the types, geography, and genesis of narratives about the blood libel.

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Photographing a Demon: On the Crossroads of Mythology and Technology in the Modern World

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This paper is based on materials collected from fieldwork in different regions of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and South Siberia (2006–2012) and records from Tajikistan, and Badakshan Province and Pamir regions, P.R. China.

In the epoch of positivism it was apparent that primitive cultures are opposite to industrial societies, and the introduction of technical novelties only leads to the degradation of the naive life of savages. This was stated more than 100 years ago about the use of a photo camera in the bush. “Naive superstitions will come out through one door when electricity comes in through the other!” – an ethnographer enthusiastically claimed in the early 1920s in Tajikistan.

Now, when cameras, radio receivers and telephones are used almost everywhere, it is the greatest temptation for scholars to examine how they influence, if at all, the local beliefs and myths. To that aim I tried to investigate any possible connections between supernatural creatures (demons, local spirits, deities) and the process of taking pictures (by camera) in Asian, Pamir and northern Chinese regions.

As a result I found that photographs became part of important rituals in folk medicine: to portray a patient is to cure him, because the demon of illness moves to the picture from the sick person. But sceptics argue that here the photograph is only a convenient substitute for the traditional symbolic image (made from wood, for example) used in such rituals. In other cases, the function of photograph is completely new and unique, and new customs emerge as a result of the technical possibility of the camera to make instant pictures. For example, a Mongolian ethnic group was divided into two parts along the border between Mongolia and China, and their worshipping rituals were ruined because the Mongolian part of the tribe could not see and worship the mountain (which remained in the Chinese part) and its deities. However, the possibility to make instant pictures re-established the link between local spirits and their people.

“We are Being Watched, Constantly!”, or the Contemporary Belarusian Panopticon

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Conspiracy theories concerning the belief that special agents are watching everybody’s (or sometimes somebody’s) personal life is widespread all over the world, making people refrain from the use of social networks (as the agents may exploit them as sources of knowledge about people’s lives), or from mentioning certain themes on the phone out of prudence. This paper concentrates on the Belarusian case, where this belief acquired multiple dimensions depending on the means of watching (listening, videoing), the objects of watching (political activists or politically neutral

people) and the purposes and consequences of it. Fieldwork carried out in Belarus shows that the Country is seen by many interviewees as a network, designed to watch. Such a situation produces various narratives that confirm the belief (interestingly, I have not encountered narratives of disbelief in this case), as well as other genres, including conversational jokes. Research focuses on various aspects of the described belief and provides analysis of the possible reasons for its popularity.

Belief in Mantra: A Psychological Analysis

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Since time immemorial, in India and in many parts of Assam, mantras have been used to cure disease. Although it is difficult to explain the scientific basis of the therapeutic aspects of mantras a large number of people have a firm belief in the functionality of mantras for treatment of diseases. However modern allopathic medical science does not accept that mantras have any scientific therapeutic value, although from the psychological point of view mantras might play a role in curing a person's ailments. Probably the administration of mantra on the diseased person works to develop a positive psychology in the mind of the ailing body. The application of Mantra works as a psychological medicine in curing ailments.

The term mantra is a combination of two words, namely *man* + *trana*. *Man* means to think or to meditate while *trana* means liberation. Traditional mantra practitioners believed that during the application of mantra a kind of energy or *shakti* is liberated.

The whole *mantra sastra* is based upon the potentialities of words or *shabda* ('sound'). Five gross elements are the constituents of both microcosm and macrocosm, namely *akasa* ('space'), *vayu* ('air'), *teja* ('fire'), *apa* ('water') and *prithvi* ('earth'). Their origination is stressed back to *shabda* ('sound'), *sparsa* ('touch'), *rupa* ('vision'), *rasa* ('sap') and *gandha* ('smell') respectively. In this order of creation, *akasa*, the gross element, and *shabda*, the essence of element, are considered the most subtle elements. *Shabda* is considered subtle to that extent that it is viewed as *brahman* or *shabda brahman*, the source of creation.

As tree lies in a seed, in the same way the power of mantra lies potentially in a seed letter or *bija* mantra. As a tree grows from the seed, likewise the whole mantra evolves from the seed letter. And being so, the seed letters are considered the source of creation.

There are certain reasons for disease. One of them is the imbalance of hormonal secretions from the glands. Over-secretion and under-secretion both create disorder in the body-mind. Proper secretions depend upon a person's mental state. When a person is not in a happy mood, glands do not work properly. This improper glandular function results in disease. Mantra gives happiness to the mind and keeps the mind silent. In the silent mind glands work with no obstacles or disturbances and in that way mantra works indirectly as therapy.

Folklore of Kamakhya: With Special Reference to the Ambubachi Mela

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The Kamakhya Temple has been considered the highest seat of tantrism, a sort of black magic that has been an integral part of India's folklore for centuries. The Kamakhya temple is a different paranormal world where most of the sadhus are capable of doing miracles. The emphasis of this paper is on unfolding the belief system underlying Ambubachi Mela, which is the most significant event in Kamakhya commencing in the month of Ashara during the monsoon season and continuing for four days and in which Mother Earth is said to have entered a period of menstruation. It is believed that during the monsoon rains the creative and nurturing power of the 'menses' of Mother Earth becomes accessible to devotees at this site during the mela. Ambubachi Mela is also known as *Ameti* or the tantric fertility festival, which is closely related to the tantric cult and the traditional belief that our sacred Mother Earth is like a fertile woman. Apart from this the pertinent belief connected with the celebration of Ambubachi Mela is that the pieces of red cloth used by Devi during the three days of her menstrual cycle are greatly beneficial and auspicious for devotees if they are able to wear such a piece. The colour red is symbolic of shaktism and Devi is said to be pleased with this colour as per Kamakhya tantra. *Shakti* as a divine concept is not only limited in women but is manifested in men too as it is the universal agent of creation and change.

How to Get the Genie Back into the Bottle: Healing as a Strategy to Propagate Rangfraism among the Tangsa in North East India

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Rangfraism is the name of the newly institutionalised and reformed form of the old belief systems of the Tangsa, a small ethnic group (related to the Naga) who have migrated to India from Myanmar and have settled in the North East Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. However, by the time Rangfraism came into existence in the mid 1990s, many Tangsa had already embraced standard world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

The Tangsa living in the hills of Arunachal who were still practising their old beliefs quickly embraced Rangfraism as they believed it to be essentially their old religion. There were healers and diviners called Shammas amongst the Tangsa in their traditional system. From around 2005, some Rangfraiters, mostly young girls, began to perform ‘healing’ and doing ‘prophesy’ in the Rangfraa temples, and were given the new name ‘kechus’ or the ‘pure ones’. Once a few sick people were successfully cured, the news spread even to non-Tangsa areas. So much so that healing has become the central component of the Rangfraa Sunday services in most Rangfraa temples and being cured has become the biggest reason for many people to convert to Rangfraism. I have met many people who have become Rangfraiters only because they have been helped in some way, but who have no clue about the religious tenets of their newly adopted religion.

In this paper I wish to take a closer look at Rangfraism and the use of healing as a strategy to attract followers to examine whether such a strategy is sustainable or even desirable in the long run. In addition, the problems associated with citing miracles as validation for the underlying religious doctrine will be discussed.

Bringing Life to an Assamese Folk Belief Narrative

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Assamese society as a whole is a great believer in the legend of Lord Krishna. The birthday of Lord Krishna is celebrated as *Janmastami* throughout the State. His birthday itself is a great legend – it

was in fact no usual birth. Various beliefs circulate taking into account of the birth of Lord Krishna. In Assamese folk societies, various acts were performed on the occasion of *Janmastami*, which is believed to be a sacred day. Some believe that worshipping Krishna on the day of his birth would result in the birth of a son like him. Belief stories also circulate that those couples who, on desiring to have a son go on to give birth to girl children one after another, would definitely have a male child as the seventh child if they become devotees of Krishna (Lord Krishna was the seventh child of Daibaki).

While working on my research project in the north Kamrup area, I had an unique experience of first listening to a belief story (After Blehr it should be termed a “folk belief story” Blehr 1967: 261, quoting Asbjornsen 1845, although Honko classified it as “memorates”, a narrative which describes the real experiences of the narrator) and then having the chance of enacting a role in bringing the story to life in a village. At the core of the story is the belief among the folk women that a childless couple could be bestowed with a child if on the day of *Janmastami*, the wife enacts the role of Daibaki (Krishna’s mother) in a full length play performed secretly. The play has to be performed at a place where none but women are allowed and no male folks are supposed to know about it. The plan was made only one or two days ahead of the auspicious day on getting the green light from the childless women. Everything was planned within a short duration. Most of the villages have an expert group of women for this performance – but nobody knows about it in detail.

This paper narrates the experience of the researcher while taking part in the play and analyses the social importance of the belief, its economic and other aspects and its effects.

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Supernatural Elements in the Folk Tales of Assam with Special Reference to Lakshminath Bezbarooah's *Burhi Aair Sadhu*

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Assam is rich in folk literature. Orally transmitted folk tales are one of the important components of folk literature. The Assamese term for folk tale, *sadhukatha*, means the tales told by saints or sadhus. On the other hand, *sadhu* also means merchant or *saud*. Folk tales or *sadhukathas* might be told by saints or merchants to amuse the folk people in ancient times.

Folk tales spread all over the world are to a large extent enriched with supernatural elements. Assamese folk tales also carry the same characteristics. Lakshminath Bezbarooah's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* has some good examples of supernatural elements as well. *Tezimala*, *Tula aru Teza*, *Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*, *Cilonir Jiyekor Sadhu*, *Ou Kunwarir Sadhu*, etc., may be mentioned as examples. These elements in folk tales will be discussed vividly in this paper. For this purpose analytical methods will be followed.

Theorising Performance in Folklore and the Indian Concept of Rasaesthetics

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There are many examples of a new trend in methodological analysis of not only literary works but also the products of folklore. Literary studies have emphasised the importance of contextual and pragmatic methods of investigation. The structuralist analysis of literary works has gained ground over the course of time. The categories of symbolism, the symbol itself, and also the system of symbols are also observed as important terms for the study of folklore.

The conception of performance as the 'doing of folklore' gained currency in the early 1970s. The foundation of performance oriented perspectives in folklore lie in the observations of folktale and its documentation. The field collectors are also influenced by the artistic skills of the storyteller. They are further influenced by the audience or listeners who give importance and value to the storyteller by attentive listening. Generally the performance is considered as supplemental.

However, text and context as concepts have been the focus of theoretical or critical attention from folklorists.

Rasaesthetic is a term that deals with performance with emotion. The term *rasa* is used in an Indian written sacred text *Nāṭyaśāstra* (N.Ś). N.Ś is a Sanskrit manual of performance filled with narration, myth and detailed instructions for performers. It is more potent as an embodied set of ideas and practices than a written text. It is more performed than read.

This paper will discuss some of the perceptions of performance and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (N.S) sacred text. I will attempt to sum up a conventional understanding of ‘performance theory’ in folklore and also the idea of embodied performance. The latter will be discussed with the help of practices and beliefs of the tradition bearer.

Black Magic in the Tea Tribes of Assam

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The belief in unseen supernatural force evolved in a society that was totally illiterate and uneducated in the modern sense. It is also a product of a homogenous society that has little access to the outside world. The Tea Tribes of Assam, though a cluster of various communities migrated to the state, are also a community which has very little access to the outside world. Since they were mostly illiterate, it is obvious that they did not bring to Assam anything in a written form. There is no record of having any manuscripts and books containing *mantras* in their hand for practising black magic.

The Tea Tribes of Assam, which are not indigenous to the state, do not have any written document from which one can study or acquire the art of black magic. Though they do not possess the art of black magic in the written form, they use various forms of black magic to inflict harm on their enemies. Some of the forms of magic prevalent in the Tea Tribes of Assam are use of *ban* (charmed arrows), use of spirits (sorcery), and use of some charmed tree roots which are put inside the house or compound, feeding the enemy with charmed tree roots/medicine. The influence and popularity of magic is declining at the present time.

The Study of Magic

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James Frazer developed an explicit theory of magic. His tripartite division of magic, religion and science is not only evolutionary but also positivistic. He followed a worldview. Malinowski's concept of the utilitarian aspect of magic will also be probed in the paper, which will discuss the psychological interpretation of magic. Evans-Pritchard's study of Azande magic and witchcraft is another dimension of the study. Levi-Strauss' approach will be discussed in a dialogical way. Witchcraft, sorcery and spirit possession will be discussed as related concepts. Finally, the status of magic in contemporary society will be investigated.

Some Aspects of Belief and Practice among the Traditional Mishing Society: A Case Study

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In every culture, a substantial and integral set of beliefs, knowledge, techniques and practices are related to the major life experiences of good health and increased human lifespan. At the same time, various studies reveal that every folk society follows various beliefs and practices as remedial measures for maintaining a healthy life. They have their own indigenous ways or concept of maintaining their life. Thus these beliefs and practices play a major role in understanding the latent cultural values from the 'emic' point of view and to some extent such an understanding plays a significant role in implementing many developmental projects. Studies also reveal that some of these beliefs and practices may have scientific implications, whereas others are purely fallacies.

Moreover, everywhere there are some deep seated cultural and traditional values which prevent adoption or acceptance of new ideas. On the other hand, there are certain beliefs, whose ultimate aims are almost similar to the new values that the policy makers or government agencies are going to introduce. Therefore, it is important to identify those fallacies and convince the people of the bad implications. Thus, to understand the values of any culture and society the latent cultural and social dimensions need careful consideration. With this view, in the present paper an attempt has been made to trace out some aspects of beliefs and practice in the life of the traditional Mishing community of Pani-Miri Gaon, in Dibrugarh District, Assam.

The data embodied in the present paper have been collected from Pani-Miri village, situated about 30 km away from Dibrugarh Police station in a westerly direction. The village is exclusively inhabited by the Mishing people only and consists of 170 households with a total population of 1146 heads including 598 (52.18%) males and 548 (47.82%) females during my survey period. This paper is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data are collected from the sample survey by using a household survey, structured questionnaire, group discussions and personal interviews. The secondary data are collected from different published and unpublished articles, research papers, magazines and also from Internet sources.

Beliefs and Dreams: A Comparison between the Seng Khasi and the Dimasa Tribes

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Dreams are manifestations of reality that involve images, emotions, and warnings. According to Sigmund Freud, dreams are the “royal road to the unconscious”. Dreams are divine revelations whereby we gain insight into our beliefs and our values. In the Bible, Joseph of Egypt interpreted the dream of the Pharaoh correctly and therefore was made the Governor of Egypt. Among all religions, the animist believes that dreaming is part of their faith and they interpret it accordingly. Dream interpretation dates back to 4000–5000 BC. This paper compares two tribes of North East India who follows dream as a part of their belief system.

The *Seng Khasis* (Khasi tribe practising traditional religion) of Meghalaya play lottery (*rongbiria u khasi*) games as a part of their culture. However, the lottery numbers are calculated from dream interpretations. If a person dreams about a boy, it is taken to represent number 6, with a girl representing number 5. If the person dreams them together, then both numbers are taken for the lottery. This practice is prevalent in all parts of Meghalaya and the success of the lottery is attributed to dreams.

Among the Dimasa tribe of North Cachar, Assam, dreams have lead to a disaster and the formation of a lake named Tortoise Lake. There is a village near Hajong (Dima Hasao), Maibong sub-division, where natives believe that a giant snake (anaconda) terrorised the village. However, it was killed and its flesh was distributed among the people except for a widow woman. The widow had a

dream in which God told her to leave the village as soon as possible. She obeyed and left the village. Immediately, the village sank into the earth and a lake was formed.

Therefore, this paper is an attempt to show the vital significance of dreams in tribal culture and belief systems.

Belief Narratives, Witchcraft and Women: The Case of Rabha Society

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Belief narratives are narratives that express community patterns of belief as experienced by either the narrator or those known to her or his family, friends, etc. Scientific rationalism and Enlightenment thinking could not totally wipe out the presence of a shadowy world within the visible world outside. Belief in the supernatural continues in many societies, literate or otherwise, with the beliefs still held to be true and transmitted in different channels of communication, including oral narratives. Supernatural legends are belief narratives that describe human encounters with the supernatural world, a realm that in legend, as in experience-centred belief narrative, is “objectively real” although “qualitatively different from the everyday material world” in certain ways that are inclusive of “beings that do not require a physical body in order to live” (Hufford 1995: 11). Supernatural legends address a wide variety of topics including witchcraft and magic, fairies and other supernatural beings, ghosts and revenants, apparitions, etc. These supernatural beings are capable of performing both harmful and helpful actions towards human beings.

Witchcraft is closely related to folk belief and superstitions. Folk belief in witchcraft is the product of the ideas, beliefs, superstitions, customs and attitudes prevalent among the different tribes, particularly those communities who are illiterate and backward both socially and economically. Traditional belief narratives on witchcraft present a negative view of women as threatening to their community. This paper attempts to study a few belief narratives on witchcraft in the context of the Rabha Society, a major ethnic group of Assam. It is worth mentioning here that witchcraft is still practiced among this tribe and its negative impacts are seen time and again.

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Beliefs Surrounding Hudumdeu Worship in the Koch-Rajbongshi Society of Western Assam

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Folklore consists of legends, oral history, music, customs, etc., and these are the traditions of a culture. Different societies have different types of customs and beliefs that differentiate them from others.

The Koch-Rajbongshi society is an ancient tribe, originally from the ancient Koch kingdom. The word *Rajbongshi* refers to royal community. They have a rich cultural heritage. As the society is agrarian, the different festivals performed by them are also based on agriculture. Among the agriculture-based festivals, Hudumdeu worship is an important one. The women of Koch Rajbongshi society have performed this festival since time immemorial. They perform the Hudumdeu worship for the purpose of sufficient rainfall at the right time so that the production of crops could be increased. This worship is performed at night. They sing beautiful songs and dance, with other rites performed accordingly. They believe that Indra, the rain god will bless them with rainfall. The festival also shows the role of women in this ethnic society.

In this paper, the influence of Hudumdeu worship on Koch-Rajbogshi society will be highlighted.

Witch Hunting: A Blind Belief

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Witch hunting at present is coming up as a very burning problem in our society. The term “witch” refers to a woman who has black magical powers that she uses to do bad or strange things. Women are generally branded as witches and are accused for causing harm to community. These women are physically and mentally tortured, killed or burnt alive, stripped and forced to walk in the streets leading long processions. Even though there are numerous cases of witch hunting, this issue of violence and naming them as witches has not yet received the required media coverage. It is strange that the media never tries to analyze the hidden social forces behind such incidents. Even though people talk about globalization, modernization and socialization still the blind belief in witch hunting has become a sensitive issue in the society. Through this paper, an attempt is made to highlight some of the issues and factors related to this blind belief, which influences the society, and suggest some remedial measures for eradicating it.

The Meitei Community and Manipuri Muslims: Dialectics of Influences in Folk Beliefs

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The Meitei are the majority ethnic group of Manipur in India’s North East. Its history goes back to 33 AD when god-king Pakhangba took the throne. The Meitei profess Hinduism in general. The *Meitei* have a strong belief in folklore and supernaturalism. There are *Maibas*, the male priests with female counterparts called *Maibis*, who are the priests of folk beliefs. Meitei temple rituals are incomplete without the *Maibas*. Their rituals are believed to be the weapons of protection against evil spirits. In remote areas where doctors and hospitals are not readily available, the *Maiba Vaidis* are very much sought after. These traditional physicians are equipped with natural medicines and are highly respected by the tribes.

The Muslims here have a history of four-hundred years. Locally they are called *Meitei Pangal* which relates to the mixed heritage of the Pangal women from Meitei. They speak Manipuri or *Meiteilon* with an accent and live in the valleys in different parts intermingling with the Meiteis. Manipuri Muslims like their Meitei counterparts have some of the folk beliefs. During illness and even during ill faith, they usually visit the Meitei *Maiba*'s residence for treatment. Among the Muslims, there are also *Maibas* who practice magic and other folk practices similar to Meitei *Maibas*. The term *Panji yengba* is quite popular among the Meitei and Muslims. This is mainly to foresee their futures and fortunes. If any ill fate is to occur in the future course of the individual or family, *chaban thaba* or *laida katpa* is performed in which fruits, a hen or any material as proscribed by the *Maiba* or *Maibi* is offered to the evil spirits.

The paper examines the folk beliefs of the Meitei community and the dialectical influences on the Manipuri Muslim community over and above their religious differences.

Folk Remedies and Magical Beliefs Practices for Different Medicinal Plants by the People of Assam

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Assam is a state of exceptional interest to the rest of India. Assam is inhabited by about 115 ethnic groups, with their characteristic distinct ways of life, beliefs, traditions, customs and strong cultural heritage. The major ethnic groups are the Ahom, Bodo, Borahi, Chutia, Deori, Dimasa, Gar, Kachari, Koch, Khamti, Karbi, Lalung, Mishing, Moran, Mutuk, Naga, Rabha, Tai-Fake and Tiwa; together all are known as *Assamese* and bounded by the lingua franca Assamese language. The different ethnic communities are considered as a hidden wealth of information about plants used for medicinal purposes. Usually traditional medical practitioners have tremendous knowledge of medicinal plants although they maintain secrecy about their knowledge and pass this information down within the generations. In addition to this, they also believe in a magico-religious theory of disease causation and seek devices through supernatural forces. This paper includes documentation of a few medicinal plants used to treat different diseases by the local people of Assam and the magical beliefs practiced using those plants.

Narratives of Supernatural Experiences from a Folkloristic Perspective and their Influence on Assamese Society

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Mystery, mores, divinity, animism, black magic, tantric Vedas, etc., have greatly embellished the image of India. Indian sub-continent is a melting pot of diverse socio-cultural practices which contribute towards perpetuating the exotic nature of the image of the country. Indian society is an amalgamation of organic indigenous civilisation as well as invaders and immigrants from across the globe. As a result, the collective Indian mind-set is mired by the beliefs that have passed down from different cultural manifestations. Empirical evidence suggests that India as a society participates actively in perpetuating the spiritual and ritualistic folklores and beliefs to the extent that the divine and supernatural beliefs have become part of the daily life of the common masses. Religious institutions and texts have also played an instrumental role in creating such folkloristic perspectives, which have consequently created the essence of both faith and fear about supernaturalism. In addition, it is also observed that from time immemorial, storytelling has been another form of potent measure of all pervasive folklores and beliefs in the divine and the spirit world. Being no exception from rest of the country, the influences of animism, witchcraft, religious folklore, etc., also identify a significant part of the Assamese cultural set up. Popular supernatural mores and practices form a vital part of the fabric of the societal framework that binds together the Assamese folk.

This paper aims to analyse the influence and experiences that have woven the folklores and traditions of the Assamese cultural layout. It also attempts to understand the role of such supernatural narratives in trussing Assamese society within a thread of unity irrespective of religion, caste or creed. The data related and analysed for clear exposition of the study purpose is based on both primary and secondary sources.

Fish in Beliefs amongst Some Communities of North East India

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Fish is an essential article of food for the people of North Eastern India. Consequently, fish plays a significant role in the cultural life of the people and naturally many beliefs and ceremonies are associated with fish, fish eating and catching fish.

The non-tribal and tribal Assamese both observe certain rituals before fishing on certain occasions. On an auspicious day the day before *Magh Bihu* (the Assamese harvest festival), the entire village including men, women and children go out ceremonially to fish. Before commencement of the actual operation, a *puja* is performed on the bank and offerings are made to the water with prayers for good luck. Then Mantras are performed to obtain a good catch. There are large number of mantras to charm and capture the fish.

Fish as an essential item in the marriage ceremony of many communities of NE India. Fish is indispensable in betrothal among the Mishings. One hundred and twenty varieties of fish either raw or dried must be supplied to the bridegroom at the time of betrothal. The presence of a lesser number of fish is regarded as a sign of disrespect to the bride's party. Again at the time of the final marriage ceremony sixty dried fish of the same size must be brought by the groom's party and the bride and the groom must be fed together on the same plate with dried fish and specially cooked rice. The Karbis also offer pieces of dried fish to deceased ancestors at the time of marriage. The presentation of fish by a man to his betrothed is the formal sign of the completion of an Ao marriage. It is a common custom amongst the Assamese to send presents of fish to relatives and friends on the birth of a child. The Khasi use fish with rice bear, ground rice and turmeric when attending the ceremony of the birth of a child. The Lotha Nagas also offer fish to a new born within a month of the birth, ceremonially. On the death of a member of a family an Assamese does not partake of any meal with fish or meat. However, immediately after the *shraddha* ceremony a feast is arranged with the family of the departed in which fish is an essential article. This feast is also known as *matsyasparsa* (the fish touching feast). In this feast the departed soul is offered a meal prepared with fish.

Fish, especially dried fish, occupy a high place in the religious performances of the Karbis – in fact no performance can occur without dried fish. The Karbis believe that the blessings of God can be

achieved only by offering dried fish. Whenever a Karbi preceptor dies, his disciples offer dried fish at his deathbed. The Mishings use fish with barks in the performances of certain rites, in the worship of seven powers of nature: the sun, the moon, the wind, the water, the fire, the stars, and the lightening. In certain occasions the Mishings regard fish as the collateral to goddess Lakshmi.

Reflection of Folk Beliefs in Assamese *Dākar Bacan*

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I. Introduction:

Maxims can be considered as potential sources of folk literature. The oral form of literature proves to be a potential element of literature. Succeeding generations can very often look towards oral literature in hours of hope and despair, pain and pleasure, need or leisure.

II. Objectives:

- i. To focus on the Assamese *Dākar Bacan* as a potential element of folk literature.
- ii. To attempt to find popular beliefs in the selected *Dākar Bacan*.
- iii. To focus on societal reflection in the beliefs extracted from the tradition of *Dākar Bacan*.

III. *Dākar Bacan* in Assam: The maxims of *Dākar Bacan* are an unequal source of traditional knowledge in Assamese society. These have been classified accordingly with the subject matters they are associated with, such as farming, food habits, civic behaviour and law, property, disease, treatment, weather, etc.

IV. Rationale:

- i. Oral literary tradition is a potential resource for literature, and for literary criticism.
- ii. *Dākar Bacan* can be a promising area of belief narratives.
- iii. A study of the *Dākar Bacan* as narratives is a potential area for understanding Assamese popular beliefs.
- iv. Assamese *Dākar Bacan* being an unavoidable component of folk culture reflects the heritage of the Assamese societal construct.

V. Conclusion: The present paper will be an analysis of selected Assamese *Dākar Bacan* reflecting various areas of life and manners of people living in Assam. The same will be an attempt to understand the reflection of folk beliefs in Assamese society.

The Sociological Perspective of *ThangNarsaw*

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In Khasi, religion (*Niam*) means the rites and ceremonies and performing and completing them. This also means customary practises. In these rites and ceremonies there is a manifestation of the Khasi mind in words, deeds, customs and institutions and their idea of the ultimate cause. The ultimate cause is the *Dawiiing* (internal causes), and the *Dawlum* and *Dawwah* (external causes).

One aspect of the external causes some uneasiness and displeasure, although any unpleasant event is thought to happen because of evil spirits. Evil spirits that are commonly known among the Khasi are *KaTarro*, *KaPhansabuit*, *KaShwakaBih*, and *Thlen*. These are possessed by evil doers waiting to bring suffering and trouble to mankind. If there is any suffering caused by evil doers, the Khasi have to find the cause by performing a ritual made by egg breaking or by reading the entrails of a rooster. Some apply lime to the afflicted person. One of the most interesting of all the healing process is the *ThangNarsaw*.

ThangNarsaw is a healing ritual performed by the King Clan (*syiem*) of Khyrim and Myllichem Kingdom/state. Among the Khasi it is now only regularly practised in the family of the SyiemSad (Highest Priestess or Queen Mother) of Khyrim. An iron rod is put into the hearth until it becomes red hot. This red-hot iron is used in the ritual by touching a small lock of the hair on the head. This can also be done on clothes. Water that has had the red-hot iron rod dipped in it is also given to the afflicted person for washing, bathing, and drinking. In the process of performing rituals the performer also prays to the almighty to cure the afflicted person.

This paper looks into aspects of the *ThangNarsaw* ritual and its social impact among the Khasi.

Fishing Community Origin Narratives: A Case Study in Kamrup District

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A folk group, living in a particular locality, creates and recreates narratives about the originality of their existence in the locality and/or on this earth. By doing so, the folk group declares its existence and answers to the questions of how things and events take place in this physical world. Like any other occupational community, fishing communities in Assam have some origin narratives. These narratives refer to the creation of their community, identifying it with some noble gods and lords. The origin narratives of fishing communities may be classified into myths associated with epics and their characters and narratives, and myths associated with some popular folk deities. Moreover, some narratives, associated with narratives of noble lords and kings and their heroic deeds also form parts of some popular origin narratives of fishing communities.

This research paper aims to discuss some origin narratives of fishing communities in Kamrup district. These narratives are associated with the concept of divine figures and noble sages and kings. Fishing communities of Kamrup district identify their origin with some deities like Krishna, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshvar, etc. The divine powers of these deities are explained by fishing communities as the causes of their existence in this world. Fishermen in different parts of Kamrup district also identify themselves with some ancient kings and sages. They consider these sages and kings as the saviours of their community. On certain occasions, they are also accepted as their ancestors. Under such beliefs, they worship divine figures, noble lords and virtuous sages and consider themselves their descendants. A comprehensive analysis of all these origin narratives, dealing with deities, lords and sages, is made in this research paper in order to study how they determine belief patterns of fishing communities in their folk society.

Tiwa Ethnic Belief, Folk Music and Dance Performances

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Tiwa or Lalung is a culturally rich tribal community inhabiting the States of Assam and Meghalaya of North East India. Tiwa people are closely associated with the principality of Gobha. Gobha Raja belongs to the Tiwa clan and his territory covers more or less Tiwa cultural realm.

A striking peculiarity of the Tiwa is their division into two sub-groups, displaying contrasting cultural features: Hill Tiwas (mainly present in the Karbi-Anglong and Ri-Bhoi districts) and Plain Tiwas (mainly present in Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup district). The Tiwa are one of the major tribes of North East India, which performs its mosaic performances.

Most of their folk songs and dances are associated with their various types of belief. The lullabies of the Tiwas reflect their belief in rebirth, which is one of the chief beliefs among this tribe. Apart from this, the folk songs and dances are performed to praise the God of agriculture. It is believed that only if they make her happy, she will create a healthy harvest.

In terms of the indigenous religion, Tiwas believed that they had been born from the saliva of Lord Shiva, therefore they are also known as Lalung (the term is related to the word saliva).

Tiwas follow their traditional religion. It is based on the worship of local deities. The role of king (*Raja*), known as *Gova Raja* is very strong among the Tiwas and has been from the ancient time. It is believed that the king is possessed by the deity, which is why he is called *Deuraja*, meaning ‘the king who is related to their Deity’.

Tiwa is the only tribe of North East India that has intercultural relationship with the Khasis and Karbis (Mikir), Bodo and Kachari. It is believed that they are in a sibling relationship. This is reflected in the famous folk songs of the Tiwa, for instance, *Lali Lai Hilali* songs (here *Lali* means a Lalung female, *Lai* means a Mikir female and *Hilali* means a Kachari female who are sisters). *Jonbil Mela*, another important example of this, is a fair cum festival the most important part of which is its barter system between the hill people and the people of plains. Many groups of tribes (Khasi, Jayantia, Tiwa, Karbi, Boro, etc.) have participated in *Jonbil Mela* since ancient times.

Thus, the paper will focus on these and some other beliefs reflected in the folk songs and dance performances of the Tiwa community.

Magical *Bajra Xil*: An Object of Charm, Sorcery and Divine Power

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It is a worldwide phenomenon that archaeological stone axes have traditionally been considered “thunderbolts”. It is believed that these thunderbolts fall from the sky in thunderstorms when lightning strikes. Several beliefs and traditions prevail among the indigenous people of North East India who collect prehistoric stone artefacts as sacred and heavenly objects, mainly from their agricultural fields, and keep them for various magico-religious purposes. In view of the vast antiquity of the Neolithic period we have not yet satisfactorily addressed the role of these antiquities in their life and culture, gathered from North East India often from people residing in rural areas. The local Assamese people of Mayong area consider these stone axes as *Bajra xil* or *Bajra pathor* or *Parashu kuthar*, ‘the axe of the God’, while the Khasis of Meghalaya refer these artefacts as *Sdie pyrthat*, ‘lighting axes’. It has been observed that the Karbis of the Garbhanga area on the Assam-Meghalaya border perform a day-long religious ritual in connection with these artefacts. The Karbis offer puja to Ithabo or Thengcho, the ‘God of the Sky’, for preventing destructive and frightening thunderstorm activities at their settlements and agricultural fields. The present paper is an attempt to address the ideological significance of these artefacts in some parts of North East India and particularly to record the religious traditions associated with the belief system among the Karbis of the Garbhanga area.

The Tradition of Beliefs and Narratives in Assamese Society

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This paper makes an attempt to explore the age-old tradition of beliefs and narratives in greater Assamese society, which encompasses varied tribes and races living within the territory of Assam. The paper is primarily divided into two parts. The first part deals with conceptual aspects of beliefs and their status among Assamese rural folk while the second part covers the aspects relating to narratives in Assamese society. Accordingly, the paper will show the relationship between beliefs and narratives in Assamese rural life and also their profound impact on the psyche of the masses of the society. As we all know, beliefs and narratives are important components of every society,

either tribal or non-tribal. This paper wants to highlight how beliefs and narratives are traditionally handed down in agrarian Assamese society. It also discusses how beliefs have led to the various customs and rituals of Assamese society. On the other hand Assamese narratives are either in verse or prose. The verse narratives include ballads and similar while the prose narratives include myths, legends and tales. All these have occupied an important place in Assamese society, enjoying a place of pride and honour especially in rural Assamese society. This paper makes an analysis to see how these beliefs and narratives are deep rooted in Assamese society. An introspection into these aspects would establish the extent of influence these beliefs and narratives make on a traditional society which is a confluence of hundreds of tribes and communities of different origins.

Folk Belief in the Context of Disaster: *Bordoichila*

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Hinduism admits of a complexity of belief structures within which the deities that supervene are far more significant than the concepts of a distant God. Among the deities who reign over the consciousness of people in the context of disasters are Surya, Ganesha, Indra, Shiva, Kali, Varuna, and of course a host of non-canonical local deities. Each warrants special treatment. In this context this paper deals with the folkloristic belief in disaster, like a squall which we call in Assamese *bordoichila*, known in Chennai and on the Andhra coast as *mangoshower*, and *kalbaisakhi* in Bengal and Orissa. *Bordoichila* is a violent storm in Assam that marks the coming of the monsoon season, as it is accompanied with heavy showers and strong wind causing widespread damage.

There is an interesting Assamese legend explaining this local phenomenon. We call this fierce wind *bordoichila* and it is compared with a young married woman who could hurriedly fly back to her maternal home destroying anything that comes in her way. Sometimes in the later part of April, when *bordoichila* leaves her mother's home, she unleashes another series of frightful burst in her wake. It is also believed that *bordoichila* is a fortune teller for farmers. Numerous rituals have been built around the legend of *bordoichila* and this quaint traditional rite has been handed down generation after generation, which is simply heart pleasing. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the rituals organised by the different communities, both tribal and non-tribal, of this region. For this purpose various studies have been undertaken from traditional and folkloristic

perspectives along with interaction with the people of different communities of the North Eastern region.

Non-Verbal Communication in Belief Legends

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There are direct dialogues between human and non-human beings in belief legends but there are also other ways of communication. Even a written text can reflect such non-verbal communication in folklore. For example in old Estonian plague legends, a stranger who enters a village is sometimes categorised as an evil person who deliberately distributes the illness, sometimes as a mythological plague spirit, yet in some cases also as somebody who warns the village people of the illness or protects them. Similar automatic conclusions are drawn about strangers in modern folklore: for example, hitchhikers interpret drivers in dark clothes sometimes as dangerous maniacs, sometimes as good Samaritans. Strangers who appear in dreams are interpreted sometimes as malevolent aliens, yet sometimes as angels or other helpers.

So tradition and belief act here as a stereo-typifying filter before a dialogue between the actors takes place. Making conclusions in critical moments occurs, based on traditional, often mythological, fore-knowledge. In my paper I will take a closer look at the following questions: how do narrators decide who exactly is the supernatural being that they have met and if the intentions of this being are evil or friendly? Are there some special characteristics in the appearance of the strangers or in their non-verbal communication? In addition, I would like to examine which situations turn talking into action (e.g. the narrator has started using protective magic or punished another person whom he/she accuses of a magical attack) and in which cases real life events and behaviours become a topic of narratives (e.g. encounters with normal people that are interpreted as meetings with a supernatural being). So my aim is to discuss how real life (re-)produces folklore and vice versa.

Proverbs among the Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by numerous tribes and sub-tribes with distinct languages, cultures, customs and traditions. They have different customs and customary laws, myths and legends, folk tales and folklore, etc. These tribes follow oral traditions and all but a few lack their own script. They have their own faith and belief systems. Proverbs used to be an important guiding force and moral principle of the social systems. Proverbs used to be the soul of the justice system and basic education. Proverbs are gems of wisdom. They are coined in order to impart practical knowledge to us. Each is a great truth with lots of experience and profound thinking. Proverbs are the mixture of wisdom and philosophy. Proverbs can be known as the common man's friends, philosopher and guide.

Nyishi elders used proverbs to explain something and it has a great impact on our minds. Proverbs play a vital role in Nyishi life. The language of proverbs is simple but picturesque. Some important proverbs are as follows: "*Arum Ham Patee Lupup- Aru Ham Tassu Lupup*", meaning we should not behave like a tiger in the evening and like cat in the morning; "*Anne sama leedee buhe*" (the pious obligation of children to bury the mother's corpse); "*Anee Benglee lale- Abhu benglee lale bhuea/nyekhun*" (people who do not listen to parents' advice suffer); "*Amee Haree Nyee Maree Tukdee buhe- Isse Haree Nyee Langchak Dardee buhe*" (when in fire collect ash and when drowning in water collect pebbles in search of a dead body); "*Badar rea Sal – Sal lea Badar*" (fortune and misfortune come into one's life as a lake turns into current water and current water into a lake, so one must not be proud of one's own good time and make fun of others having a bad time); "*Gangtee Darr Ham Amee Reema – Iss Darr Ham Tamu Jangmaa*" (don't burn an innocent environment and don't poison clean water); "*Nyobee-Nyuru- Nyoru- Nyobee*" (dense forest turns into thin grassland and thin grassland turns into dense forest); "*Sangtung Padung Nyre Pakkhe*" (looking up while cutting something overhead invites dust in the eye, meaning that one must be careful when doing something); "*Machang Malang – Manee Todar*" (solve a dispute at the earliest opportunity before it spreads like a big fire).

Popular Miraculous Narratives Related to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) and the Beliefs of Muslims

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Narration is ageless; story-telling and popular narratives are means of entertainment and pleasure and have been since time immemorial. In addition, they spread the message of social and spiritual values. Before the discovery of writing, storytelling or narratives constituted the major part of oral tradition. Oral lore and beliefs encompass various issues and ideas, such as spells and magic, religious stories and narratives, folk songs, folk sayings, mystical compositions and superstitions. These have a tremendous role to play in framing the mental make-up of the people. The most important and influencing narrative prevalent among the Muslims is the Arabian Nights. Moreover, various narratives centre on miraculous happening in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) and his disciples (Sahabas). Some of the popular miracles related to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) are:

- a) The idols in Mecca that fell down on the night on which Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) was conceived by his parents.
- b) On the night the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) was born, the palace of Qisra (the King of Persia) trembled and its fourteen towers fell down.
- c) On the night the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) was born, the flames of the fire worshippers, the Majus (Zoroastrians) went out, although that fire had been burning for more than a thousand years and never extinguished.
- d) Syria's caravan and the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.).

Some of the famous miracles of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) are: the night journey of the Venerable to Jerusalem and then to heaven (Isra and Meraj); splitting of the Moon; survival of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.a.w.s.) after being poisoned; the spider's web; and so on.

In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight these narratives and make a folkloristic and analytical study of their social and spiritual values and deep impact on society.

Religion and Supernatural Beliefs: Oral Traditions and Narratives in the Context of North East India

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Religion has been the primary source of superstition and supernatural beliefs. In traditional societies, religion plays a central part in social life. Religious symbols and rituals are often integrated with the material and artistic culture of a society, which includes music, painting, carving, dance, story-telling and literature. Despite the vast number of variations, nearly every religion in the world promotes the same beliefs : the existence of a soul, an afterlife, miracles, and the divine creation of the universe. Craig T. Palmer and Lyle B. Steadman in their work *The Supernatural and Natural Selection: The Evolution of Religion* (Paradigm Publishers, 2008), describe how supernatural beliefs develop family-like relationships that foster cooperation, creating an evolutionary advantage for both the believing people and their culture. Religion and supernatural beliefs have persisted in almost every known form of human civilization and have had corresponding effects on the people and society concerned. Likewise, the north eastern Indian state of Assam has been the heartland of magic, charms and supernatural beliefs associated with religion. Popularly known as *jadu-mantra* in the vernacular tongue it is highly prevalent in the lower parts of the state, especially in the Dhubri District. It is noteworthy that though beliefs in the supernatural and religious legends have always existed in the Assamese society, these persisted primarily in the form of oral traditions. In the recent past, these narratives have found expression in the form of literature also in the novels like *Bakor Putek* and *Hudum*, written by Imran Hussain and translated into English by Mitali Goswami.

In this paper, we intend to explore the 'magic realism' evident in these two translated narratives and investigate how beliefs have been successfully transported and retained in the regional literature.

Spirits, Gods and Man: The Lepcha Context

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The Lepcha are the indigenous people of Sikkim, although a sizable population can also be found in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, Ilam in East Nepal and the western-most part of Bhutan.

This is because they were all part of one Lepcha land which was called *Nye Mayel Renjyong Lyang*, meaning ‘the land of holy and eternal purity, having the rule of the honourable people’. Animism and animatism can explain the indigenous religion of the Lepcha, but today a majority has converted to Buddhism introduced by Tibetan migrants, or to Christianity, spread by European missionaries.

As is evident, the Lepcha believe in a number of benevolent and malevolent spirits which they call *rums* (benevolent) and *moong* (malevolent). Sometimes, the same *rums* is also believed to take the form of a *moong* if displeased. This apart, they acknowledge the existence of a supreme god called *Itbu Rums*. What is interesting to note is that the Lepchas do not pay much heed to benevolent spirits with the logic that ‘since they are good to us there is no need to appease them’. However, the malevolent ones are also propitiated only when a crisis occurs in relation to the spirit that is supposed to cause it. So, there are *rums* and *moongs* associated with both the tangible and the intangible. The Lepcha religion is officiated by the *muns* and *baongthings* who are the traditional priestesses and priests. They are considered to be the mediators between the spirits, gods and man and are therefore required in every ritual from birth to death. The Lepcha also have their own concepts of heaven and hell. Although the Lepcha religion is on decline, there are those who still believe in the supremacy of their indigenous religious beliefs.

The Family Python: Experiencing the Supernatural

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The paper attempts to study the relationship that existed between man and animal (python) in close link. The study will be based on the experience of snake rearing by a Tangkhul family (of Ramva Village earlier known as Lambui, in the Ukhrul District of Manipur) prior to the advent of Christianity among the Tangkhuls. The paper will also discuss the Python as more of a deity than an evil spirit based on the role that it plays in the family in which it is reared.

The Weretiger Tradition of the Khasis: An Encounter of Reckoning

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The Khasis of Meghalaya, like many other communities of North East India are supremely ambivalent about tigers. While the tiger is respected, admired and revered, he is also feared. Folklore is replete with examples of the tiger as the bitterest enemy of man, yet, paradoxically he is considered to be man's greatest benefactor. Among other things, this has given rise to a dramatic belief among most tribes, a belief which is moored in very ancient traditions and narratives and which has survived to this day. Belief in the tigerman. The paper will also attempt a comparative study of the belief prevalent among the Garos and Nagas.

Exorcism as a Healing Power: A Study in the Khasi Context

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Belief is a powerful tool in the process of healing. The Khasis not only traditionally believe in the healing powers of various natural substances but also in omens, the supernatural and spiritual forces. Magic is another phenomenon believed in by many Khasis. Exorcism as a form of magic is found to have been practiced by the Khasis since time immemorial to propitiate some evil spirits called *Ki Ksuid Ki Khrei* – which is an umbrella term to denote ghosts and spirits. The performance of exorcism in the Khasi hills can be carried out by a priest or a gifted person only. The power of belief is imperative in the ritualistic performance of exorcism. An exorcist has the unique power of connecting to the world of the supernatural and attempts to free the negative force from possession. In this paper, I intend to study exorcism as a form of traditional healing practice and I will also highlight the supernatural and religious beliefs and superstitions relating to forms of folk medical and traditional healing practices prevalent among the Khasis.

Belief Narratives: Local Beliefs of the Meitei Ethnic Community

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The purpose of the present paper is to highlight the tradition and beliefs that have been associated with the Meiteis from the very beginning and which exist even today in tandem with numerous other sets of traditions related to Hinduism. Although features of both the indigenous religion of the Meiteis, called *Sanamahi*, and Hinduism constitute culture along with numerous belief systems of Meiteis ever since the adoption of Hinduism, this group of people still keep alive many of the cultural traits and beliefs originally associated with them.

An assortment of mysteries engulfs our human existence, which attracts, puzzles and baffles us at the same time. Ever since childhood we have heard many stories based on local beliefs, and have followed numerous beliefs without questioning as to what could be the mystery behind these beliefs. Such narratives have been ingrained in the society since its creation and they have become part of human life until today. There is lots of confusion regarding belief narratives. Some consider it to be a false consciousness and some regard it to be an inseparable part of native culture. In spite of all the arguments no one can deny the fact that beliefs have formed as an integral part of human reality beyond the scientific reasons.

In Meitei society many belief narratives have been found, although they remain unexplored. This paper will endeavour to bring forth the stories as well as sayings underlying the beliefs associated with Meitei culture. It will also make an effort to analyse how the Meitei peoples preserve and follow their beliefs in day-to-day life, with instances.

Authorities, Practices and Belief

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My research focuses on contemporary Western folk belief according to which the ground has some kind of special quality that affects the human body as well as the nature upon it. From this perspective, the quality, described as special radiation or energy, divides reality into 'positive' or 'negative' zones for human health and plant vegetation. People can get to know of these energies often by consulting with professional dowsers who can prospect for the 'positive' zones, for

example planning a house or garden or detecting the possible reasons for health problems, restless sleep or different spiritual visions. These advisers work as educated specialists since they possess a variety of vernacular knowledge, trust and authoritative positions as mediators between known and unknown forces. Although the skill to detect the invisible energies of the ground is a privilege that most people are said to have, the guidance of specialists is often still sought. Dowsers as specialists of the energies provide access to the ‘information’”, meaning the stories of particular places. Belief in this vernacular theory is based on the negotiations between authorities and individual experiences where the place legends are often at hand. In these expressions, knowledge as a form of engagement in discussions about the supernatural plays an integrating role between the individual and the forces beyond.

In my paper I shall discuss the relationships between practices and beliefs with a special interest in power relationships in these situations. What are the beliefs and how they are negotiated through everyday practices? Who holds the authoritative knowledge and how are the arguments put together?

Fieldwork as a Means of Contextualising Archived Belief Narratives: Theory and Praxis

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In my paper I will discuss the methodology of fieldwork I used for my PhD thesis. As the main source of research on *raganas* tradition was archival material, which usually lacked any context, the aim of my fieldwork was to try to contextualise this material, find out the functions of *raganas* legends and the dynamics of the tradition. Each of these research aspects required a different set of fieldwork methods, which I will discuss in my paper.

War Jaintia: Propitiating the Deities

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The *Hynniewtrep* is a generic term given to the various sub-groups of the Khasi community living in Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, a small state in the north eastern part of India. These sub-groups include the Khyntiam, the Jaintia, the Bhoi, the War and the Lyngngam. The people who

live on the southern slopes of Jaintia hills are known as War-Jaintia. The War-Jaintia like the other sub-groups of the Hynniew Trep have their own indigenous religion, known as *Ka Niam Chnong*. They believe in *U Prae Nongthia* (Supreme God, the Creator). They also worship other subordinate gods and goddesses like *Ki prae Am prae Pdeng* (the deities who guard the rivers and hills), *Ki prae Shyem Prae Sni* (household deities), *Ki prae kur* (clan deities), village deities, etc.

These deities are worshipped by particular families, clans and villages. The people worship and pacify these deities by offering *phan* or prayers and sacrifices to them; these deities are believed to safeguard and protect the people from harm and punish those who wrong them with sickness or by possessing the wrong doer(s) or sometimes even causing death. There are instances in which a scholar had witnessed people who are accused of wrong doing towards those people who worship these deities, the accused being punished in the form of possession by these supernatural elements. This paper will be a descriptive study in the form of narrating personal experiences of the supernatural powers as witnessed by the scholar in the War-Jaintia area.

Legends of Church De-/Construction: Mixing Balkan and Eastern Slavic Motifs

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My paper analyses narratives from the Albanian villages Devnenskoe and Georgievka (Ukraine). At the end of the 18th century orthodox Albanians, Greeks and Bulgarians were in flight from the Ottoman Empire and settled down where Catherine the Great offered them a piece of land.

In the village of Devnenskoe there is a church outlined against the surrounding Ukrainian constructions and reminiscent of a typical Balkan church: a single-nave cross-domed building made from red bricks. Legends about this church can be divided into several categories: a) stories about the church building that contain elements of well known Balkan ‘building sacrifice’ motif; b) stories about the church destruction and about horrible consequences for those who participated in the demolition, referring to the Soviet period and the spread in related territory; c) contemporary stories of the accidents during the church reconstruction between 2000 and 2011; d) new etiological legends describing reasons for the architectural peculiarities of the church that do not correspond with the ‘old’ Balkan motifs.

These narratives are related to the same object but have different origin, time of appearance and structure. This collection of texts can be a good illustration of the principle of motifs changing over time, adapting to different periods.

Spirit Propitiation: Esoteric Funerary Rites among the Lynggam and Nongtraï

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Supernatural tradition and its manifestations are a key component of the beliefs identifying the culture of the Khasi ethnic community of the North Eastern Section of India. Vernacular ways of life, in its everyday manifestations are informed and underlined by it. Khasi belief subscribes to a parallel reality inhabited by beings and powers other than human who need to be propitiated in order to uphold social and religious order. As such, magic, guardian spirits and malevolent deities exist in the vernacular constructions of ordinary life interwoven into the language, customs and individual and community held beliefs.

The Lynggam, Muliang and the Nongtraï are sub communities of the Khasi residing in the Western section of the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Although, these sub groups share affinities in their way of life and traditional beliefs, they prefer to be recognised as separate sub groups of the greater Khasi tribe. They differ mainly in their dialects, customs and village administration.

Within a particular clan present in the Lynggams and the Nongtraï areas, the practice of sacrifice and corpse reanimation in the context of spirit propitiation is known. If a death occurs within this clan, a divination is performed. There are elaborate rituals associated with this. Whether a sacrifice is needed depends upon the spirit of the deceased.

In the present day, most of the members of this clan are Christian converts and so this tradition is no longer followed. This paper will therefore focus on the historical description, context and social uses of this practice. How does vernacular epistemology sanction and perpetuate this practice and what are the social implications of this tradition? Why is it practised only by a single clan? Why does the perception of the spirit of the deceased as ancestor, become subverted into a malevolent entity within this clan?

This paper will be based on preliminary fieldwork carried out in the Nongtraï and Lyngngam areas of the West Khasi Hills District.

Magical Practices in Assam: With Special Reference to the Folk Medicinal Practices of Nalbari District

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Assam is a land of magic. This region has been famous from ancient times for the culture of magic. The spread of education and the development of science and technology has been able to decrease the influence of superstitions, although not to a complete extent. The influence of magic or tantrism can be seen in the field of folk medicine. The modern achievements of medical science, like artificial organ implantation, test-tube babies, cloning, etc., have not been able to win the complete faith of the common people. They still believe in folk medicinal practices based on tantrism. This belief ranges from common diseases like chicken pox, jaundice, body ache, headache, eye-ear-nose related diseases, bone fractures, sprains, fever, coughs, etc., to all kinds of male and female sexually transmitted diseases. They resort to the modern methods of treatment only after traditional methods have failed to cure them. It is worth mentioning here that not only the illiterate rural masses but many of the educated modern people also believe in such practices.

The traditional folk medicine of Assam can be divided into two parts: natural or herbal treatment and treatment based on tantrism or magic. The natural or herbal treatment is performed through different kinds of naturally available elements. On the other hand, the second type of treatment is performed through the use of mantras and magic. Sometimes both of these methods are employed together. A person practicing these kinds of medicine is called an *oja*, a *bej* or a *kabiraj*. Such an *oja* can be seen in almost all rural areas in Assam. However this traditional folk medicinal practice in Assam has not been studied in detail until now. This section of the vast field of folk practices has been covered in studies to a very limited extent. Among this limited sphere, the emphasis given to the use of magic is far more limited than the study of herbal medicine. Thus, in the present research paper, an attempt will be made to make a detailed study of the tantrism-based folk medicinal practices that are prevalent in Nalbari, a district situated in lower Assam.

The important aspects of the research paper are:

1. Diseases treated through magic,
2. The practices prevalent in tantrism,
3. The contemporary relevance of such methods, and
4. Tantrism-based medicinal practices and scientific attitude.

Field studies will be performed while preparing the research paper.

Discourse of Ecology: The River Spirits

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The paper is intended to focus on the belief, legends and description of customs concerning bodies of water and water related supernatural beings. Water spirits occur in many cultures and mythologies. The energy in the flowing and falling have mesmerised the imagination of people from time immemorial. The influence of the flowing aspect of a water body is seen in the surrounding environment directly. The liquid history of a river, which the civilisation on its bank always witnesses, creates a long and rich cultural bond between the water course and man on its bank resulting in different interesting linguistic connotations.

Almost all societies of the world possess beliefs regarding the presence of supernatural beings. An attempt to trace the origin of such beliefs generates awareness of ecological concern in numerous oral forms throughout culture. The different linguistic groups are rich with a variety of belief narratives regarding river spirits. They are imagined in both male and female form. They can also take the form of any animal. Water spirits fall into two tribes, viz. good water spirits and bad water spirits, with the latter believed to have evil intentions. The psychological state of the victim of water spirits generates newer and newer beliefs in the concerned surrounding.

What deserves special attention is the link between the belief in water spirits and the maintenance of ecology and regeneration of the environment. Conservation of water bodies may be considered a direct objective of such belief narrative. Water, being the core source for life, must be protected by any means. The paper tries to see the discourse of ecology behind belief narrative on water spirits.

Beliefs Regarding Child Rearing in Traditional Assamese Society

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Child rearing practices refer to how children are raised in a society and include the beliefs and practices surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, feeding, care and socialization of the young ones in a society. Child rearing practices are deeply rooted in cultural patterns and beliefs which are in turn influenced by the traditions, myths and religious practices of a society. These practices vary from one culture to another. In the traditional Assamese society too, there are a set of beliefs and practices regarding child rearing.

These beliefs start from the period of pregnancy itself. Pregnant women are forbidden from seeing the body of a deceased or to visit a house where a death has occurred until all death rituals (*shraddha*) are over. It is believed that the spirit of the dead may endanger the pregnancy. Witnessing an eclipse is considered a bad omen for pregnant women. Following delivery, a knife is kept on the bed used by the mother and baby to ward off the evil spirits. A month-long period of confinement following delivery, both for mother and child, helps the mother to recover her strength and fosters mother-child bonding. Black threads that have been charmed or blessed as well as other forms of amulets or charms are given to the child to provide spiritual protection. Use of a cloth pouch filled with mustard seeds and garlic and tied around the child's neck as well as a pillow filled with mustard seeds is believed to protect the child from the evil eye. There are several spirits and Gods associated with pregnant women and children. *Prasuta* is a spirit that governs the health of pregnant women, Goddess Sitala (*Ai* or mother) is the small pox goddess and *Apeswari* is a fairy invoked in times of children's illness. The naming of the child is a significant event. The names are chosen after considerable thought, considering the child's birth time and the position of the heavenly bodies. *Nisukoni geet* (lullaby) and folk-tales (*sadhu-katha*) form an integral part of the growing-up years and introduce the child to his or her culture, in addition to imparting moral lessons.

Knowledge of the various traditional child rearing practices is important to develop an understanding of and a respect for the varied cultural practices of different societies.

Estonian Werewolf History

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Estonia has been well known for its werewolf beliefs. In early modern Europe one could hardly find a book among those that dealt with Livonia (today the southern part of Estonia and northern part of Latvia) where the ability of Livonian peasants to transform themselves into animals was not mentioned. Olaus Magnus wrote in his famous *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* ('History of the Northern Peoples', printed in Rome in 1555 and translated into numerous languages soon afterwards) about the fear of werewolves that the people living south from the Gulf of Finland had, and about the enormous damage that werewolves had done to livestock in these areas. Another author of the 16th century, a famous jurist and demonologist Jean Bodin, also stressed the close connection between the werewolves and Livonia (using the expression "the wolf-addiction in Livonia is the biggest").

The best sources of the Estonian werewolf belief are not these West European books however, but the writings that are closer to the peasants' words/world. Among those written materials, the trial records from the 17th century and the recordings of werewolf legends from the 19th and 20th century, which can be found in the Estonian Folklore Archives, compose the most important part. Numerous motifs in these werewolf legends appear neither in the early modern books written by Western European intellectuals, nor in the witch trial records. What is the origin of these motifs? Why were these stories told among the peasants who lived a hundred years ago? In my presentation I am going to make an attempt to answer some of these questions.

Beliefs and Practices of Magic in Mayong: From Past to Present

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Nobody can deny that some of the centuries-old practices of magic, and the beliefs and rites connected with them, are still widely prevalent in some traditional and tribal societies around the world. These beliefs and practices have now become one of the most important parts in folklore studies as they have been in continuance in these societies as an inseparable part of their culture and tradition.

There are still some places in the world that can be referred to as living museums of those beliefs and practices of magic and magical rites. One important place among them is Mayong, located on the western extremity of the Kolong-Kapili basin between the mighty Brahmaputra on the north and the Kolong to the south and south west. Mayong lies in the west of the district of Morigaon and just beyond the eastern fringe areas of the famous tantric centre Kamakhya, of Kamrup district, Assam, India.

Mayong has been famous as a 'land of magic' in Assam since the days of yore. There was a belief that the magicians of early Mayong were very much adept in the practices of magic (both black and white magic) and could perform some stupendous feats by employing some supernatural powers of black magic. With the passage of time, though the practices of black magic (which were used mainly to achieve some nefarious ends) disappeared from the heart of Mayong, belief in the practices of white magic (which are mainly used in the treatment of diseases) are still widely prevalent among the villagers. It has been observed that the majority of the local people still resort to the 'magical way' to cure almost all types of minor ailments or diseases.

The main aim of this paper will be to explore and document the beliefs and practices of magic in Mayong from the distant past to the present. I will also try to show here how the image of Mayong as a 'land of magic' in Assam has been created and how these beliefs and practices are now in vogue as an inseparable part of the culture and tradition of society in Mayong.

Perspectives on Irish Fairy Belief

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The fact that Irish fairy belief can be subsumed under the category of ubiquitous 'animistic' beliefs together with its evident (and typologically expected) connection with the cult of the dead makes the historical investigation of the subject seem futile. However, the wealth of the Irish medieval literary tradition gives us a unique opportunity to weigh, with regard to this particular case, some traditional hypotheses concerning the origin of fairy-like beliefs in different societies. On the one hand, fairies and other personages of 'lower mythology', or 'demonology', are often deemed to be connected with the most archaic strata of any given ethnic oral tradition. On the other hand, in the context of Christianised traditions, they are not infrequently treated as gods of the original heathen

religion relegated to the position of forest or domestic spirits and the like. The evidence of different early medieval Irish texts shows that in order to account for the particular features of Irish traditional fairy belief we have to combine these hypotheses and devise a more complex approach based on the possibility of the presence of different strata in the Irish heathen mythology itself. This analysis may also help us understand the variation in the Irish fairy belief which is evident in the folkloristic record.

Life in the Underworld: A Study of Man and the Supernatural Union

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The paper is an attempt to study the relationship that human beings have with supernatural beings in the Khasi context. This relationship is created either by a close contact through ritual performance (in the form of possession) or through conjugal union. I will focus the study on the experience of the journey and life in the underworld that people encountered. Taking the case of Meral Nongrum (of Kynshi village in the West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya), a man who was reportedly married to a river nymph, I will try to analyse the experience that he had with his supernatural wife in the underworld.

Mythological Origins to Contemporary Perpetuation: The Historical Paradox of the Tai Ahom

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The case of the Tai Ahom of Assam, India, is the unique story of a small group that migrated to the far north east corner of present day India in the early 13th century AD, bringing with them an extremely rare system of written record keeping (*Buranjis*), compiled in the exotic Tai language, on perishable material, that would eventually be the primary reference for Medieval Assam. For the initial three centuries they remained confined to the original locale, but by the mid 17th century their kingdom had expanded to most of the Brahmaputra valley. Over the last eight centuries, in the process of assimilation, state formation, the colonial period, etc., the Tai Ahom lost much, principally their language, religion, and identity as erstwhile rulers; so much so that they are categorised among Other Backward classes in the modern state.

It emerges that they had a belief system rooted in mythological origins (*Buranjis*). These beliefs are corroborated by the most important work of an ‘outsider’ depicting Medieval Assam in totality, namely, the Persian chronicle *Tarikh-e-Aasham*, dated 1662–63, wherein Ahom beliefs in the supernatural or the magical, such as during wartime and burial rites, are highlighted. In our time, the very term Ahom continues to arouse strong emotions and debates, often heated. In the late 20th century, alternative narratives were advanced on the alleged identity construct and contemporary position of the Ahom, with descriptions of belief practices (Yasmin Saikia).

This paper attempts to contextualise the evolution and applied aspects of the revivalist movement, based in large measure on cultural content, including oral and written narratives of religious beliefs and practices, language, folk dance, folktales (*Joymati*, *Godapani*), traditional dress, food, art, festivals, ethnic products, etc., in the quest for political, economic and cultural space in the contemporary state.

Spirit Possession and the Restless Dead: A Supernatural Experience that Changed a Life

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Personal experiences of the supernatural are widespread in the narrative traditions of Assam. These narratives are expressive of cultural norms, social and religious perspectives and individual and community held belief. This paper seeks to explore the idea of supernatural possession, of what happens when the soul of a deceased person is restless and what measures are taken to propitiate and appease the unquiet soul. Social balance is achieved when the wishes of the deceased person are fulfilled. The following narrative will be examined in order to explore the various dimensions of spirit possession and the concept of the restless dead.

In the year 2006, unnoticed to the world, an incident occurred which changed the life of an elderly lady. Lalitha Basumatary (55) from Baksa in Assam lost her divorced and re-married husband (Lt. Bisti Boro) three years before the incident. She had given up all hopes of living a decent life with a home and a shelter of her own long before the death of her husband, who lived in Dhamdhama, Nalbari. Her two sons got married and they all lived separately in Bwikuntha Nagar, near Gita Mandir in one of the hills in Guwahati.

She had been to her home in Baksa when she received a call from her younger son Khola Basumatary (35). “Mother, our father has come back and he wants to talk to you”, he said. At this, the lady was taken aback for she never believed that she would ever talk to her husband again as she had stopped talking to him long ago, well before his death. At her son’s earnest request, she agreed to talk to him but the voice seems to be faint and cracked. She later discovered that whenever she tried to talk to him on the phone it simply wouldn’t work out as the technology did not accept the voice of the dead. The very next day she went to meet her returned dead husband and to her surprise, he was there not in person but his soul had entered the body of her younger daughter-in-law who had never been seen by her husband while he was alive. It was simply astonishing to see her daughter narrate their whole story about love, marriage and separation, that too in the voice of her husband. She (he) asked for tobacco, as it was his favourite during his lifetime. She (he) even guided her (Lalitha) to get her pension money as her (Lalitha’s) husband had been a government employee in Dhamdhama.

She (he) had vowed never to take any form of liquidity from her husband after the divorce but now the very soul of the dead had been pleading her and begging for pardon. Her heart melted as she (he) promised to wait for her till her next birth, serve her and be a good husband (he had asked a blessing from Lord Shiva to unite him with her in the next birth so that he may make up for his past mistakes). She now enjoys her pension and has her own home in Barimukh, Baksa. All the incidents that were narrated would create a thick book in itself.

Supernatural Beliefs among Assamese Muslims

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Supernatural beliefs are universally prevalent among human beings irrespective of their religion. The history, heritage, culture and beliefs of a place have great influence on its people and their religion. Subsequent conversion of some of the inhabitants to a religion originating in another country need not deprive them of their heritage, culture or beliefs. This phenomenon was seen among the Assamese Muslims of Assam. The *Assamisation* of the Muslims in Assam started in the 13th century when Bakhtiar Khilji in 1205–06 was defeated by the Kamrupa ruler King Prithu.

Many of Bakhtiat Khilji's soldiers were killed and many captured. The Assamese Muslims of Assam maintain the traditional culture of Assam strongly. It is very difficult to identify separately a Hindu Assamese from a Muslim Assamese.

Muslims universally believe in *Jinns* as spirits with extraordinary supernatural power. Along with belief in *Jinns* the phenomena of *Deu-Laga* and *Aie-Laga* are two beliefs which are prevalent among the Assamese Muslims (*Deu* is 'supernatural spirit'). The native Hindu Assamese believe in *Deu* in many ways. When a person is possessed by a spirit it is called *Deo-Laga*. They believe that *Deu* can cause mental and physical illness in the human body through affliction or possession. This belief of the Assamese Hindus is widely accepted among Assamese Muslims. *Aie- Laga* is another such belief, in which occurrence of measles and chicken-pox are related to the possession of the body by a female Spirit or goddess addressed as *Aie* or 'mother'. Along with the beliefs there are specific rituals for ridding a person of these diseases. These rituals are influenced by Assamese Hindu Culture and beliefs along with a distinct feature of the Islamic rituals. *Monokha Puja* (worship of the snake deity), which is part of Hindu culture, is another phenomenon practiced by some of the Assamese Muslims to acquire health, wealth and power by pleasing the snake deity.

Mythological Link to Assamese Folk Culture: The Behula and Deodhani Dances

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Assam finds mention in various texts of Hindu mythology from Mahabharata to epic songs about Behula, who continues to fascinate the Assamese and Bengali mind alike, both in India and Bangladesh. She is often seen as the archetypal Hindu woman, full of love and courage. This image of Behula is reflected in her ordeal to revive her dead husband through divine intervention. In these songs the serpent goddess Manasa has an important role.

Deodhani dance is a ritual dance performed in honour of Manasa. This dance depicts the process of worshipping Devi Manasa. The dancers wear *mekhala*, traditional Assamese dress in *muga*, a red blouse, and traditional jewellery. When dancing the dancers leave their hair loose and dance to the tune of a *jaidhol* (a cylindrical percussion instrument) and *khutitaal* (palm-sized cymbal). The dancers rotating their heads in a rapid circular motion with open stresses is a striking moment of this dance. It is performed solo or in a group of three or four females. The dance begins when a

young woman drinks the raw blood of a pigeon and goes into a trance and starts the dance with slow movements. As the tempo of the music increases, the dance becomes faster and the dancer spins her whole body like a top, twisting the neck to imitate a snake. This goes on until the dancer falls exhausted into a swoon.

A Study of the Archaeological Sites of Mayong: With Special Reference to the Legends and Traditional Beliefs Relating to Them

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Mayong, a small area in the District of Morigaon, Assam, is rich in archaeological remains and is widely known as the 'Land of Tantrism and Black Magic'. The archaeological sites of Mayong attract thousands of tourists to visit these sites every year, yet no one has so far made any systematic attempt to study these archaeological remains and the legends and traditional beliefs relating to them. A few archaeological heritage sites in Mayong worth mentioning are: Kachashila Shiva Temple, Hatimuria Ganesh Temple, Aai Bhagawati Than of Hatimuria, Burhi Aai Than of Hatimuria, Kechaikhaiti Than of Rajamayong, Ranga Dangaria Than of Rajamayong, Kamakhya Dham and Kechaikhaiti Than of Burhamayong, Ganesh Than of Gobhali. All these are religious places and so there are many legends and traditional beliefs relating to them.

The proposed research paper will include only a few of the above mentioned archaeological sites. The basic objectives of the study will be to bring the history as well as the legends and traditional beliefs relating to these sites to the fore, which will ultimately lead to the reconstruction of the history of Mayong.

Belief Related to Matrilineal Society among the Tribes of Meghalaya

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The societal system in Meghalaya is the only matrilineal society in North East India. 'Matriarchy' is a form or system of family in which women lead the society and have more status than men. Total control is centred either in the wife or in the mother. This system of matriarchy is prevalent and practiced among the tribes – the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos of Meghalaya. There is a belief related to this type of social system according to which, “the children are the blessing of God”, and the mother is the one who bears the child in her womb and protects it from all sorts of dangers and vices, thereby performing the role of a protector throughout her life. The mother takes pains to ensure the security and happiness of the children. Thus, it is believed that as a woman takes care of the child single handed she can take the sole responsibility for leading society. Moreover, it is believed that when one faces danger one always takes refuge or shelter in the mercy of a deity not in the lap of a male God. It is for this particular reason that the word *Anti-Mei*, meaning dedication to Mother God, arises. Thus although neither inheritance of property nor this societal system is recognised and sanctioned by the parliament or assembly, it is followed today.

Examining Narratives and Trauma through Folktales: A Selective Study of the Folktales of the Khasis

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Trauma, whether personal or public, is something that radically and forcefully repositions the sense of being. In terms of a trauma experienced by a community, it redefines a pre-existing cultural and social structure. Often a traumatic event exposes gaps in the ideology of ideas, beliefs, rules and laws that served as the foundation of the sense of self and the sense of community. There is a sense of harmony, completeness, the sacred and the ultimate before the advent of a traumatic event and as such the sacred and complete are deconstructed by the consequences of the traumatic event. Narrating such a traumatic event then focuses on the idea of the 'downfall'; the destruction of the structure, the soiling of the sacred and the violent desecration of the ideal by an external or internal element. However, in the choice of the narrative surrounding trauma, the point of view taken by the dominant narrative discourse and the methodology adopted by both the aggressor and the victim of trauma there is a unique perspective. This perspective is one that can be examined in the history of narratives and trauma, a history that lies in folktales and religious records. Folktales and religious narratives are the precursors of the modern day narratives of political, social, cultural, economic, cultural and individual trauma. There is no denying that trauma, individual and communal, can trace

its history to the emergence of human communities, from the ‘cave man’ societies, to the feudal societies, from the industrial society to our modern society of technology and virtual reality. One cannot deny the unique and complex socio-political and economic histories of each and every community and the traumas which they experienced, yet one can attempt to show that the acts of inscribing such traumatic events share a common thread in the point of view and methodology adopted.

Belief, Discipline and Subversion: Gender and Russian Vedism

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Within the variety of ideas associated with the Russian New Age, the vision of Vedic Russia and the community it creates constitute an especially interesting subject of research. The imagined past provides a spiritual ideal of ‘correct living’, which is seen as crucial in the transformation of society and the return of the Golden Age. Gender norms constitute a very important part of the Vedic value system. The preoccupation with gender is reflected in didactic texts, which range from lectures by Ayurveda specialist Dr. Torsunov to ‘inspirational’ posts on the social networking website *Vkontakte.ru*. In practice, however, the patriarchal implications of these gender ideals become vulnerable to challenge or re-interpretation.

This paper focuses on one St Petersburg organisation that provides a platform for people to promote their activities and exchange ideas at workshops, retreats, and annual festivals. For all its heterogeneity, the group’s discourse nevertheless promotes the Vedic ideal and exhibits an interest in Russia’s ancient past. In my interactions with the group, I have observed that while its members seem to enthusiastically embrace and promote Vedic values, they often reinterpret, parody, and openly contest them. The group’s female members, for example, instruct each other in the correct practice of Vedic living as they develop friendships, participate in self-help events and craft workshops, and make use of social networking and other websites. Paradoxically, these women seek to embody the rigid norms of Vedic femininity with a degree of creativity, humour and self-awareness. It is this relationship between discourse and practice that I intend to analyse.

Some Popular Narratives in the Proverbs of Goalpara District: An Analytical Study

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Narratives result in retelling events, incidents or stories in the form of folk performances. Narratives include oral traditions and migrate from the originality to some formalised or written collections. Various forms of narratives like *Märchen*, supernatural tales, fairy tales, fables, motif and folk tales can be expressed with the help of ballads, proverbs, riddles, folk songs and such other oral forms of folklore. When a ballad tells a narrative in the form of a song, riddles express the same in the form of a question. Folk songs, on the other hand, also represent some narratives in the form of songs. Among these elements of verbal folklore, proverbs also reflect some narratives, generalising some common truth, habits and moods and manners of a group of folk people living in a particular locality. Proverbs, the simple and concrete sayings and quintessence of accumulated wisdom or experience of any civilised society narrate some narratives in a precise way.

This research paper aims to discuss some narratives, as revealed by proverbs, prevalent among folk people living in Goalpara district. Narratives, representing moods and manners, habits and nature and above all some common truths are expressed by these proverbs. Moreover, some common fables and supernatural tales are also presented in the form of proverbs. This paper intends to discuss some of the popular narratives that deal with the social systems of folk people living in Goalpara district.

Constructing Women: Womanhood in Assamese Folk Narrative

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Each and every folk society stores and transmits folk knowledge and culture through the medium of folk literature – tales, fables, proverbs, riddles, songs, poems, etc. Folk narratives are, indeed, the real storehouse of folk knowledge and experience which is the manifestation of social reality. In folk narratives generally, stereotypical women are depicted: one is meek and mild, another is quarrelsome, cruel, jealous, and unkind. She even does not hesitate to kill someone whom she envies. In some tales of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (The Grandma's Tales) we find these types of women. In Tejimala's Tale (Tejimalar Sadhu) Tejimala is meek and honest but her stepmother, who is treacherous and cruel, tortures her and at last kills her. The concept of *dainee* or witch is also

available in Assamese folk tales. Folk narratives depict and explain womanhood; it is one of the powerful tools to instruct women what is expected by this patriarchal society, and thereby to construct females as women. Folk narratives are very helpful for the process of socialisation in a male dominated patriarchal social structure. Some proverbs contain some comments ('knives are to be honed on stone, wives are to be regulated with blows') on women that are derogatory for all women. Hence, in this paper an attempt is made to study the folk narratives of Assam with a view to investigating how women are treated in folk society, how womanhood is constructed and their gender role defined by Assamese society in folk narratives. The paper is descriptive and analytical. Both primary and secondary data are applied in preparing the paper.

Beliefs, Narratives and Social Discourse: A Study in the Vaishnavite Institutions of Assam

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The Vaishnavite institutions of Assam, called the *sattras*, are religious institutions established from the fifteenth century onwards to propagate the teachings of the neo-vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva. With the official number placed at around nine hundred, *sattras* are powerful institutions exerting tremendous influence on the social, cultural and religious life of the Assamese people. The faith disseminated by these institutions is monotheistic, urging devotion to a single godhead, Krishna. It stresses oral propagation of *bhakti* through *shravan* and *kirtan* – listening to and reciting God's name – and has a compendium of narratives associated with the official religion. Yet, it is seen that apart from these classical narratives, there is a vast repertoire of narratives in the *sattras*, such as the divine genealogies of the founder saints bordering on the mythical, as well as legends, tales, parables, exempla, proverbs, songs which are constantly narrated, recited, sung and used as a part of *sattriya* culture and which reflect the beliefs and practices associated with vernacular religion. Very often, these narratives are grafted onto the dominant discourse and help in articulating and maintaining the image of the *sattra* folk, while at other times they serve as a counter to the dominant discourse.

This paper will focus on a few legends collected from different *sattras* and show how they reflect the social and cultural set-up of the *sattra* folk. These narratives help in understanding the worldview of the *sattras*. In addition, they perform the important function of creating and maintaining the unique identity of the *sattras*, investing supernatural powers in the institutions as

well as the sattra pontiffs and maintaining hegemony both within and outside the sattras by invoking fear and faith. The paper will also discuss how these narratives can also be viewed as powerful rhetoric with political implications.

The Aboriginal Institution of *Karadji*: From Sorcery to Medicine Man – Can He Survive?

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Belief in supernatural procedures is a characteristic feature of preliterate society. In such societies there is always a person who acts as a link between the natural and supernatural worlds. Such a person is considered to possess extraordinary power. Most of his/her acts and deeds are based on mediums unknown to the common people of the community. They are the religious specialists who are divided into two broad types, shamans and priests. For Lowie, a shaman is a person who receives his or her powers directly from the gods and spirits and acquires status through personal communication with the supernatural. In this paper we will discuss such a person among the Australian aborigines. He is commonly known as *Kardji*. The name of such clever men varies in accordance with the different regions of Australia from which they originate. *Karadji* (western districts of New South Wales), *wingirii* (Queensland), *kuldukke* (south of the Murray, Victoria), etc. Elkin defines a *Karadji* as a man of high degree who possesses magical power and who serves as a channel between “Dreamtime beings and their own communities.” For the people of this community, the *Karadji* plays the role of a doctor, a wise man, a religious leader, and a sorcerer. They possess special knowledge of the Dreamtime that allows them to perform magic rituals for the benefit of the tribe, or the detriment of their enemies. This essay attempts to explore the role of *Karadji* in changing aboriginal societies – both in the spiritual and cultural aspect.

Religious Beliefs in Rabha Society

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The Rabhas are one of the nine Schedule tribes in the plains districts of Assam. They are widely scattered but mainly concentrated in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. The Rabhas are rich with distinct culture and cultural heritage. They have their own folk literature, beliefs and rituals that deserve attention. Folk beliefs, otherwise known as ‘superstitious beliefs’,

constitute culture as well as a value system of a given society. These beliefs manifest basically their custom, way of living and believing, religion, opinions, fears of the unseen and unknown, old or popular practices. The rituals and institutions related to these beliefs show how people view the 'supernatural things', gods and goddesses and the means of appeasing the gods and goddesses whom they believe to be the controlling force of their past, present and future. The Rabhas of Assam also have beliefs regarding the supernatural, gods and goddesses. They believe that if those gods and goddesses become angry, diseases, misfortune, even death would come into their lives. So, observing different rituals and institutions they try to appease them. Like other Assamese people, the Rabhas believe that the cause of pox is the wrath of a goddess; in Rabha society the name of this goddess is Basanti. She is named as Sitala also so that by pronouncing the name a patient can be made free from itching and burning. When somebody suffers from a disease it is also called the appearance of Aai. So, to satisfy the goddess they arrange puja, worship of Sitala or Aai. Women sing *Aainaam*, chanting her name and narrating her activities. They worship Lord Shiva (Langaburha). To appease Lord Shiva the Rabha arrange *Langapuja*. They also believe in *Ghor Gosani, Kuber, Dainee, Baghdeo, Batar Deo, Sil deo, Naodeo, Sordeo, Jangor Puja, Khakhlam, Hamdeo, Kasupasaldeo, Silasamen, Aaka Dainee, Bar Manee, Banaria Gosain, Tukuria Puja, Bora, Kali, Bihuli, Balia Gosain*, etc. So, in this paper an attempt is made to study different religious and supernatural beliefs and how these beliefs are reflected in folk narratives of the Rabha community of Assam. To prepare the research paper primary data are collected from the Goalpara district. Secondary data are collected from books and journals. The paper is both descriptive and analytical.

Migration of Belief: A Study of Sitala Tales and Lore in Assam

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Sitala, a village female deity, is responsible for the creation and destruction of the disease popularly known as pox. The traces of the origin of worshiping Sitala are lying in foggy chambers of mythology. In West Bengal and certain parts of Northern India and Southern India one can find the practice of worshiping goddesses Sitala. Along with the ritualistic codes for worshiping this deity, one can discern the development of a body of tales and lore. These tales and lore, besides being

important from folkloristic perspective, also provide interesting insights into the nature, character and method of worshipping of this deity. The migration of these tales and lore to Assam (chiefly from West Bengal) at different historical junctures will be the focus of the study. The objective of this paper will be to analyse how these tales and lore migrated and adapt themselves in a new cultural context in due course of time. The classical texts on medicine (*Ayurveda*) have given lesser scope to the discussion of pox and pox like diseases. This has doubled the problem of drawing a line of distinction between the mythical and scientific elements prevailing in the narratives around this disease and the deity. Such narratives not only provide interesting insights into our culture but also inform human belief system.

The *Adi-Dharam* – A Religious Belief of the Tribes of Jharkhand

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The *adi-dharam* is the root or the beginnings (*adi*) of the religious beliefs of the tribes or the Adivasis, the first settlers of the Jharkhand region. Such beliefs have been variously known as animism, animistic religion, primitivism, primitive religion, aboriginal religion, nature worship, adivasi or *janajati dharam*, *sarna dharam*, *sari dharam*, *sansari dharam*, *jahera dharam*, bongaism, etc.

The Adivasi people – at least a large section of them – are recognised in the Constitution of India as a distinct cultural group but they do not have a distinct religious identity. The census reports, compiled every ten years, give them the choice of registering their religious identity under the category of “other”. Consequently, the Adivasis, or tribal people who do not identify themselves as Christian, Muslim or Buddhist, are compelled to register themselves as Hindu. This creates the confusion about the Adivasis as practically losing their ‘tribal-ness’ or indigenous identity by converting to other religious communities (Christian, Muslim or Buddhist), but turning them to Hinduism is also a contentious and unethical issue. This however has been the tendency. By doing so, Adivasis are not getting anywhere in what they expect to be a ladder of upward mobility. In that effort their place is at the bottom even below the last born (*antyaja*) Harijan. The attraction of the so-called mainstream is misleading. For the Adivasi to get in that would be accepting servitude forever. The Adivasis are falling into the attraction, for the Adivasis’ long mental exploitation has compelled them to forget their distinctiveness and proud heritage. The present paper aims to

contribute to the effort of reconstruction of the religious aspect of that heritage, a process which is already going on at the preliminary level.

Whose Language, What Culture? Two Voices from NEFA Crossing Linguistic Boundaries

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The role of culture in the production of fictional literature has always been pivotal. As literature is closely bound up with the cultural, social and political discourse of a society the sense of cultural identity is always there in writers' works. In short, a writer attempts to recreate the culture, everyday life of the time and offers the reader the scope to experience that period. It is an admitted fact that no art can grow alone unless it is rooted in its soil. So without knowledge of cultural background one is denied some of the intellectual and moral experiences that give meaning and richness to life. In other words, a meaningful social life at present would be incomplete without reference to knowledge of the past. Culture enables us to justify our claims in the present. That is why a cultural group's present situation depends on how the past is constructed. In the early days, cultural history was considered to be the storehouse of legends, heroic accounts and folktales. However, with the passage of time the scope of history underwent a sea change. The main scope of history will be the social life of man, his diurnal achievements, his communal arrangements and his economic endeavours. In short, history is concerned with origin and development of all kinds. A good novelist generally does an in-depth study to give a realistic picture of a society with fully developed characters who think and act. Seen from this point of view, cultural history is concerned not generally with the past but only with the realities of the past. In this regard Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi and Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh deserve special attention.

The approach to Mamang Dai and Thongchi has been an engaging vocation for folklorists since the publication of their literary works. Many scholars/folklorists have studied the works of these two writers on various aspects of folklore resulting in a wide range of critical readings. A close survey of their works shows that much has been written about the anthropological and sociological significance of Arunachal Pradesh. It is quite interesting to note that until the appearance of Mamang Dai and Thongchi the literature of Arunachal Pradesh did not gain any satisfactory place in the folkloristic discussion of the state. Consequently, no authentic writing came out that could attract the attention of the readers. In addition, the literary men in this state concerned themselves

with the presentation of the socio-political situation and the characters in order to locate the culture in its own place. But a tremendous change can be noticed in the presentation of the native culture and its people in the works of these two writers. Both of them are successful in upholding native culture and placing it in its own form and addressing their characteristics in a non-native language that is intelligible to a small majority. While Thongchi wrote in Assamese creating a new tradition in writing, Mamang Dai records cultural life in English, a language that is not her own. Both have crossed a linguistic barrier in order to create a literature of their own. This paper will try to examine how these two writers position themselves as literary voices to create their cultural identity in a language that is not their own.

The Donyi-Polo Revival in Arunachal Pradesh: Examining the ‘Formalisation’ of Animist Practice

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This paper offers an overview of the Donyi-Polo revival, addressing (1) the movement’s processes of religious ‘formalisation’; (2) the movement’s charismatic leader Talom Rukbo; and (3) the challenges faced by scholars attempting to develop a neutral vocabulary with which to discuss the movement. Donyi-Polo, the worship of the sun (*Do:nyi*, female energy) and moon (*Po:lo*, male energy), is the uniting set of rituals and beliefs common among the animist Tani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In recent decades, aggressive missionary initiatives by Christian and Hindu groups have inspired the Tani to ‘formalise’ their practices in an attempt to strengthen cultural awareness and protect against mass conversion. This institutionalisation has been achieved primarily through restructuring the Donyi-Polo tradition to fit the model of more ‘mainstream’ religions (e.g., the documentation of a formal theology, the construction of prayer halls, the designation of official holidays, and the unionisation of shamans). The late Talom Rukbo (1937–2001), renowned Adi activist, author, and social worker, is generally considered the father of the Donyi-Polo revival. His prolific canon of poems, stories, songs, and essays reflects his fear of the Adi losing their identity, his concerns for women’s rights and the environment, and his strong desire to educate youth about Tani heritage. While the Donyi-Polo revival is today a significant part of Arunachal Pradesh’s complicated religious landscape, the movement is not without internal tensions and has been criticised for creating merely a ‘Hindu-ised version of Tani animism. By observing this formalisation of Donyi-Polo, we may be witnessing the beginning of a trend through which

indigenous cultures are preserved by the adoption of more contemporary ‘frameworks’ when faced with religious infiltration, cultural appropriation, and the passage of time. However, we are simultaneously asked to consider that which may be lost through institutionalisation and to give attention to the meanings and usage of basic terms such as ‘religion’, ‘animism’, and ‘indigenous’, the contextual understandings of which have come to determine government policy and tribal identity.

Folk Beliefs in Khasi Oral Tradition: Text and Practice

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This paper proposes to study some aspects of folk beliefs prevalent in the Khasi oral tradition. The Khasis are an ethnic community residing in Meghalaya, a state in North East India. There are existent, multiple genres of folk beliefs within their religion and worldview. Such beliefs have no foundation in rational explanation, but are widely accepted as truth by most members of the Khasi community. Beliefs include divinations, spells, cures, charms, signs and omens, rituals, taboos, rites, social practices, customs, superstition, magic and traditional beliefs. In this paper the textual meaning and the context of the beliefs will be explored so as to understand the folk belief system of the Khasis in its semiotic perspective. It is worth noting that from the semiotic point of view, anything in verbal or nonverbal form is a text that can be recorded in any medium such as writing, audio or video. Looking from this perspective, the study of Khasi folk beliefs as text and practice will help us to understand its meaning and purpose better.

Genres of Enchantment: Understanding Magic from the Folkloristic Perspective

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Magic as an art of achieving desired results by manipulating supernatural powers has fascinated both practitioners and theorists through the centuries. The rise of Christian theology in Europe brought the suppression of alternative worldviews and religious practices, including different forms of magic that were seen as forms of demonolatry, superstition and illusion. During the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period the othering discourse about magic was taken to its extreme in

definitions of witchcraft (*maleficium*) as an art of practicing evil in co-operation with the Devil. The leading Christian demonologists claimed that humans cannot possess any supernatural powers; unexplainable, unnatural and fantastic phenomena were seen as diabolic interventions. When the Enlightenment undermined the authority of religion, and scientific views gained prestige, magical thinking was disparaged as a primitive and erroneous mode of thought. In his *Golden Bough* (1890) James G. Frazer formulated the laws of similarity and contact as the grounding principles of magical practices. Both in religious and rationalist doctrines magic has been rejected and ascribed to the ‘others’ (pagans, heretics, uneducated peasants and primitive peoples). These attitudes have contributed to connecting magic with esotericism and secrecy on the one hand and to its growing folklorisation on the other hand. Some later theories, sometimes based on extensive fieldwork (e.g. by E. E. Evans-Pritchard) have rehabilitated magic to a certain extent by noting its social functionality. In the contemporary cognitive approach to religion magical phenomena such as spiritual journeys or ritual summoning of demons are connected with the processes of the human mind, described as “tuning” the nervous system (E. Gellhorn).

Early folklorists conceptualised magic as a superstitious survival. Contemporary folkloristic approaches proceed from the understanding that cultures are textually and verbally constructed (R. Bauman). Supernatural beliefs are expressed in a variety of genres that sometimes construct fantasy worlds beyond social realities, sometimes blend them. The efficiency of verbal charms, of magical practices and belief in the reality of supernatural encounters is rooted in related narratives, including personal experience stories. These genres of enchantment manifest both magical and aesthetic functions, transforming the world into the playground of supernatural powers. The paper discusses cases from folkloristic field interviews about magic and the narrative strategies of informants to make arguments about the efficacy of magic.

Binding Words and Powerful Things: Verbal Communication Between Christian Missionaries and Nenets Pastoralists in Arctic Russia

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In this presentation, I shall discuss an ethnographic case of idol burning in an encounter between a Nenets reindeer herding family and a Pentecostal missionary. The event that I will discuss took place in April 2007 on the northernmost slopes of the Ural Mountains. This is the area where, since

the mid-1990s, Pentecostals and Baptists of Ukrainian and Russian origin have been actively evangelising. By now, out of five hundred nomadic Nenets of the region, roughly half have converted to Christianity.

Those Nenets who agree to convert and burn their idols, the missionaries say, become persuaded with God's help or, in other words, they are convinced by the Holy Spirit. The missionaries insist that destroying an idol is an outward sign of an inner change. At the same time, it is also imagined to be an embodied experience of freeing one's consciousness from material objects. The old Nenets man whose idols were burnt had a different understanding of the situation. I shall analyse the dialogue between the Pentecostal missionary and the Nenets man and demonstrate how the divergent concepts and usage of spoken words and sacred things influence the outcome. I shall suggest that a decision to convert to Christianity in this case is tightly related to the verbal intensity as well as to the imbalance of authority in the encounter and not with the Nenets man being persuaded.

Archived Genres of Belief: Strategies of Textualising Votian Belief Narratives

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In my presentation I will discuss strategies for textualising genres of belief, as was done by Paul Ariste (1905–1990) when documenting the vernacular religion of the Votians, a Finnic minority group in northwest Russia. In 1942–1980 Ariste made 25 field trips to Votian villages and compiled a 5499-page manuscript collection titled *Vadja etnoloogiat* ('Votian ethnology'). Ariste's intention was to document and study the particularly archaic heritage of the Votians and thus his field recordings were evidently past oriented (the contemporary religious context was manifested mainly in his field diaries). Ariste preferred informants who were on the one hand religious but at the same time also superstitious personae. Due to his research interests we can find from his collection material about unique old-style religious concepts, supernatural phenomena and other manifestations of Russian Orthodox village Christianity. In my analysis I will concentrate on recurrent structures in folk belief accounts, memorates and belief legends as well as the descriptions of ritual practices found in the collection of Paul Ariste. In addition, my aim is to discuss ways of transmitting religious folklore within the tradition group through a variety of genres and the role of the researcher in moulding these genres.

Toward a Unified Schema of Folklore and Belief Studies

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The study of beliefs in folklore has evolved over the past century from collections of magical and supernatural beliefs to a less genre-specific study of belief systems in their entirety. Nonetheless, the study of belief is still largely concentrated on supernatural, magical, and health-related beliefs, rather than beliefs pertaining to justice, culture, and nature. The approach is often still item-focused rather than more broadly systemic, as well. The challenge for folklorists then becomes how to unify this theory, how to show the folkloric relationships between beliefs that involve religion, health, politics, and sustainability. I argue that the folklore of belief is always a discourse on forces beyond our control, across an array of genres. These responses to supernatural, spiritual, biological, environmental, or political power are attempts to negotiate with forces from a position of mortal human weakness drawing on tools from the matrix of folk epistemology.