

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

*GOROKA*: COSMOGRAPHY AND THE SHARED ACCOUNT IN ASSAM

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SEAN MICHAEL DOWDY

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For Muscat Ali, my *bhagin*, who made and unmade the world in a single dirty limerick:

*Dangor manuh kela, gundhai gela gela.  
Xoru manuh pupu, mane mare gupugupu.*

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The Oxomiya (Assamese or Axomiya) language has a sanctioned and standard orthography based on the phonetic alphabet, and the standard transliteration of the language into the Roman script follows the same rules as Bengali and other Indic conventions. The trouble is, the standard for transliteration does not account for the particularities of pronunciation in Oxomiya and many of its dialects. I have purposefully rejected the use of standard transliteration in this thesis, opting instead for Roman script spellings of words in the spoken Mayongian dialect (*Mayongor Upbhaxa*) and Standard Oxomiya that approximate local pronunciation. There are, however, three consonants and two vowels that deserve special mention on how to pronounce them correctly:

- x* pronunciation should be the voiceless velar fricative ⟨x⟩ (as in “loch”)
- ch* pronunciation should be the fricative sibilant /s/ (as in “sip”)
- o* pronunciation should be the open mid back rounded vowel ⟨ɔ⟩ (as in “thought”)
- j* pronunciation should be the voiced alveolar sibilant [z] (as in “zoo”)
- ú* pronunciation should be the near-close near-back rounded vowel |ʊ| (as in “hook”)

*This is Magic Mayong; you always should move within the account.*

– Saritra Biswas

*Although the account is shared, most men live as though  
their thinking was a private possession.*

– Heraclitus (5<sup>th</sup> Fragment)

*Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers.  
I would be free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's books.*

– Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)

## PREFACE

### **The Arrival of the Naked Men**

*“Latch your windows tonight. Do not go outside. Do not drink and play cards. Sleep with a dao under your pillow. Stay quiet. If someone knocks on your door, do not answer. We have a problem...the naked men have arrived. Hisapot solabo, dei (Move within the account / Proceed carefully with calculation).”*

Here was a warning I hardly expected. I had just arrived in Burha Mayong (Assam, India) for my second year of fieldwork only two hours prior. It was a Sunday evening and I planned to spend that night as I usually spent Sunday nights: drinking, laughing, and telling stories with the Karbi<sup>1</sup> *deka raij*, the society of unmarried/uninitiated males (mostly in their twenties) who, like me, were learning traditions and customs from the elders. But this night the *deka raij* was occupied with duties more disconcerting. The village elder who admonished me with this baffling warning informed me that the boys were camping at the northern edge of the village to protect everyone from dangerous “naked men” (*lengta manuh*) who were emerging from the forest at night. And for my protection I would have to stay locked in my room, *dao* at my side. Dumbfounded yet not wishing to create a scene, I followed orders. A couple days later, I snuck out late at night to meet the *deka raij* at their sentry camp. They recounted to me a curious string of events that, to this

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<sup>1</sup> “Karbi,” here meaning the Plains Karbi “tribe,” who I lived with during my fieldwork and who comprised the majority of my informants. The Plains Karbi people have yet to be given official “Scheduled Tribe” status, which would afford them protections, reservations, and benefits as outlined in Articles 338 and 342 of the Indian Constitution; nor are their places of habitation protected under the guidelines of Schedule 6 of the Indian Constitution which allows the creation of autonomous districts with major local controls for persons in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The “Hills Karbi” (formerly known as Mikir) do have Schedule 6 protections as per state recognition of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District. This situation, and its relationship to Mayong’s *de facto* (rather than *de jure*) autonomy, will be explained in Chapter 1.

day, remain frustratingly inscrutable—for the anthropologist as much as for the people of Mayong.

The inscrutability of these events draws us into the ethnographic stakes of this dissertation, which attempts to tackle how, why, and through what processes a shared form of accounting (both written and oral) has become an emergent phenomenon in the erstwhile kingdom of Mayong (Central Assam, Northeast India). The *strangeness* of the “naked man” situation that I describe in this preface is not meant to be taken as allegorical or even exemplary of the larger “cosmographic situation” of Mayongians, which will be described in Chapters 1 and 2. But it is meant to be *exhortatory*, a means of participating in the shared account (*raijor hisap*) via one of its central processes: inciting others into action and speculation. In some ways, it is also meant to incite you—the reader—by drawing you into the hyperbolic and public interpretations that, *inter alia*, make and unmake the shared account.

The arrival of the naked men and the public sense-making that unfolded in its wake clarifies an idea that unites the ethnographic and historical analyses in this thesis. To condense this idea, I paraphrase a felicitous insight from anthropologist John Kelly (2012): anthropologists, nowadays, study situations—and situations are *irreducible*. If we accept Arjun Appadurai’s (1981: 218) argument that the past is “inherently debatable” because it is a “rule governed, [and] therefore finite cultural resource,”<sup>2</sup> then as far as any situation involves the past—and per both Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2009: Introduction, *et passim*) and Michel de Certeau (1988: 82–84), all situations necessarily do—we may have good reason to qualify the statement that situations are *irreducible* to any single interpretation or framing. On one hand, I concur with Appadurai that debates over the past, or really over any situation of any temporal depth like myth and ritual, are

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<sup>2</sup> By “rule-governed,” Appadurai essentially means “socially mediated,” with all implications of access, hierarchy, and interpretive legitimacy.

culturally organized, and in many cultures this organization is framed by political power, literacy, and various social constraints. Appadurai's overall point is adapted from Edmund Leach (1954: 278, emphasis added), who argues that "Myth and ritual is a language of signs in terms of which claims to rights and status are expressed, but it is a *language of argument*, not a chorus of harmony." In Mayong, the shared account is indeed a language of argument built around myth, ritual, and event—and it often "closes" hyperbolic public debates with the quiescent authority of elders and "analogic kings" (see Chapter 3) who try very hard to harmonize all voices into an authoritatively construed yet literally *shared* account. History, however, has no real end—in authoritative quiescence or any other modality of power. And rules that govern the interpretation of that past are not always evident in any given situation. Uncertainty lingers in any situation, and in Mayong the shared account is often *unmade* through various revisions, subversions, and resituations (what I refer to as speciations, exhortations, and particularizations). Indeed, the uncertainty is part of what makes the shared account seem irresistible and necessary in the present moment and also what drives its unmaking. This dynamic is the Mayongian idea/metaphor of *goroka*, i.e. the alternating pedals on a foot loom that symbolize the dialectic tacking back and forth between creative labor and patterns "discovered" in the invention of history itself (see the Introduction for further elaboration).<sup>3</sup> Effectively, attempts of meaning-management that try to make the past or any situation into a scarce resource, *pace* Appadurai, are often "recaught" in new patterns of symbolization, interpretation, and innovation that tend more toward situational *surplus*.

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<sup>3</sup> *Goroka*, in this thesis, is meant to be an ethnographic explicans—or, if you will, a "controlled equivocation" used to construct an "ethnographic theory," per da Col and Graeber (2011)—for the creative labor that goes into making and unmaking the shared account. It is a Mayongian idea, but one that shares certain features with Roy Wagner's (1972, [1975] 2016) ethnographically-derived insistence on the inventive and innovative capacity of symbolic life, and *mutatis mutandis*, Marshall Sahlins' (1981a, 1985) concept of the "structure of the conjuncture." *Goroka* illuminates the creative process we undertake when we risk our categories and extend them into new situations with new stakes, which may renew their initial significance or divert its force toward new "transvaluations," to say it with Tambiah (1996).

This does not make them any less *shared*, however. That the shared account is open to a surplus of meaning, resituation, and reinvention while also being publicly composed into a single form is neither a paradox nor a contradiction in need of logical resolution by the anthropologist or the Mayongian. The situation is irreducible because the social totality is irreducible.

Of course, a surplus in meaning can become deadweight for creative activity and lead toward exhaustion and inscrutability. From Gluckman to Sahlins, Goffman to Das, anthropological theories of “the event” assume a level of transparency and intelligibility even when there may be no warrant. But, for Sahlins (1985; 2004), this is what distinguishes an event from a happening; events are a *relation* between an occurrence and a structural-symbolic order.<sup>4</sup> Sense (as both impression and meaning) is what makes an event. The arrival of the naked men in Burha Mayong certainly had sense...too much of it in fact, which ultimately blanketed the event in failed speculation and unintelligibility. On one hand, villagers tried desperately to make meaning of it all, using frame after frame (Goffman 1974) in an exhortatory mode to force the transitory weirdness of the whole incident to fit into myths and stereotypes they shared. On the other hand, the particular reports they had at their disposal resisted smooth structural work, leaving everyone to shrug their shoulders in the end. Effectively, the situation became a matter of pragmatics: not so much “What is going on here?” but “Given what little we do know, what is to be done?” And yet, the memory of the unintelligible event lingered on and still lingers today, resurfacing in new situations.

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<sup>4</sup> We might compare Sahlins’ definition of an event to that of Alain Badiou ([1988] 2006), who proposes that an event only can be intelligible as an event when a situation is construed as a strong or radical singularity. For Badiou, it is a post-festum issue: events can only be known as events (“counted as one”) after the fact because the situation as such has been changed radically. While I would concur with Badiou that evenemential intelligibility is ultimately retroactive, one has to be able to understand how actors apply meaning to an event while they are caught up in it. This is what makes Sahlins’ treatment of the ritual killing of Cook/Lono an insightful handle for understanding the relation between contingency and structure.

## Downstream Transvaluations

It all begin in late June 2013. News had spread across Assam of “dark and naked” men terrorizing forest villages in Sonitpur District, approximately 170 km. northeast of Mayong along the Brahmaputra River. The news stories, hyping and transvaluating<sup>5</sup> the event in the wake of the recent Delhi rape case that made international headlines, had declared that these “dark and naked” men were knocking on doors at night and threatening to rape village women. The quantity of so-called “official” reports (FIR)—made to the police—was staggering, in the hundreds per some local news outlets (DY365, NewsLive), but very few of them actually detailed any literal, direct or explicit sexual violence. Rather, most of them describe a gendered interaction, marked as one of male-male unintelligibility and male-female cannibalism: *A dark-skinned man, completely naked, knocks on a door. When men answer the door, he shouts in speech that is completely unintelligible. When women answer, he tries to bite off and eat one of her ears, a finger, or a piece of flesh from her arm.*<sup>6</sup>

The Sonitpur incidents ended tragically. A “village defense squad” near Tezpur halted, tackled, and then literally lynched three young men, travellers (i.e., strangers), who were discovered stealing crude oil from a storehouse near the highway. They were immediately

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<sup>5</sup> I use the concept of transvaluation in Stanley Tambiah’s sense (not to be confused with Nietzsche’s concept, which sees transvaluation as the “revaluation of all values”). For Tambiah, transvaluation is “a process of assimilating particulars to a larger, collective, more enduring, and therefore less context-bound, cause or interest” (1996: 192).

<sup>6</sup> It is conceivable that the threat of cannibalizing women was understood as “attempted rape” for two reasons. First, sexual acts in rural Assam are often euphemistically referred to as a kind of “eating.” Second, any bodily violation of women by men is colloquially referred to by the English word “rape” in Assam. But the reason I disambiguate here is that all too often the Indian news media treats events in Assam and the rest of Northeast India as if they resonated with national concerns—in this instance, I am concerned with the way the news media framed the naked men incident as if it were an after-effect of the Delhi rape case (see the links in footnote 4, which do not even use images from Assam but rather from anti-rape protests in Delhi). In fact, events in Assam do not always resonate with national concerns (which are read as “concerns of the center”)...and this is quite often intentionally so, since a great deal of Northeasterners see themselves in a schismogenetic relationship of complementarity with the Indian nation-state rather than one of balanced symmetry where meanings and contexts are equivalent if opposed.

suspected of inciting the terror.<sup>7</sup> In the end, the Sonitpur incident played out among locals as if it were an all-too-common event of witch-killing rather than the response to a typical instance or threat of sexual rape (an important contextual significance that was ignored or lost in the media frenzy).

And still, the reports did not end there. Almost as if the naked men were following the flow of the Brahmaputra River, accounts of their terror spread southwest from Nagaon to Morigaon District, and finally appeared in Burha Mayong weeks later—a few days before I arrived.

In Mayong, there were only three official reports made to police and reporters, but these were sufficient to set off a collective panic that continued for around two weeks until accounts of the naked men were being confirmed further downstream and had eventually “disappeared” upon reaching the edges of Guwahati (Assam’s largest city, 40 km west of Mayong). The official accounts, provided to me by an amateur journalist in Raja Mayong, were as follows:

Approx. 9:30 pm, July 5, 2013. Nambari, Burha Mayong. A woman was cooking dinner in her home when she heard the ducks outside making a raucous noise. Thinking it to be a wild cat, she grabbed her flashlight and *dao* [a machete-like knife] and ran outside to chase it off. She shined her light on a dark-skinned man standing near the duck coop. He had matted hair and was completely naked. His penis [*linga*] was very big and he had scars all over his body. He moved forward and began speaking in an unknown language. She screamed and the naked man ran away before an alerted neighbor arrived to provide help.

Approx. 10:00 pm, July 5, 2013. Nambari, Burha Mayong. A husband and wife were sitting on their verandah. They heard their daughter shriek from her room so they ran inside. Outside her window stood a dark-skinned man, naked. The man spoke but no one understood what he said. He opened a packet of Shikhar [chewing tobacco] and put it in his hand, but it was not really tobacco. It was only *boga* [“white,” here meaning slaked lime (calcium hydroxide), which is used with tobacco and betel nut to cut the gums and induce a quicker stimulation]. He ate the white only. He then took a razor blade that was

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/three-lynched-over-nakedmenouttorape-panic-in-assam/1131173/>;  
<https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-06-20/india-3-men-lynched-naked-rapists-rumor-spreads-panic>;  
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Naked-men-spark-panic-in-Assam-3-lynched/articleshow/20673164.cms>.

tucked into a thread on his arm, spread some white on it, then cut his chest. He smelled sweet.<sup>8</sup> He shouted, his mouth was full of white, and then he crawled [*bogai korile*] into the jungle.

Approx. 12:30 am, July 6, 2013. Kolabari, Burha Mayong. A local man returning from a neighbor's house saw a dark figure in the distance where the forest meets the rice fields. He shouted out to him, but there was no response. He walked closer and saw that the man was naked. His penis was oversized [*linga to iman dangor*]. Another naked man came out of the jungle holding a dead chicken. The villager shined his flashlight on both and shouted "Where are you going?" Both naked men quickly returned into the jungle.

One may immediately notice the variety of bodily dispositions of the naked men encountered in Burha Mayong: unintelligibility, matted hair, penis size, scarring and scarification, et cetera, but no *direct* sense of sexual violence. This was more than just a localized re-valuation of the Sonitpur incident. It was, what I am calling, a "downstream transvaluation"—an assimilation of particulars in a new but also larger context, where significance is no less context-bound but since it is understood as a reiteration of something experienced elsewhere (here with respect to the Sonitpur incident), the focus turns on something more enduring that connects the disparate events. After the circulation of these reports in Burha Mayong, random sightings and speculations snowballed. I too was convinced that I was hearing things outside my window in the dark. Stories circulated fast. On at least one occasion, men from two connected hamlets grabbed their *daos* and rushed from their homes to the road where someone had sighted a naked man squatting in the gravel. It was a false alarm. Nothing but a stray dog was found.

### **Exhortation, Speciation, Particularization**

Who were these naked men? Where did they come from? What were their intentions? Huddled around their campsite, the boys of the *deka raji* spent their nightly duty as sentries speculating on

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<sup>8</sup> The reporter mentioned to me that the "sweetness" of the smell most likely referred to chloroform that was probably being used to attack people. This was an off-handed speculation on the part of the reporter only and not mentioned by anyone in Burha Mayong.

the incidents while carving spears out of bamboo (*jati bah*). When I finally managed to sneak out to their camp, the boys informed me that they had been trying to piece together the stories and sightings to make sense of it all: what kind of people these were, what the reported details meant, etc. They had been doing so through a unique genre of verbal play known as *jukowa* (see Chapter 5, this thesis). The defining feature of this genre is to incite or exhort another person into a humorous or thoughtful response, who in turn incites with further excess. To call it sophomoric horseplay or teasing would not fit the semiotic particularity and public understanding of what *jukowa* is and does. *Jukowa*'s exhortatory mode is meant to underline the incompleteness of a narrative or action (cf. Favret-Saada 2015)—a literal mode of *foreplay*—that provokes others to act and “fill in the blanks,” so to speak (see Chapter 5). So, with my arrival, I too joined in the *jukowa*, took on my exotopic role as the foreigner anthropologist, and allowed others to *jukai* actions and ideas out of me.

I have translated portions of this group *jukowa* here in order to reveal the invention and ultimate failure of three different speculations/frames for which the *deka rajj* tried to make sense of the naked man panic. The first frame concerns stereotypes of race and bodily disposition, the second concerns stereotypes around practitioners of Tantric Hinduism (for which Mayong is infamous, see Chapter 2), and the third concerns stereotypes about so-called “illegal” (Muslim) immigrants from Bangladesh—known colloquially as *Miyan*, or more broadly as *bahiror manuh* (“outsiders”)—who have been at the center of political controversy as a pariah community since the Assam Movement in the 1980s and, due to the rise of the BJP government in Assam in 2016, have recently been “evicted” from their residences in many areas across the state as part of an “eviction drive” movement. Unfortunately, and in an unparalleled moment of state-centric authority that almost symmetrically resonated with rising land-claim grievances against people in

the so-called “Bangladeshi hamlets” on the riparian islands (*sor, char*) at Kaso Xila in Mayong, many of my Bengali-speaking Muslim friends in Mayong were forced to vacate their homes.<sup>9</sup> Most had been living there since the 1960s (see Kalita 1992), well before the 1971 cut-off date of amnesty secured in the Assam Accord (1985).

To the point, each of these frames is, of course, immanent to the creative repertoire of Mayongians and their particular problems or ideas about the world.<sup>10</sup> Yet they were also downstream transvaluations that attempted to find a place for this inscrutable event in larger, more enduring interests—ones that would account for the Sonitpur events as much as the ones in Mayong. What makes them Mayongian in context, however, has to do with the processual form in which the speculations were gathered: through exhortation of addressees, speciation of the persons involved, and particularization of details. These are the means by which the shared account is made and unmade. And, as I lay out in the Introduction, although they have a specific resonance in Mayong, these processes are general mechanisms of transvaluation that use logics of induction, deduction, and abduction.

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2016/sep/21/After-Kaziranga-Mayong-to-drive-out-Bangladeshi-immigrants-1521853.html>; accessed December 12, 2016. I was told by the new SP, Mr. Bordoloi, at Raja Mayong Police Station that this eviction was hurriedly done because of the state sponsored Namomi Brahmaputra festival, which had various tourist programs planned in Mayong near the river. He said that the matter was “more a political issue than a legal one,” because it involved the riparian boundary between Darrang and Morigaon District and thus was driven by the issue of “vote bank” politics more than actual claims over land ownership. The festival provided an incentive (and screen) to make it seem as if the BJP Government was properly implementing the agreements of the 1985 Assam Accord. According to Mr. Bordoloi, “This was all political maneuver. Mayong was just in the right place at the right time for the BJP to finally act, but many of the families here were not recent immigrants at all.”

<sup>10</sup> Almost ironically so, witch-killing is entirely absent from Mayong (see Chapter Two) and so-called “rape cases” are rare, or at least rarely reported. Over the three years I spent in Mayong, only one case of rape was brought into public debate and litigation—and this, although being termed “rape” (using the English term), was actually a matter of consensual adultery that had heavy moral implications for the two families involved. The use of the term “rape” signified the moral horror of that situation and, in this light, we can see that the arrival of the naked men may have been a moral panic, but it was certainly not horror.

## SPECULATION #1: BODILY STEREOTYPES AND RACIAL RELAYS<sup>11</sup>

AB: Didn't the village headman's wife say the naked man was black?

MD: Everyone says that... *kola aru lengta* [black and naked]....

DT: Maybe they are from Africa.

MD: *Kela* ["dick"], Africa is on the other side of the ocean!

DT: But Africans have big dicks [laughter]. Go watch a BF [blue film, i.e. pornography] and understand...

PK: *Kela*, everyone has a bigger dick than you! [laughter]

XI: ....Maybe they came from Andaman Island.

DT: Where is that? Sean da?

SD: Verrrrrry far. On the ocean. Also, not all Africans or all black people have big dicks. That is a false story [*misa kotha*]. But if they came from the Andamans, then how would they get *here*?

XI: They came on the river! I know about them. They are black tribals. Nobody understands their language. I saw on TV. They don't wear clothes.

PK: *Kela*, nonsense! There are black men in South India. No one can understand their language here either. No one is saying they are from Chennai. Do you think they would take a boat across the ocean and up the river from Bangladesh to here?

*Murkho*...["idiot"]

XI: But they are naked! Eh, forget it dude [*bad diya, bey*].

PK: No one knows where they are from, but if we see them maybe we should serve them tea and try to understand them.

XI: *Httt, mus-kat!* ("Uff, you pussy"), do you want them to put poison in your tea? Go ahead. Give tea to everyone who travels on the road. You will die quickly.

PK: How do you know they would give poison? You know nothing, *kela*. Maybe they are scared and hungry. Maybe they just need compassion (*morom*).

BD: *Kelaaaaaaa*, a naked man with a blade doesn't need compassion. He needs blood to eat, and your sister to take!

## SPECULATION #2: TANTRIC STEREOTYPES AND AMBIGUITY

PK: Maybe he is a Baba [a Tantric practitioner] who is lost. He had hair like Xibo (Shiva) was in his body.

MD: Why? Babas speak Hindi. The naked men speak nonsense.

PK: Do you understand mantras? Everyone knows about Magic Mayong [*Jadu Mayong*]. Babas come here all the time and build temples and meditate and learn magic. You know that.

SD: Pranjal's right. I've spoken to a lot of them.

SB: Impossible! The naked men do not act like Babas. The naked men are dangerous! Baba only meditate in the jungle and smoke ganja.

XI: No, they are not baba. [The naked men] didn't come to Mayong first. They arrived in Tezpur, then Morigaon, then Mayong. Why would a baba go to Tezpur? Why eat the white and cut himself?

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<sup>11</sup> I have used pseudo-initials here, rather than pseudonyms.

MD: They eat dead bodies in Varanasi, *kela*. They also injure themselves to go into trances [*jok korise*]. Do you know anything or do you just watch BF all day? [laughter].  
XI: I know that to give tea to a stranger is stupid. He will bite you like a snake [*ronga*] and then heal you like a sorcerer [*bej*].<sup>12</sup> Maybe give him money and liquor? Then he will love you too.

### SPECULATION #3: BANGLADESHI STEREOTYPES AND POLITICS

MD: Listen. Assam does not have a naked men problem. It has a foreigner problem. They are probably Miyan [Bangladeshi Muslims; immigrants often considered as a pariah community].

AB: They don't speak Bengali.

MD: They don't speak Bengali **to us**. The naked men are probably crazy [*pagol*] or taking drugs. The police [in Raja Mayong] arrested a Miyan yesterday who was selling drugs. They are probably his friends.

DT: It's true. I saw him at the police station. He carried a knife.

PK: All Miyan carry knives everywhere. One hundred miyan in a Hindu village are safe. One Hindu in a Miyan village will be killed in daylight in a crowd. No witness. They all carry knives.

SD: I disagree. None of you have ever stayed in a Miyan village. Saritra goes and gets medicine from Bura-Buri village all the time. No one harms him.

AB: No. They are not Miyan, but they are crazy. Probably taking drugs. Even a crazy Miyan would not walk around naked. That is *haram*. They could be anyone; none of you know. Everyone is acting more crazy than the naked men. Everyone says, "I saw the naked men." They think it makes them big. Nobody *really* sees anything...

The boys' exhortations and speculations continued, but no matter what stereotype or social speculation they tried to match with the particulate elements culled from reports, they were left with nothing concrete except the same modest experiences of others (however extraordinary) that they were interpreting in a typical Mayongian register and form. Downstream transvaluations were coming up short.

There is a wealth of space for analysis here, but the uptake of the event by the *deka rajj* does reveal something notable about the rumors that deserves mention. Put quite simply, their sense-making both mirrored and amplified many of the ambiguities that occur in ordinary, daily

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<sup>12</sup> This is a common folk idiom (*jojona*) in Oxomiya, uttered to emphasize a rapacious person who will hurt you and then heal you in the same breath. Metonymically, this is what Mayongians think all *bej* ("sorcerers") do, but it can be used in reference to anyone. Here, the boy in the *deka rajj* has employed a common method of averting a spoken taboo by using the word *ronga* ("red") instead of *xap* ("snake"), in that the later is not supposed to be uttered at night. See below.

interaction: the threat of poisoning from sharing tea, trusting strangers on the road, crowds, confusion from multilingualism, etc. Julien Bonhomme's (2016) brilliant ethnography on pan-African "penis theft" rumors makes a similar observation. Being a public rumor rooted in common everyday interactions that have emotional resonance (strangers and alienated exchanges can be found everywhere), penis theft is no more exotic than the fear of contracting avian flu. That being said, the everyday does not map so easily onto the everynight...especially in Mayong.

### **Quiescence, or Why the Everynight is not the Everyday**

Once the naked men sightings began to happen further downriver, the Karbi senior chief (*bor bangthai*) and the Koch village headman (*gaon burha*) arranged a village council meeting (*raijmel*). The panic devolved into what most public debates (or shared accounts) in Mayong often do: an authoritative yet quiescent statement about what is to be done. As it is with Mayongian obsessions over public accounting, chiefs, kings, and big men must often step in to "close the books" and slow the dynamism of an event into a manageable interpretation. This is sometimes accomplished on the grounds of gerontocratic authority and at other times charismatic authority, depending on whether it is a true elder/chief/king or a "big-man," respectively, who attempt to instill quiescence (see Chapter 3). In this instance, it was an exquisite case of gerontocratic cosmography that settled the account (see again, Chapter 3). The *bor bangthai* scolded the crowd, took a platform for the "chief's speech," and made it crystal clear that there was a simple moral to this story and that no one should gossip any further about who these people were. Here are his words, which I recorded at the *raijmel*:

Unseen forces work at night. Yet you all drink and play and risk your lives. Not even our sorcerers (*amar Mayongor bej*) know the remedies for removing ghosts who enter your body at night. We now have a paved road. Strangers drive here from Guwahati and all places. You do not know their work. But you sit on the side of the road and gossip until

2:00 am. You drink and you fall down and no one finds your body until morning. The naked men are gone, but the night is still filled with enemies. At night, down is up and nothing is as it appears. People say, and I say often, “*rati to aru hati to*” [“the night and the elephant,” meaning both are dangerously unpredictable]. Do not be foolish. Carry your torch and your *dao*. Stay close to home. Move within the account/Act in a calculating way. If you see someone in the darkness, give *khedi* [a local call-and-response used to locate people in the jungle]; if he does not answer, return home quickly. I say again, do not be foolish.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the question of who these naked men were and what they were doing was superseded by a safe and familiar myth coming from an authoritative (and gerontocratic) voice: night is a time of unpredictability, terror, and enmity (*xondhyar xotruta*). The everyday interactional order is certainly rife with uncertainties. As Bonhomme (2016) rightly points out, something as simple as a handshake can be cathected with terror in contexts where alienation and unknowability unfold—like a city street. However, daily uncertainties do not have the same quality as nightly ones; nor is the rural landscape of Mayong comparable to urban alienation in Africa or elsewhere. For Mayongians, the saga of the naked men demanded the clarity of ritual authority to (re)produce a narrative that could work for everyone, despite their prejudice or politics. Night terror is not only something all Mayongians are familiar with, but it is also something everyone wants to avoid (see also Chapter 6, this thesis).

This is not to say that the *bangthai*'s pragmatism *lacked* structural significance. On the contrary, it was precisely because a diurnal/nocturnal binary exists that his pragmatic gesture made sense and squashed the panic. Moreover, that binary has concrete resonance. The night is marked in Mayong, and across much of Assam, as a timespace where taboo is in effect to a greater concentration. Nighttime language, for example, employs “color euphemisms” to prevent

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<sup>13</sup> As with most “chiefly speeches,” second person pronouns and verbal affixes used here are marked by the intimate/inferior register (*toi*), aligning to the three-part T/=V (i.e., extremely informal, informal as equivalence, and formal) system used in many South Asian languages. See Chapters 3 and 5 for further discussion of the use of non-honorifics in the shared account.

threats related to utterances that might attract negative forces or entities like ghosts or hostile spirits. One cannot say “snake” (*xap*) or “sun” (*rod*) at night, but instead must say “red” (*ronga*). Likewise, one cannot say “slaked lime” (*sun/chuna*) at night, but must say “white” (*boga*). Notice that in the original “official” reports of the arrival of the naked men, as well as the *jukowa* musings of the *deka raij*, these euphemisms were used with perfect regularity. At night, even a single word is not safe.

But the *bangthai*'s injunction was only an alternative pragmatics, delivered as the crow flies to calm the situation down and create a semblance of quiescence. Even if it (re)produced a nocturnal imaginary in the name of “what is to be done,” it did nothing to solve the puzzle of the naked men: who were they, where did they come from, and what were their intentions?

### **Unmaking and Remaking the Shared Account: Or, *L'Homme Nu* Once Again**

The naked man saga might thus fit into what Isak Niehaus (2013) has called a “zone of the extraordinary.” The transitory, anomalous, and (quasi) non-repeating character of the naked men panic makes it something very different from African penis theft rumors, which have been appearing on and off since the 1970s. It is also very different from other iterative myths, rituals, and events in Mayong. In the same sense, it did not actually disrupt *daily* life (as Captain Cook's arrival in Hawai'i did, for example), but instead threw nightly dispositions into (further) disarray. All in all, the *bor bangthai* may have been attempting to cultivate socio-cosmic order in a pragmatic sense, but he left the nocturnal imaginary open to future violence and disorder in the very same breath—authoritatively producing it as a timespace where “down is up” and where “nothing is as it appears.” Thus even if the shared account of the incident was authoritatively

“closed,” the kernel of inscrutability remained intact, if not doubly *affirmed* in the way the *bor bangthai*’s speech exposed the vulnerable nakedness of the *raij* itself.

Thus we might recall an important observation from Freud ([1917] 1990: Seventh Lecture, *et passim*) that psychoanalysts should never dismiss a patient’s initial associations, no matter how absurd they might seem. The first “sense” in a talking cure provides a semiotic landmark to follow for determining the ultimate source of a repression. In this way, we can turn back to the initial sightings of the naked men in Sonitpur District. From the beginning, the *unintelligibility* of the naked men was highlighted. But if their female-directed cannibalism was discarded in the rumor mill (or replaced by other sexualized bodily dispositions), their unintelligibility remained as central to the shared accounts as their darkness and nakedness up until the chief’s speech. *Inscrutability* was thus marked from the beginning of the incident, if not *the ultimate* sense of it all. Never hidden, the inability for the naked men to communicate...their very unintelligible and irreducible nature...was crying out for analysis, for public engagement, all along. And, perhaps, the antistructure of panics like the naked men saga—or quasi-formal systems like the Mayongian shared account—carry with them such an immediate yet disavowed sense of unintelligibility that the imagination tends to overwork itself in compensation, leaving no clear “frame” to follow except to pick up on new speciations, exhortations, and particularizations.

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In the Summer of 2016, I found myself back in Mayong inviting friends to my forthcoming wedding. I had a chance to spend an evening with the boys of the *deka raij* again. We drank, laughed, and reminisced. Suddenly, my friend Pranjal asked me if I remembered when the naked men arrived. I said I did. He followed, “So, tell me . . .” [Here, I thought I was in a typical

*jukowa*-style incitement requiring a lewd or provocative response.] A silence fell in anticipation. I just smiled and pointed to my penis, which was followed by a burst of collective laughter. Pranjai poured me a drink, quieted everyone down, and then asked me again: “No. No. Listen. Listen. Tell me. Did you ever find out who they were or where they were from? . . .”

## INTRODUCTION

### Cosmography and the Shared Account

*[B]ecause the thesis, as well as the antithesis, can be shown equally clear, evident, and irresistible proofs . . . reason therefore sees that it is divided against itself . . .*

– Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1983: 81)

#### A Forest of Accounts

In the preface to his magnificent monograph on the forest-dwelling Huaulu of Seram in West Papua, Valerio Valeri (2000) reflects on the almost paralyzing effect of making sense why the Huaulu have a seemingly inexhaustible and indefinite repertoire of taboos. For Valeri, the sheer profusion of taboos, their ubiquitous role in ordinary and ceremonial life, and their constitution of all embodied subjects, ultimately provides a key to grasp the particularities of Huaulu society, as much as it refines an anthropological understanding of “taboo” in general. As Valeri’s discovery concerns this dissertation’s topic and ethnographic focus, the profusion of accounting repertoires in Mayong (Assam, India), I find myself confronting a similar excess and paralysis. When some phenomenon is everywhere and seems to apply (almost) to everything existing, where does one conceptually begin and end?

In Mayong—a multi-ethnic, “de facto” kingdom,<sup>1</sup> and semi-forested village cluster on the Southern bank of the Brahmaputra River, approximately 40 kilometers northeast of Assam’s largest city, Guwahati (see Map 1)—accounts (*hisap*) are everywhere.<sup>2</sup> Numeric, nominal, and

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<sup>1</sup> I use the qualifier “de facto” here in that Mayong functions as a “customary kingdom” despite the fact that it has yet to be granted any sort of *de jure* autonomy, beyond the granting of an occasional “royalty allowance,” by the Assam or Central Indian government. See Chapter 1 for further clarification.

<sup>2</sup> *Hisap* (“account”): an Oxomiya loan word from Arabic. The term is used throughout South Asia and is usually pronounced in most languages as *hisāb* (with a voiced, bi-labial “b” instead of the voiceless, bi-labial “p” used in Oxomiya).

narrative, sometimes secret yet increasingly public and shared, they are at the communicative heart of economy, collective ritual, political authority, and history. Through ledgers and rhetorical speech, they track individual and collective lives in birth, name, transgression, and death. They replicate yet complicate hierarchy by bringing into focus sorcery, kingship, and kinship. They attempt to unify and make a composite picture of a whole, while relishing in diversity and particularity. From collecting bamboo and hunting in the forests to harvesting rice and fishing in the floodplains—simply put, almost every action or event of value (economic or otherwise) has an account attached to it. Accounting, in Mayong, is thus a total phenomenon; charged by affect management and aesthetic labor (Boas [1887] 1940: 644-45), we might felicitously call it a *cosmographic art*.



**Map 1.** Map of North and Northeast India showing the relative geo-political location of Mayong. Map used with permission from Pobitora Wildlife Reserve, Board of Tourism, Raja Mayong, Assam (India).

This dissertation is an ethnography of this cosmographic art of accounting and both why and how, in the contemporary moment, it has developed emergent properties of transparency, mutual commitment, and publicity that have congealed into a quasi-formal institution: the *raijor*

*hisap* (“account of the public”), or what I call, with a strategic nod to Heraclitus’ idea of the fundamental transparency of *logos*, the “shared account.”<sup>3</sup> In terms of analysis, this dissertation investigates why the shared account now seems irresistible, necessary, and yet always on the verge of collapsing under its own logic and processes. My primary argument is that the shared account has responded to a historical situation—what we will call, following Baruah (2005), “durable disorder”—by effectively (*re*)creating that very same situation, only each time it does so it elicits new wonders and revelations that compel a deepening of public commitment to the project. This requires further elucidation.

In its legitimizing function as a ritual means to establish prosperity and manage cosmic order in the face of overwhelming socio-economic disorder and ethno-political segmentation in India’s Northeastern periphery, the shared account attempts to negate a “given” set of state-effects—viz. enmity, ethnic differentiation, and economic precarity—with an antimony of “kingly” order: peace, unification, and prosperity (the shared account being conducted by the Mayong king and his analogues). Through means of intention revelation, public debate, and an eye toward the ultimate cosmic source(s) of prosperity, the *raijor hisap* is a ritually closed exercise in building a “shared commitment” (Tomasello 2009) toward a common goal. By exhorting the “public” (*raij*, see below) under the guidance and auditorship of both gerontocratic and charismatic figures of authority, the shared account makes (or, better, *activates*) the cosmos, the unified totality, that kingship pre-figures. In doing so, however the processes through which

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<sup>3</sup> Heraclitus’ cryptic fragments on *logos* are difficult to synthesize, but his general argument is that “reason” is essentially a collective accounting for reality that we disavow. The Stoics (see Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*), took the meaning of Heraclitus’ *logos* to be a kind of “transcendental account of everything”—that is to say, a representation that governs the cosmic order. But in Heraclitus’ fragments, it seems clear that the argument is two-fold: (1) *logos* is universal and the universe is ordered according to *logos* (here, an idea that the cosmos is rationally ordered and we participate in that rational order); (2) *logos* is something we collectively participate in whether we avow it or not (here, an idea, which he consistently emphasizes, that we disavow the shared or common nature of our ability to reason or make accounts about the world).

the shared account is made inevitably unmake it as well—leaving Mayongians<sup>4</sup> with, well, what they started: an aspirational totality that cannot be completely totalized.<sup>5</sup>

This is neither a picture of classic “socio-cosmic” reproduction (in the key of British social anthropology) nor a smooth replication of the “micro/macro” into the “meso” world of human institutions (see Lincoln 1986, 1991). Instead, and what this dissertation illuminates, is that the revelation of a fractured and incomplete totality is not just a cyclical “return” to Assam’s state of “durable disorder.” Rather, it is a further negation of the antithesis of composite unity that the shared account attempts to compose. Moreover, this negation of a negation is a result of the processes by which the shared account operates. By drawing its processual methods of reckoning—quiescence, speciation, exhortation, and particularization—from “open” domains of life beyond ritual time-space (ordinary kingship, critical events, a genre of inconsummable play, and taboo containment, respectively), the shared account produces revelatory surfeits, new wonders and provocations, that instill in it a sense of necessity, irresistibility, and true dynamism. I call this dynamism and the negative dialectic it engenders “*goroka*” (see below), after a local metaphor for historiography that takes its inspiration from the foot loom rather than the industrial world of motors and drivebelts.

My description of the dynamism of the shared account in Hegelian terms of a “negation of a negation” and Adorno’s (1966) “negative dialectics” is intentional. As I see it, Mayongians are not satisfied with any “affirmative” resolutions of the shared account. When shared accounts

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<sup>4</sup> *Mayongia* is an Oxomiya term for “those from Mayong”—regardless of tribal, ethnic, religious, or caste/sect status—and pertains, in particular, to those who live in the villages of Burha Mayong, Roja Mayong, Loonmati, Hatimuria, Xoti Bheti, Ouguri, Sonoka [Chanaka], and a few other villages. The referent of the Anglicized version of the term, “Mayongian,” is broader and refers to anyone who embraces Mayong as a marker of political belonging in its affective and ritual registers. The term was recommended to me by Principal Phanibhushan Nath of Mayong Anchalik College as a useful means of inclusion without collapsing my social referent into one of “identity.”

<sup>5</sup> As in many Marxist-Hegelian lines of thought (see, for example, Lukács [1923] 1971), a totality (a picture of a “whole”) is not the same thing as “totalization,” for a totality encompasses contradictions without resolving them while something “totalized” would assume harmony and boundedness where they may be no warrant.

unravel (or when quiescence does not stick), which is really all the time (see Chapter 3), Mayongians do not abandon the project. Rather, the contradictory state compels them forward “as if” they were critiquing their own society, or at least confronting the limits of their own knowledge. In this progression, the cosmos itself is expanded.

My goal, then, is to develop an “ethnographic theory” (da Col and Graeber 2011; cf. da Col 2017) of both accounting praxis and “publicity” that puts “*goroka* dialectics” on the same epistemological footing as “negative dialectics.” This is not to say, however, that Mayongians are *really* doing some kind of “native philosophy.” Rather, what is going on is largely unawares—or, better stated, the dialectic process of the shared account is not rendered explicitly in discourse. Thus, the ethnographic theory that I undertake here does not mean exploring not only what my informants *say* the shared account is and does, but by following the dynamism of its structural logic to its sequiturs. When approached about the purpose of the shared account, most Mayongians will respond with blunt, taken-for-granted explanations: “It is our tradition,” “It is our law,” or “It keeps our society from being breaking apart.” In the right circumstances some will wax philosophical, but this is not just a matter of context or method (e.g., asking the “right” questions). It rather concerns the fact that a great portion of our lives goes on without conscious reflection and even if some things are made conscious they may still be mystified or opaque to our understanding. Thus, and as I will elaborate further below, ethnographic theory must not be content with “surface phenomena” or “surface explanations,” but must necessarily attend to structural depth in order to *truly* take people seriously as multidimensional subjects.

To return to the dialectical image presented above, when looking at the shared account as a dynamic process, rather than a static institution, one begins to notice that it is built around an antimony, or paradox, that is quite resonant with Kant’s second antimony of reason in his

investigations of transcendental ideas and the transcendental dialectic. In his *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* (1983: 80), this antimony is described as follows:

*Thesis:* Everything in the world is constituted out of the simple.

*Antithesis:* There is nothing simple, but everything is composite.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1996: 465), Kant elaborates the antimony further and develops both proofs and commentaries for the justification of the thesis and antithesis. Here, the second antimony is articulated accordingly:

THESIS

Every composite substance in the world consists of simple parts, and nothing at all exists but the simple or what is composed of it.

ANTITHESIS

No composite thing in the world consists of simple parts, and there exists in the world nothing simple at all.

I will not go further into Kant's critique, but the second antimony bears consideration here, for it seems as if Mayongians are caught in the same contradiction, albeit on socio-cosmic terms: are we, or can we be, an undifferentiated unity, or must we be necessarily differentiated and segmented all the way down? In some ways, this is the paradox of all multi-cultural democracies: the cliché of reconciling "unity" and "diversity." But Mayongians are not so easily seduced by resolution, reconciliation, synthesis, or even transcendence. They rather seem to embrace the completeness of a totality divided against itself because the friction that the contradictions call forth brings in irresistibly new ways of thinking about the totality immanently. All this will become clearer as we proceed through the chapters, but for now it suffices to say that because the shared account is cosmography (a semiotic mediation of the cosmic totality), it is also a way of doing metaphysics and wrestling with *ultimate* principles (cf. Schrempp 1992).

Another way of rephrasing all this is that we are dealing with a dynamic between “ideology” and “revelation” (see Lincoln 1986).<sup>6</sup> Because the shared account functions at the intersection between a *representation* of the cosmos—in all of its alloforms and analogies—and a *participation* in the cosmos via the enactment of the social (political and economic) order, the domain of kingship and its relationship to the ritual order are not only preserved, but felt to be necessary and irresistible. Like *myth*, that other great cosmographic art, the irresistible wonders revealed in the interconnectedness of all things affords the stability of an arbitrary social order with all of its implications of power, domination, and force. *In theory*, the Mayongian shared account is thus an analogue of myth and its ideological function (again, cf. Lincoln 1986, 1991). *In practice*, however, things are more complicated. Kingship, in contemporary Mayong, is hardly an oppressive or distorting regime of cosmic authority. Almost ironically, it is a subaltern “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1985) or “harmony ideology” (Nader 1990), which frees Mayongians from the interventions of the state and its more obvious monopoly on legitimate violence (see Chapter 1).<sup>7</sup>

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In the forest of accounts, we must consistently hack away at the overgrown *jungle* of theory to make sense of it all. But once we have a clear path to follow, we can gather our bearings and go back to the work of describing our surroundings only with a new sense of what is around us.

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<sup>6</sup> One could also see it as an instantiation of what A. K. Ramanujan (1989) noticed as the contradictory tension between “context-sensitive” and “context-free” systems. Although, as Ramanujan notes with respect to the irony of the Buddha’s ethical injunctions (ibid.: 57), “context-free” situations in the long view of the Indic ecumene often create one more context, though one not so easy to contain. The attempt to create composite unity, for Mayongians, is like a straw in the wind forecasting what could be, but being a cosmographic situation particular to Mayong, it could never shed its contextual significance as a particular project in a particular place and time.

<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the Armed Forces Special Protections Act (AFSPA), which still applies to the state of Assam, that grants impunity to paramilitary acts of violence against Indian citizens in the cause of preventing the escalation of various “insurgencies.”

Thus, before diving back into the brush, we need to specify what we are exactly talking about with reference to the shared account.

Occasionally, the medium for shared accounts in Mayong is a written ledger of sorts, but not always and never only. For example, narrated events, meetings of debate (*raijmel*), complex ritual images, erected stones, jokes, technologies used to halt, transfer, contain, sieve, or shuttle materials of various kinds, etc are all used, and often in coincidence with ledgers. They are all referred to as *hisap* (“accounts”) that pertain to the *raij* (“public,” but see below for a more equivocal translation of this concept). On the surface, this mélange of accounting repertoires exemplifies what Carlo Severi ([2007] 2015; cf. Carruthers 1990) has called a “chimerical” mode of memory making. In Mayong, as with much of the sub-continent (see Hull 2012), the written word has indexical “force,” but there is no ideological or moral subordination of oral narratives or other forms of representation by graphic technologies; all are forms of public account keeping in and they often work in conjunction.

Keeping with insights from Severi ([2007] 2015), the mode in which Mayongian shared accounting occurs is almost always a ritual one. I mean this not in the sense that accounting itself has ritual characteristics (it obviously does), but that it is always linked to a liturgical order wherein collective rites, public worship, and *service* to the deities unfold alongside public reckoning, debate, and juridical decision-making. This is called a *raijmel* and will be described in detail in Chapter 3. One cannot disassociate the economic, the oratorical, the written, the socio-political, and the sublime from the shared account. Again, true to the Durkheimian/Maussian sense in which I framed the institution above, Mayongian account keeping is a *total phenomenon*.

Accordingly, the ritualization of shared accounts suggests that they are more than just records for memory making—or for the “externalization of memory” (Paul 1995: 43). They are also aesthetic arguments about how various social relationships are to be remembered, stored, accessed, mobilized, manipulated, told and retold, hidden and revealed. As this thesis argues, a great deal of this kind of artful argumentation revolves around how “secret accounts” (or *so’rang hisap*) are to be *transformed* into publicly shared ones (see below). *So’rang* is a complicated term. On one hand, it literally means “unlawful” but not in the sense of transgressive or harmful activity. Rather, it carries the sense that what is unlawful is *anomic*, something rootless or in disagreement with the *publicly* avowed order of things. I translate it as “secret” because, at least in the Mayongian *uphaxa* (“dialect”) of Oxomiya, it also pertains to “hidden activity” that does not make it out into the eyes of the *raij*—and this applies to intentions as much as to any other clandestine reckonings. This best describes the realm of *sorcery* in Mayong and the relationship between secret accounts and sorcery logics, explored in more detail in Chapter 2, is a crucial element in understanding why the shared account is an emergent phenomenon with a preeminent value of transparency.

Finally, it is important to point out that the shared account carries with it such a moral and poetic value that common Assamese (from here on, Oxomiya) idioms, which play on the multiple meanings of “*hisap*,” have been refracted into associations with the dynamic character of the shared account. In Oxomiya, *hisap* can mean narration, calculation, clarity, counting, equivalence, tidiness, management, reckoning, account, or sufficiency depending on context. A common imperative phrase in Oxomiya, for example, is “*hisapot solabo*,” which, being ambiguous, is basically an admonishment for someone to get his act together without specifying how to do so. The phrasing can be interpreted as: speak with clarity, act calculatingly, count your

blessings, equivocate, manage your shit, tidy up your life, get with the program, etc. In Mayong, however, the phrase is used literally: “move within the [shared] account.” *Hisap* is almost taken for granted to be the public version of an account, a place of clarity, calculation, tidiness, equivalence, unity, etc. As opposed to the sorcery flooded domain of “secret accounts,” it also implies that the ritually sanctioned information in shared accounts is safe in its transparency. From this, one may notice that the meaning of shared accounting qua the Mayongian imperative “*hisapot solabo*” has a dynamic and almost “cybernetic” character here (see Bateson 1972), in which we can imagine a person moving within and across accounts, contrasting with the sense of accounts as static pages in a ledger where information is only recorded and moved around.

In so many words, the shared account in Mayong provides a mode for both representing and participating in an entire cosmology. It makes the totality intelligible and modifiable even if in doing so, it decomposes both itself and the totality it pre-figures. Still, in that moment, new accounts are brought into existence with new perspectives on the never-quite-totalizing totality. We thus find ourselves back in the forest of accounts. Our paralysis aided only by the double crutch of theory and description. Like Valeri’s move to “open up” what taboo is all about in order to make sense of this profuse overgrowth, we now have to chart out a path to refine, clarify, and resituate our understanding of accounting in general.

## **Resituating Accounting**

### *Red Herrings and Deutero-Logics*

Social histories and theories of accounting are, much like the rote work of bookkeeping, rather insufferable. There is no lack of insights into what accounting is and what it does. Indeed an entire field of “critical accounting studies”—with its own journals and conferences—has emerged over the past 25 years. The humanistic social scientists working at the fringe of

economic and managerial science have found a niche to reflect on this idiomatic institution of counting, reckoning, and communicating—seemingly one of the most important developments in world history. After all, some of the earliest forms of “writing”—in the moment between proto-writing and graphic languages based on human communication—were account ledgers (Goody 1986: 48–55). Yet, with every new insight into accountancy across the vast span of world history, one encounters less and less descriptions of what accounting actually is in a given cultural-historical context, and instead encounters several theoretical “red herrings” that seemingly prevent us from figuring out what accounting is really all about. Here is a sampling:

- (1) Capitalism: Accounting techno-praxis has existed (and still exists) in societies that no competent historian or anthropologist would ever describe as capitalist. This most likely accounts for the reason why Marxist historians and anthropologists have generally paid no attention to accounting, which like money, is not historically specific to the value form of capital (see Goody 1971, 1986; Macve 1999; Tinker 1999; cf. Postone 1993).
- (2) Double-Entry Bookkeeping (DEB): In line with Red Herring #1, opponents (both soft and hard) of Sombart’s (1967) thesis (and to a lesser extent, Weber’s [1978] supplementary reflections) that DEB not only allowed for an exquisitely *rational* means of ordering economic data but enabled the transformation of medieval and mercantilist cultures in Europe into the calculative spirit that gave rise to capitalism, show that DEB was never quite as superior as the less elaborate methods of bookkeeping found in both modern and pre-modern eras (Yamey 1962, 1964). Similarly, if one takes a more global view of the origins of capitalism, one finds that DEB was simply not central to the decision-making processes of firms and, anyway, along with it various other economic instruments, which are equally “rational” and “calculative”—like bills of exchange, banking, stock exchanges, markets, endorsements, discounting, etc.—, were to be found in histories and cultures beyond the West and its “sacrosanct rationality” (Braudel 1982: 573–75). In other words, even when we try to specify a particular kind of accounting immanent to capitalism, we fail in comparison.
- (3) Quantification: There has never been a purely quantitative form of account keeping in the history of the world. In other words, it has never met the status of being pure mathematics. Moreover, even arguments about the epistemological primacy of numbers and quantifiable logics in accounting fall short of a general description of accounting because they disregard the effects and primary necessity of qualitative “inscription” (see Robson 1992; Donovan 2012; cf. Mimica 1988).
- (4) Writing and Literacy: As James Aho (1985, 2005; cf. B. Carruthers and Espeland 1991; cf. M. Carruthers 1990: 11) has brilliantly shown, the particular writing techniques of double-entry bookkeeping never eclipsed the more primary oral and “rhetorical” function of accounting as a mode of communication in its pre-modern guises. Moreover, in regimes where secretive means are used to counteract the publicity of accounts, writing

can be as evanescent as oral reckonings: in practice, it is hardly an “irreversible and unerring cosmic record of all one’s deeds” (Paul 1995: 43).

In short, it seems as if accounting theory has exhausted—with strong arguments—almost every possible explanation as to either the particularity of accounting as a stimulant for the calculative spirit of capitalism or, in the *longue durée*, as a transformative development in the arts of quantification and graphic technology. Outside of social histories of accounting, however, the world historical promise of ledgers remains open to a flood of speculation.

Critical treatments inspired Foucault and science studies, for example, have opted for a more diagnostic and genealogical approach—namely, that DEB and other developments in accounting technology were a condition of possibility of “modern facts,” deductive reasoning, statistical sciences (including economics), and even transcendental philosophy itself (Poovey 1998; Hacking 2004; Porter 1996). Other literature on so-called “audit cultures” or “audit societies” has taken this insight further to pinpoint the prevalent dimension of “accountability ethics” at the heart of neoliberal models of governance as one derivative of the “verification” processes central to DEB and other modern accounting technologies (Strathern 2000; Power 1999).

Elsewhere, we have a handful of anthropological studies on accounting techno-praxis that, despite their specific and detailed descriptions, tend to hold an assumption about accounting: namely, that it is a technical language used by literate elites to dominate illiterate subalterns who, in turn, either do not comprehend it or attribute its efficacy to magical qualities (Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1992: 298; Bailey 1994: 147; Hugh-Jones 1992; Goody 1971, 1986). Even in more holistic studies, such as David Graeber’s (2011) analysis of the global history of debt, popular theological notions of “reckoning,” “sin,” “redemption,” etc. are treated as analogic extensions of essentially and originally *economic* concepts related to accounting, extended

metaphorically to justify social inequalities. Graeber's argument is more complicated than this, but he does follow suit in the sense that accounting has been, historically, a tool for social domination by elites.

Similarly, in global strategies for poverty-alleviation, financial accounting has come to be considered one of the principal "languages" of financial inclusion. Training in basic accounting rules is a widely-implemented method for improving decision-making among poor populations (cf. Cole, et al 2010). In India, this training has been largely unsuccessful in increasing income or savings (Bali Swain and Varghese 201), but attempts to address this issue have not changed the "language" of financial literacy itself. Instead, development hacks have sought to "simplify" it (Drexler, et al 2011). The insistence that a basic training in modern (Western) accounting principles—or simplified financial "rules-of-thumb"—is a key to breaking the barrier between financial inclusion and exclusion, assumes, however, that we know what actually counts as "good" accounting practices and principles cross-culturally. How, then, might anthropologists, who really no longer seem to care about how accounting is done in different historical and cultural contexts, respond to this?

As far as I would argue, a key theme to explore in cross-cultural accounts of accounting practices is the ambiguous character of reckoning itself, which seems to have made it a durable form of interest. In cultures of accounting across the world, it seems as if ideologies of "transparency" goad every calculation, transaction, and event accounted for. If they did not, it would beg the question, why even keep accounts all? To be sure, rhetoric and audit are essential features of financial reckoning—one has to render transactions clearly and communicate effectively to larger economic concerns and to persons who have a vested interest in the accounts (Aho 1985; Maurer 2002; cf. Robson 1992: 70), or at least perform that kind of mystified

expertise (Hines 1988). One of the connecting themes one finds in social histories of accounting today is precisely the idea that accounting is, to borrow a term from Scott (2009: 11), a “distance-demolishing technology,” that is able to share information widely by means of mutual participation that can only happen if minds are somehow mediated through the shared appurtenance of a given economic entity. Hence, we have succinct “reporting” instruments like balance sheets, income statements, budgets, etc. Yet, many ethno-historical descriptions of financial reckoning that actually explore the use of accounting technologies in cultural-historical contexts show that accounting practices by and large remain *secretive* endeavors. In India, merchant caste (*baniya*) account books were (and still sometimes are) written in ciphers (Hardiman 1996). In early-modern Thailand, ledgers were kept as a secretive and ritual means for Bangkok elites to “extend dynastic forms of governance” (Constable and Kuasirikun 2010: 601). Even in the United States today, any C.P.A. or managerial accountant will readily admit that hiding money and “cooking the books” is part of the job description; it is, in part, what makes them “experts” at constructing reality (Hines 1988).

In ideal typical terms, accounting is thus doubly constituted by ideologies of transparency *and* secrecy, but also by a dual function of representation *and* communicative participation. This double ambiguity, wherein one always has to see accounting in two ways, each with a secondary feature, makes accountancy a socially and morally fraught practice, where action on the basis of accounting knowledge presupposes the question: “Who should know what?” I refer to this as the *deutero-logics* of accounting: transparency and representation are always coupled with secrecy and communicative participation.

All this leads to a necessity for resituating accounting. In order for accounting to be understood in a more capacious register that can, well, *account* for its deutero-logics—secrecy

*and* transparency, representation *and* communicative participation—we need to move beyond the sense that accounts are primarily about *economy*. Collectively, the insights above all point to the fact that accounting is something both *economic* and yet *beyond economy*. Those who are not afraid of treating “accounting” as a capacious category in itself, rather than just a metaphorical extension of an economic instrument, that can illuminate the realms of morality and juridical decision-making, make it clear that we need also to resituate the “economy” (Benveniste [1969] 2016: Book 1, Section 4, Chapter 12; Borneman 1997; Maas 2016; Williams 2002).

### *Cosmology Beyond Economy*

In the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis, it seemed as if everyone was confronting the empirical and moral limits of the market as a disembedded and self-regulating institution. Economists raised their dead, finding recourse in Keynesian animist psychology (Akerlof and Shiller 2009). Political philosophers mused on the moral limits and dangers of a global market society (Sandel 2012). Economic journalists sought wisdom and inspiration from anthropology in neologisms like “taboo economics” (Engler 2011), and more recently in featuring columns by the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber. Ostensibly, the results were in: the economy could no longer be treated *sui generis*. Except, and ironically perhaps, in contemporary anthropology where, apart from a few major statements to the contrary (e.g. Chu 2010; Hart et al 2010; Graeber 2011, 2015; Sahlins 2013c), “the economy” seemed to be encompassing everything everywhere. To paraphrase Giovanni da Col and Knut Rio (n.d.), we now read of economies of dreams, hope, germs, affects, abandonment, repetition, ethnicity; of spiritual economies, occult economies, visual economies, etc. On one hand, a sense of *déjà lu* from this ostensibly “new” pluriverse of enchanted

economic agency is pronounced.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, even if there is a good historical reason for extending the metaphor of “economy” to practically *everything*, anthropologists seem reticent in describing or analyzing the totalities that render these economies and their novel animistic forces ordered, possible, intelligible, and meaningfully “economic” to begin with.

If there is to be a constructive dialogue between economics and anthropology in the current moment of precarity, then anthropology has to move beyond its remedial metaphors and offer its own gift. Anthropologists are posed, perhaps now more than ever, to contribute uniquely to interdisciplinarity by deploying ethnographically derived concepts that can illuminate, for example, whence and why “animal spirits” drove financial capitalism into a global crisis; why, in many parts of the world, economic life as such continued uninterrupted by the global crisis; and, perhaps most importantly, what immanent human possibilities exist in distinct cosmologies and worldviews that allow us to rethink what economic life is and to imagine what it could become.

Cosmology, it seems, might be a valuable concept to go beyond the unidimensional mode of treating everything as ultimately “economic,” accounting included. At the present juncture in anthropological theory, “cosmology” has acquired a resurgent value as a conceptual tool (see, e.g., Abramson and Holbraad 2014; Chu 2010; Pedersen 2011; Willerslev 2014), even if it isn’t quite clear precisely what that “tool” ultimately does.<sup>9</sup> But when it comes to rethinking

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<sup>8</sup> We’ve all read it before: markets self-regulate with the agency of an invisible hand (Smith); gifts contain some essence of the person who gives them (Mauss); commodities dance before our eyes like sonambulist tables (Marx); corporations are legal persons—in short, when was “the economy” (capitalist or otherwise) anything but enchanted and animated?

<sup>9</sup> One thing is for certain, it *is* a conceptual tool and not a domain to be studied apart and aloof from other epistemological realms. In other words, it seems obvious that earlier ethnographies were misguided on this point: one cannot study “Bongo-Bongo cosmology,” and then turn around and conduct a different study of “Bongo-Bongo culture,” or “Bongo-Bongo political economy,” or “Bongo-Bongo religion.” In each of the texts cited here, “cosmology” is meant to reveal something about the ordering of human realms, not a “realm” in and of itself (see esp. Abramson and Holbraad 2014).

“economy” in terms of “cosmology,” anthropologists have very few options for carving out a path. Three possibilities strike me as potentially useful.

First, one could go down the Weberian route in order to illuminate the “tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order” and, from there, the cosmos of other economic orders (say, in India, China, or among the Ancient Jews). Weber, however, doesn’t specify what a “cosmos” really is, except to index, perhaps, a vast historical totality. Still, there are good reasons to see Weber’s project as a step in the right direction for grasping a totality morally, juridically, economically, politically—in a word, *holistically*. My only concern is that I don’t think he ever quite accomplished this feat in a single treatise (if that is even possible) or offered a methodological guide for doing so, so we aren’t quite certain what a Weberian cosmography would look like.

Second, one could attempt to further chart out the relation between economy and cosmology among the new “vitalist” trends in anthropology. Drawing insights from the work of Isabel Stengers (2010) on “cosmopolitics,” da Col (2012a, 2012b), for example, has recently proposed a heuristic of “cosmoeconomics” to describe “the logic of the energies and flows exchanged among different beings, the flows of scarce resources, production, consumption, and transfer of values at stake between different entities” (da Col 2012a: S191). For da Col, the concept of cosmoeconomics allows us to pinpoint the dynamic forces of fortune, luck, prosperity, hospitality that undergird the production and reproduction of material life. In contrast to Stengers, the conceptual purchase here seems to be less about the “opening up” of the economic domain to entities beyond the human and more about the energies that unite those entities. Yet, within da Col’s formulation is an assumption about what economic life is. On one hand, being (neo)vitalist, it shares with Bataille (1988) and Freud (1917) an idea that “economy”

is ultimately about the treatment of surplus energy (i.e., what to do with a scarcity or accumulated excess of force). Limiting itself to a generic definition of economy, one wonders how we would then go about distinguishing between “capitalist” or other socio-historical modes rooted in particular forms of production. The flow of energies hardly seems sufficient. And this might be because, on the other hand, the “cosmo-” prefix in da Col’s formulation is, like Weber’s, completely undertheorized beyond being a “logic” that covers the spheres of circulation and production between entities beyond the human.

Third, one could take Sahlins’ (1988, 1996, 2010, 2013c) approach, which is perhaps shared by Gudeman (1986), that all economies are cosmological. Sahlins never defines “economy,” let alone “cosmology,” “cosmography,” or “cosmocracy,” but it is clear from his work that when dealing with relational categories, cosmology is the *encompassing* term. If “economy is the objectification of cosmology” (Sahlins 2010: 375), then reading him intertextually, we can surmise that cosmology is essentially an ordered set of “cultural-historical relations and forces” (Sahlins 2013c: 161). And “economy” would be the “material life of society” (ibid.: 163). I find Sahlins’ work in this regard the most convincing in that, whether he is using the term “cultural-historical,” “cosmological,” or even just “cultural,” the whole point is that our lives are ordered and meaningful because of a symbolic condition of possibility. Cosmology is the encompassing ground, the symbolic totality, that allows moral, religious, juridical, economic, and political “realms” to interlock and do the work they set out to do. Still, one must then confront, as, for example, the Durkheimians did, what actually generates that symbolic totality.

This leads one to wonder: is “cosmology” ultimately another word for “culture”? I think there is a “family resemblance,” but cosmology seems to me, at first blush, to be something *in*

culture and history (much like language is). In other words, it is already mediated. But there is perhaps a better way to specify its sense. I have found Gregory Schrempp's (1992) reflections on the question of how to define cosmology to be the clearest out of anyone who has trucked or bartered in the concept. Schrempp (*ibid.*: 5) reminds us, in the beginning, just how "magical" this concept is—perhaps owing its evocative power to its very nebulosity:

The term [cosmology] shows a remarkable capacity for deflecting inquiry away from the most basic questions [like "What is cosmology?"], toward specific ones. . . . The imprecise definition of "cosmology" seems also to be accompanied by a feeling that elaboration is unnecessary, as if in the case of this concept it is admissible to rely upon our "gut feeling." One would indeed have to search at length to find another term more reliant on the assumption of intuitive obviousness, such that any specific attempt at definition is unnecessary. (*ibid.*: 4)

Schrempp then follows, ironically, by asking "What do we mean by 'cosmology'?" and answers accordingly:

In part we seem to point toward formulations that involve a quest for *ultimate* principles and/or grounds of the phenomenal world and the human place in it. But cosmology often—and this aspect stems perhaps from the Greek notion of *kosmos*—seems also to carry for us a concern with wholeness and integratedness, as if cosmological principles are not only ultimate principles, but also principles of *order* in the broadest sense, that is, principles engendering and supporting a way of being that is cognitively and emotionally integrated and whole. In these two kinds of concerns—the impetus to seek the "ground" of the present order, and the impetus toward integratedness and wholeness—there is already a potential tension, since the quest for a ground is implicitly a resting of one thing on another, and thus involves a regression from any given state, whereas the impetus toward wholeness may engender the task of finding closure, as a condition for wholeness. (*ibid.*)

Tension aside, the sequitur to this description is that cosmology often connotes "descriptions of physical universes," but for ethnologists and anthropologists it also connotes "moral concerns that are sometimes embedded in such portrayals" (*ibid.*). So, according to Schrempp, we do have a set of general "sense" of what cosmology is all about: (1) ultimate principles or grounds for the phenomenal world, (2) wholeness and integratedness (order), (3) physical portrayals of the universe, and (4) moral alignments of the universe. Yet Schrempp ultimately argues that even if

all these, collectively, point to some essential meaning of cosmology, it is ultimately in the methodological act of comparison, of trying to “juxtapose phenomena bearing a cross-cultural ‘family resemblance’...the reading of one formulation in the light of another...not exactly from the perception of commonalities or the perception of differences, but perhaps from a tension between the two” that could ever actually clarify fragments of the “essential character” of any nebulous term like “cosmology”—or even “accounting.” (ibid. 5–6).

I concur with Schrempp, but I want to linger a little while on the matter of integratedness and wholeness, especially in his statement that the principles of order engender and support “a way of being that is cognitively and emotionally integrated and whole” (ibid.: 4). In some ways, it allows us to make a further distinction between “totality” and “totalization,” or what I would rather define as a distinction between “cosmology” and “cosmography.” Let us return to the example from Graeber (2011) above. It is clear that Christian theology, for example, shares several concepts with what we tend to call economics: redemption, retribution, reckoning, etc. Moreover, let us presume that most of us live in societies where the domains of religion and economics are conceptually distinct. Who is the party of the first part when it comes to the origin of these concepts: religion or economics? The weakest solution, a logical one, is to say one or the other for all times and places. A better solution, which we might call historicist, might say that the concepts are modern, but once they were part of an unseparated social domain—it is only that modern (capitalist? Western?) societies reify domains of life as distinct entities. It is this second solution that floods almost every critical study of accounting available to us in the present moment. My position—and perhaps one that Graeber would ultimately agree with—is that each and every form of economic and religious life, whether the domains are conceptually distinct or not, *shares* in a historically and culturally specific *image* of totality—an image of the whole

universe, its myriad parts, its order (and disorder), and the way all of it relates together both cognitively and emotionally. Hence, it is not that economic forms of life create the theological imagination (or vice versa), but that both religious and economic life are perspectives within and objectifications of an ordered whole, a *representation of a totality*, in which their practice makes sense, is efficacious, and replicates certain formal features of that very whole.<sup>10</sup>

For shorthand purposes, we may call the representation of this totality a cosmography. Yet, treating cosmography as only a matter of *representation* is misleading. Cosmography can also be something experienced, as in Lévy-Bruhl's (1975) late (re)conceptualizations of *participation*. For Lévy-Bruhl, in experiences of *participation*, the *pars pro toto* is “felt” more than it is represented in speech or any other semiotic medium. This identity, which is purely affective, allows for grasping a mutuality that is always composite: “The appurtenance is the individual. The leopard is the Naga” (ibid.: 72).<sup>11</sup>

One thus has to keep in mind that cosmography is always both a representational or experiential/participatory account of a totality, which encompasses representations and experiences of what we might call “economic,” “moral,” “juridical,” “political,” and “ritual” domains of life. This dissertation proceeds with the hypothesis that accounting practices and technologies in Mayong are a salient and historically specific means of making cosmology intelligible, experienceable, and modifiable in ritual, political, economic, juridical, and moral

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<sup>10</sup> In their recent volume on the “resurgence” of cosmological framing in anthropology, Abramson and Holbraad (2014: 19) state this in slightly different, yet clear terms: “Political economy...*is* cosmological, just as cosmology *is*, as the case may be, political and economic—a realization that immediately precipitates a redefinition of the very terms ‘cosmology,’ ‘economy,’ or ‘politics’ to take account of their contingently mutual constitutions in any given ethnographic situation.”

<sup>11</sup> Although, as one of my Sema Naga friends once explained to me, “These days anyone can become a leopard: just stand for office [meaning, run for election]. No degree or knowledge of the forest is required.”

life. Consider, for example, Terry Turner's (2008: 2) remark that cosmologies are "hierarchically stratified, multi-perspectival totalities, the form of whose parts replicate the formal properties of the cosmos as a whole," we can almost effortlessly transfer this as the definition of account ledgers, replacing "cosmos" with, for example, "business" or "home."<sup>12</sup> In both cases, cosmology and accounting are about creating the order of the "big picture."

As a matter of making cosmology intelligible, experienceable, and modifiable, the shared account, then, is a *cosmographic* practice of attuning parts and wholes—yet one rooted in and responding to a situation that only makes sense *cosmographically* (in terms of both representation and participation). And, I would wager, so is accounting in the most capacious way we can conceive of it.<sup>13</sup> To rephrase Hines (1988) it is not that accountants, bookkeepers, and auditors "construct reality," but that they have at their means a semiotic technology that makes totalities intelligible and malleable. Accounting becomes a source for memory making, history, communication, translation, and ultimately *prosperity*—and a method for redirecting and reinforcing cosmologies, which are always in the process of transition (cf. Barth 1987), whether the totality is represented as such or as a matter of "affective" participation, like confronting a shared name (see Chapter 6).

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Having resituated "accounting," and in the process "economy" too, we now must turn back to Mayong and its own situation. What is it about Mayong that makes the shared account such a salient and reliable form of cosmographic practice in the contemporary moment?

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<sup>12</sup> In a non-technical sense, "cosmologies" and accounts are both hierarchically or at least partonomically tiered (think sub-accounts in a general ledger vs. heaven/earth/hell in Christian cosmology), and necessarily multi-perspectival (think double-entry vs. single entry, or the view of heaven from a peasant vs. a king).

<sup>13</sup> Just as Holbraad (2005) has shown that money has an inherent capacity to attune the orders of the cosmos (being a partible medium, and both a store of and standard of value), accounting repertoires stand out as a fruitful site for investigating how people create a holistic sense of and manage the myriad parts of their lives from both material and spiritual perspectives.

### Why Cosmology Matters: A Parenthesis on the Semiotics of “Development” and “Prosperity”

When “development”—whether uttered as the English word or the Oxomiya terms *unnoyon/unnoti*—is discussed in Mayong, the term is almost always qualified by the use of the noun *briddhi* (“growth,” “uplift,” “increase”). In ordinary conversation, the enunciation of the word *briddhi* often entails someone raising their arms (palms facing up), from low (waist) to high (chest) per via the first and second syllable of the word—as if lifting an object. In the common sense of economics, it is often presumed that “development” is one of the royal roads to prosperity, a concept which—perhaps emergent from Protestant Christian cosmologies—tends toward a sense of both health and wealth. But there is somewhat of a paradox when it comes to the connection between development and prosperity in Mayongian cosmologies. As one of my research assistants informed me, the irony of the matter can be located in the Oxomiya word for prosperity: *xomriddhi*. In his exegesis, the compound word (taken from a high Sanskritic register) literally means “equal growth” (*xom + briddhi*). But *briddhi*, he said, only makes sense as a kind of accretion at the expense of another diminution. In other words, as per a cosmological rule that the universe is finite, if you increase one portion of the universe, another has to decrease. The full irony is that cosmologies of growth *and* equality cannot coincide. Our extended conversation (transcribed from Oxomiya) follows:

SD = Sean Dowdy

HD = Himanta Deka (pseudonym)

SD: OK, so if prosperity always means an increase of one at the expense of another, and if the universe (*prokriti*) is finite (*oxim*), then that implies there will always be inequality.

HD: Yes, and war. That’s the other irony (*bo’brokti*). For example, a king. He is only responsible for the prosperity of his own kingdom. He had to go to war to make his kingdom prosperous. So, another kingdom became devastated (*dongxo*). People say prosperity is about peace, equality, and growth, but growth is never about peace and equality. And you notice in the village, no one really even uses the word *xomriddhi*—this is just fashion. Most of our people say, “things will be good” (*bhale hobo*) or “things will become bad” (*beya hoi jabo*)—they never really talk of *xomriddhi*.

SD: True, but I hear the word *briddhi* a lot. People in Burha Mayong are always talking about *briddhi*—when they say “development” in English or *unnoyon* in Oxomiya, I ask them, “What does that mean?” And they say, “growth will happen” (*briddhi hoi jabo*), and they raise their arms like so (*mimics gesture of arms raising from waist to chest, palms facing upward*).

HD: [Laughs]...yes, so when government officials talk about *xomriddhi*, people think only *briddhi*—they do not think about equality (*xomota*). The first man, Purusha, his body made the castes/ethnicities (*jati*). Here (points to waist), I am a low *jati*...here (points to chest), I am a higher *jati*. Our bodies also are not equal. Look at your hand—it has five different fingers. All are fingers, but none of them are the same size. None are equal. You want to make them equal, you have to cut them to the same size, meaning the hand will not work. The other hand becomes better. When someone does use the word *xomriddhi*, they always have something else on their minds—maybe becoming a big man, maybe getting rich, but never really to have peace and equality. This is our thinking.

The example of the hand and body of Purusha as analogies for naturalized hierarchy were almost pre-packaged responses whenever I inquired about rank and hierarchy in Mayong. Both are embodied, visualistic ways of communicating cosmology—exquisitely exemplifying Roman Jakobson’s (1960) “poetic function” of language both gesturally and lexically. Yet my research assistant’s remarks on development are much more idiomatic, namely driven by the fear that “development” (*briddhi*) can never

afford “prosperity” (*xomridhi*). If the principle that decreasing one element of the universe is necessary to “uplift” another, then this can be used strategically by vested interests in terms of austerity. Imagine the possibilities of an agent of some NGO saying: “We are going to give you a matching grant for education, but you will have to give up your feasting, drinking, gambling, and expensive weddings because there are not enough matching resources to go around.” Or imagine a local elite saying, “You cannot just give money and bank access to the tribes. They will drink their savings away. They do not understand growth, only eating and drinking; after all, they just recently came out of the jungle. It is better that you invest in real estate so it will help them out eventually...I have a plot of land here, you see...”

These statements are actually word for word quotations from my field recordings, both uttered during *raijmel* related to the economic “uplift” of Burha Mayong.

### **Situating Mayong**

In terms of the modern administrative state, Mayong is a village cluster of 19 “official” villages approximately 40 kilometers northeast of Guwahati along the Chandrapur Road. Mayong borders Kamrup District to the west, the turn of the Kopili/Kolong River at Kamarpur village to the south, the Pokoriya/Sonai River to the east, and the Brahmaputra River to the north. The territory of the “erstwhile” Mayong Kingdom (established ca. 1538 CE), however, was much larger, with influence spreading further west (up to the mouth of the Kopili/Kolong River, called Kajolimukh), south (at least for some time to the kingdoms of the Southern duars), and east beyond Xildubi near what is now Morigaon town. Two points here: (1) The actual sovereign borders of the *puwali raijyo* (“baby kingdoms”) of medieval Central Assam—including Mayong or what the scant archives refer to as “Desh Myung” (see Map 2)—remains a political controversy in the present due to the fact that these kingdoms continue to have overlapping claims over territory and people;<sup>14</sup> (2) Thus I put “erstwhile” in scare quotes since the Mayong

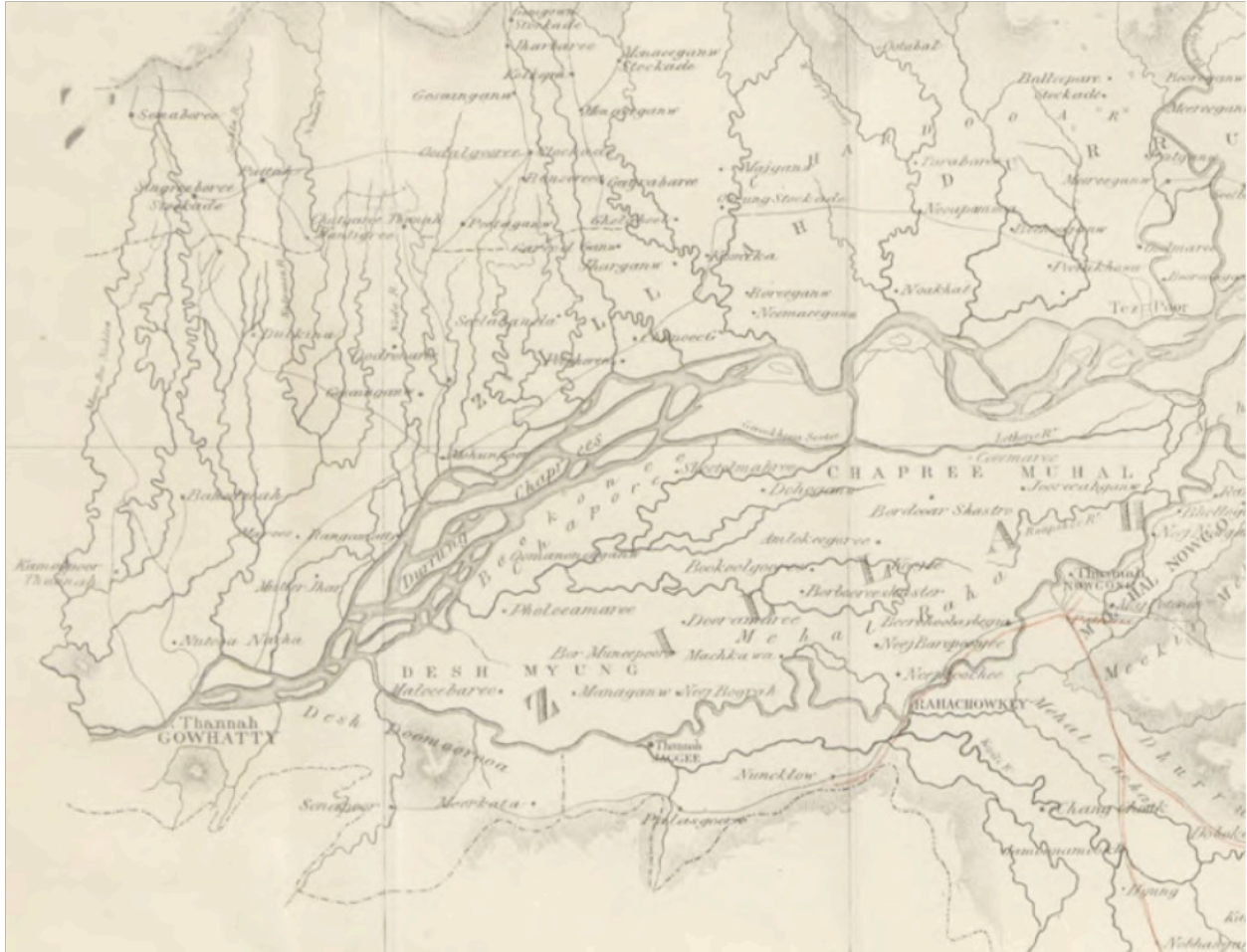
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<sup>14</sup> This resonates with the larger problem in contemporary ethnopolitics where territory cannot contain people. I once saw a diagram at a local seminar in Guwahati where the speaker overlaid all of the proposed “maps” for new homelands sponsored by ethnonationalist or separatist movements in Assam and neighboring states. Not only do they all overlap many times over, but when all are laid over each other, the entire state of Assam is covered except for a small section of the metropolis in Guwahati, the Fancy Bazar area, which is home to Western Indian (“Marwari”) traders. Effectively, if every subnationalist movement were to be granted to their claims to autonomy in some sort of compromise, the only thing left of Assam would be a 5 km<sup>2</sup> market area in an urban city controlled by “non-Assamese” outsiders.

kingdom actually continues to function *parallel* to the government mandated *panchayat* administration system, especially for purposes of arbitrating customary rule and law, land disputes, inter-ethnic or inter-caste relations, marriages, ceremonial patronage, and other so-called “traditional” political, economic, and ritual matters. Mayong’s king—like many customary kings in Northeast India and elsewhere—is considered divine (*deoroja*). His rule is not justified by divine ordinance, but his office is considered as such (in a line descending from Ghatotkacha in the Mahabharata on the paternal side and the Brahmaputra River on the maternal side).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, each year his person *becomes* divine through a complex “coronation rite” that renews his capacity to harness the forces of life and prosperity for the kingdom as a whole (see Chapter 1). The current and 40<sup>th</sup> king of Mayong, Taranikanta (Konwar) Singha, holds ritual sovereignty over a rather ill-defined area (jurisdiction and sentiment vary from village to village and from account to account), but he is worshipped as a *deoraja* and consulted regularly on political and economic matters in the villages of Roja Mayong, Burha Mayong, Hatimuria, and the Kalxila *khel* of Loonmati village (see Map 3).

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<sup>15</sup> For reasons related to both ambilineal descent as well as uxorilocal residence, the Mayongian line of kings traces its genealogy through both paternal and maternal lines (see Chapters 1 and 4).



**Map 2.** 1845 map of Assam, showing the Mayong Kingdom—written here as “Desh Myung” and shown in larger font than the more historically powerful (and historically cited) Dimoria Kingdom (here written as Desh Doomoorooa), on the southern side of the Kolong River. This is a map of the (at the time) newly created Nowgong (Nagaon) district of central Assam, plotted out by Gen. Butler during his 1845–46 excursion throughout the region. It is the earliest reference I have been able to find of the Mayong Kingdom in maps of the region. © B. Allen, 1905.

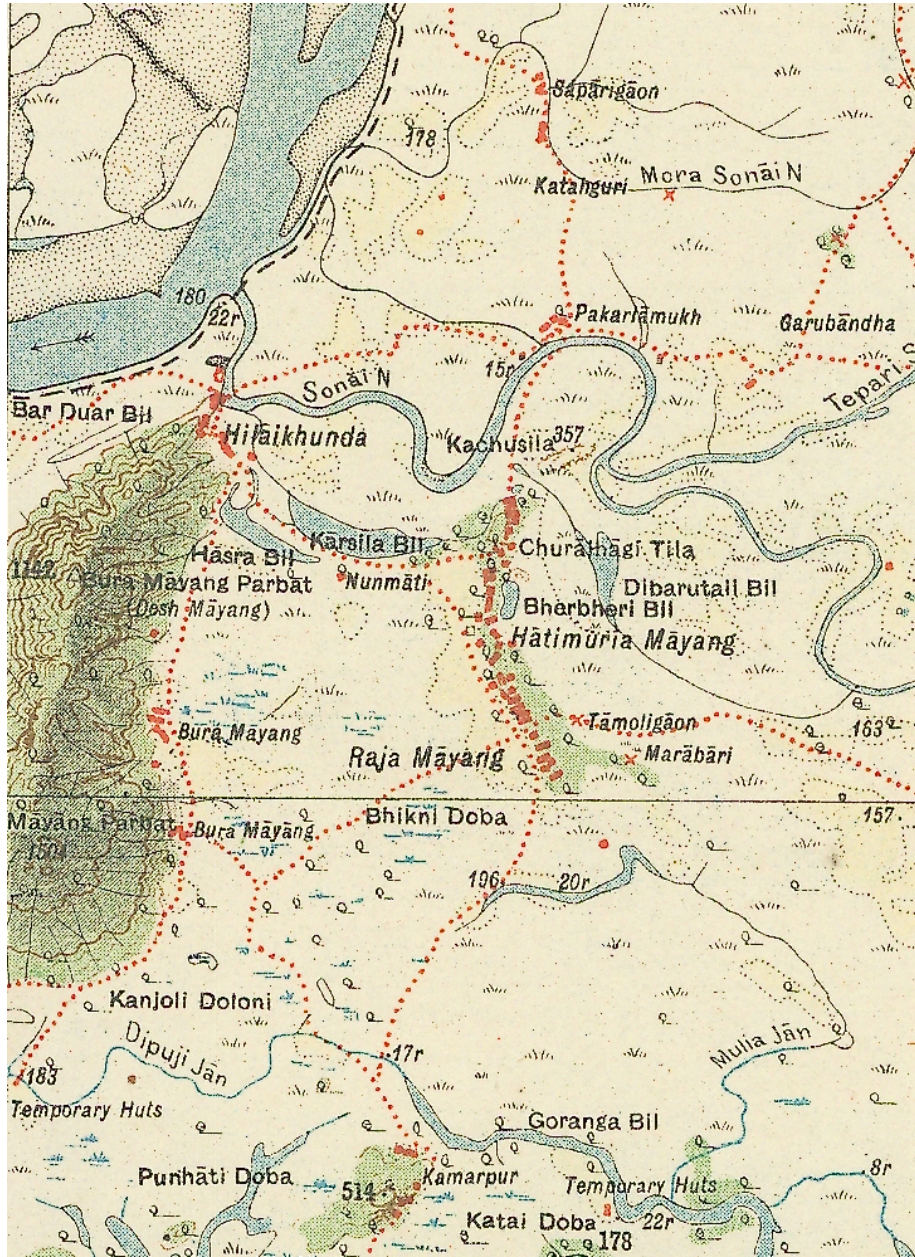
The village of Burha Mayong, where I lived during my research period and from which most of the material in this dissertation was collected, borders a range of large forested hills (the Mayong Pahar), which serves the villagers as a source for bamboo harvesting, gardening, occasional foraging, and hunting (mainly wild boar and small fowl). The hills themselves are too

rocky to support swidden (*jhum*) agriculture of any sort,<sup>16</sup> although elders in the Karbi community told me that no less than a half-century ago, their families practiced *jhum* agriculture in the neighboring Amching Wildlife Range hills that stretch from the northern villages of Chandrapur, Digaru, and Panbari, south to Ghaguah and Tepesia.



**Map 3.** Satellite map of contemporary Mayong (Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>; accessed September 14, 2014). Note the satellite map incorrectly labels the actual sites of the villages of Hatimuria and Roja Mayong. Both should be placed further north than they are. Kalxila (Kalsila) is also a village which does not exist anymore—it has been annexed into a village in the area known as Loonmati. The spelling of Mayong as “Mayang” (like the other alternative spellings of villages) here is a common variation due to the Standard “Indic” transliteration of Oxomiya. In the international phonetic alphabet, Mayong is pronounced mə’yoŋ (in Oxomiya: মায়ং).

<sup>16</sup> The exception to this is a wide soft-soil area in the hills known as Bangthai Bheti (“Place of the Chief”), which according to the current Plains Karbi *bor bangthai*, Jadab Teron, was the original site of the Mayong kingdom.



**Map 4.** Mayong in 1918, prior to the flooding and expansion of the Brahmaputra River from the 1950 Assam Earthquake. Compare this map with Map 3, which shows an alternate course for the Sonai River and the inundation of the area north of Roja Mayong. © 1918, under the publication of the *Surveyor General of India*.

Other rocky hillocks and forests dot the area in Mayong. The largest forest, which covers approx. 38 km<sup>2</sup> and was once the king's private hunting grounds, was inaugurated as a national wildlife reserve by the Assam State Government and the Indian central government in 1971 and, due to a large concentration of the endangered one-horned rhinoceros, was made into a wildlife

sanctuary in 1987. The remainder of the land consists of illuvial flood-plains used for wet-rice cultivation. Mayong is also ecologically riparian, being deeply dependent on rivers (esp. the Brahmaputra and Sonai), smaller waterways (*nijora*), swamp-lakes (*beel*), dug ponds (*pukhuri*), and flood-borne fisheries for food, water, and transportation. Flooding is a major issue in Mayong and continues to dramatically affect the ecology of the area as much as the socio-political landscape (see Chapter 4 and Map 4).

Mayong is, for lack of a better word, “multiethnic.” With a current population of around 200,000 people (80% Hindu), Mayong has at least 12 different *locally* distinguished “ethnicities” (*jati*), although the number wavers depending on who is doing the distinguishing. In some ways, the ethnic diversity of this area is not very different from North Indian villages, which are noted for their extreme profusion of castes (see Dumont 1980). In Assam, however, the idiom of *jati* (a word that literally means “species,” but used across most of North India to refer to occupational “caste” in its socio-economic sense) swings more toward a meaning of race or *ethnicity* (Chapter 4, this thesis; see also Cantlie 1984). There is no *jajmani* system of ritual and economic mutuality or division of labor in Mayong (or, indeed, throughout most of Assam). *Jati* are simply different “kinds” of people (Karbi, Koch, Saikia, Bengali, Tiwa, etc.)—with no ritual or labor roles specified (at least outside of ceremonies of kingship or minor fishing arrangements). For my fieldwork, I worked with members all of Mayong’s ethnic communities. In the beginning, this seemed daunting and extraordinarily difficult, since it involved juggling multiple (if hypostatized) perspectives on many ritual, political, and economic matters. However, it turned out to be a methodological boon since this kind of juggling is precisely what Mayongians do on a daily basis, and is ultimately what their “shared” form of accounting is all about.

*Mayong Against Itself, or the Anti-Narcissism of Small Differences*

If the thesis Mayongians put forth regarding the shared account is that the cosmos is fractured and infinitely diverse, and the antithesis is that things are actually (or should be) unified and composite, then what the shared account exposes is a transcendent totality that is always both unified and necessarily differentiated. But Mayongian shared accounting is not content with such *transcendent* completeness. It is rather an exercise in immanent, infinite regression (or negation) without a terminus. Yet it still *does* cosmology—that is to say, it is cosmography<sup>17</sup>—and in doing so, even if constantly negating its antitheses, nevertheless confronts the fact that the cosmos, like Kantian reason, is “divided against itself” (cf. Schrempp 1992).

Coincidentally (or not), “*India Against Itself*” (Baruah 1999) was the title of the first book that meticulously dealt with the fissural tensions between the state and ethno-nationalism in Assam in geo-political terms. In the conclusion, the author, Sanjib Baruah, reveals a peculiar irony concerning the groups that these days are called the “ethnic Assamese.” On one hand, many of these “Assamese” Hindus and Muslims tell myths of their ancestors’ migration from Kanauj (in what is now the state of Uttar Pradesh) or Gaur (in what is now the state of West Bengal) during the Pala Dynasty. On the other hand, these same groups, who went to great lengths to “prove” their “high-culture” *Indian* origins genealogically and thus differentiate themselves from their “tribal” neighbors, were swept up in the Assam separatist movements of the 1980s and 90s in which they aligned with “tribal” movements against the Indian state (ibid.: 199). Baruah’s almost twenty-year-old attention to this irony, an “*Assam against itself*,” commands our attention today as well. Conventional wisdom thought that Assam, with its beef-eating Hindus and pork-eating Muslims, alongside its own nationalist aspirations, would never

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<sup>17</sup> We could also say “cosmopraxy,” but I would rather retain the sense that, like *ethnography*, *cosmography* is always a mode of both representation (writing to depict or describe) and participation (*illustrare*, the illuminations led by an experience of writing, drafting, or comprehending).

become swept up into India's larger political Hindu vs. Muslim communalism. But now with the spread of Hindutva ideology through the recent formation of a BJP government (who came into power after my fieldwork ended), such lines of schism are now fomenting in the Brahmaputra Valley. When it comes to Mayong, which might be considered a microcosm of Assam given its ethnic plurality, this particular political sentiment has yet to develop fully; this is because the distinction between a "Hindu" and a "Muslim" is only one of hundreds of small differences elaborated in critical events and encounters (see Chapter 4).

This entire thesis explores the various ways Mayong is represented or participated in as a composite unity or as a perpetually segmenting plurality, and the ways the tension between the two compels a dynamism in the shared account. But there are two cosmological features in Mayong where the transcendent completeness, the stable contradiction between the one and the many, are both cognitively grasped and emotionally participated in—to rephrase Freud, these features almost display an “anti-narcissism of small differences.” The first has to do with ideas about the revolution of *bhakti* Vaishnavism in Assam, the second has to do with an affective experience of “remoteness” (cf. Ardener 2012) within Mayong's putative boundaries.

The impact of devotional (*bhakti*) Vaishnavism by way of Srimanta Shankardeva (Xonkardeu) in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century CE—who is now considered a saint, if not a “national” hero—cannot be underestimated in Assam, and especially in Mayong. Despite an ever-increasing population of Muslims, Christians, and other Hindu sects, Shankardeva's version of a universalized, “anti-Brahmanical” form of religious devotion to the names of Krishna (called *Ek xarana nam dhormo*, or the philosophy/religion of “taking shelter in the name of one”) has now become ideologically tied to unmarked Oxomiya (Assamese) nationalism and cultural identity.

Universalizing is the key term here, in that ideological exponents of Shankardeva's philosophy emphasize how rigid *varna*-style caste distinctions were abolished, and various religious or social-ethnic communities were incorporated into its fold through the rite of *xoron* (in Sanskrit, *saran*), meaning to “surrender at the feet of the guru,” or more colloquially to “take shelter” (see Chapters 1 and 4). Yet despite an ideological rejection of *varna*, blood sacrifice, goddess worship, and other elements of Tantrism or Shaktism, Shankardeva's ontological philosophy did not constitute a radical shift in the way reality itself was perceived. Not only did rank and hierarchy *not* disappear (e.g., Brahmans stuck around *as* Brahmans, even if they lost a lot of their priestly authority to Vaishnavite *bhokots* [ritual devotionalists]), but Shankardeva himself was deeply influenced by Vedic thought—especially the *mayavada* (idealist) and *advaita* (liberation through identity of *atman* [pure consciousness/self-soul] and *brahman* [the *mana*-type unchanging reality of all things]) schools of Vedic philosophy. These reinforced his popular version of emotionalized *bhakti* devotionism with a cosmology centering on the relation between deception and disclosure, illusion and phenomenal reality, and the mystically stable contradictions of the one and the many—philosophical features central to Tantric cosmology as well.

A scholar of Shankardeva's particular brand of Vaishnavism—who, like many other proponents of his religion, frames the historicity of this philosophy as an anti-clerical and moral revolution against Buddhism, Brahmanism, “fanatic” Shaktism, or a generally “degraded” Tantrism—has elaborated this cosmology as follows:

Underlying the false world of appearances, Brahman lends a semblance of reality (*sadabhasa*). The world that is unreal (*asat*), being connected with nescience (*avidya-yukta*), only appears as real, being born out of the real Brahman (*asanta jagatakhana tomata udbhava bhaila, santa hena prakase sadaya*). This is *adhyasa*, the appearance of a thing where it is not. The false appearances are made possible through *maya*, which is explained as a power of God, that conceals *vastu* (object) and projects *avastu* (non-

object) to view (*avastuka dekhawaya vastuka avari*). Practically no distinction is made among *maya*, *avidya* and *prakrti* (nature)...*Maya* and *prakrti* are often represented as *shakti* and consort of the Lord. God pervades the world, but is not touched by its merits and demerits, nor is he exhausted in the world, but creates, maintains and destroys it through *maya* residing in him. (Neog 2004: 132–33)

Elements of such a cosmology—and the argument that Shankardeva’s *avant la lettre* multiculturalism encompassed and transcended an age of blood sacrifice and tantric practices (see Barua 1933)—is very much a part of Mayongian scripts about who they are and what unites them *as* Mayongians. Yet, as we will show in Chapter 4, *jati* is not so easily erased even when worshipping in a *bhakti* mode. And this logic of the non-contradictory unity of the one and the many speaks loudly during rituals where *nam*, when the myriad names of Krishna are recited, is coupled with blood sacrifices and inter-ethnic pollution (*suwa*) rules of maintaining distance. Still, whereas theology and ritual content/form may diverge between a distant past and the present, or in the present between this and that ethnic group, for many Mayongians the basic ontological premise holds: *maya* (“illusion/projection”) is *prakrti* (*prokriti*, “nature” or “primal motive force”)—i.e., illusion is identical to nature—and *shakti* (*xokti*, “feminized life-giving power, or the ‘force of all life forces’”) is the manifestation/movement of that identity. Practically all Mayongians are ever-ready to proclaim proudly that “*Maya lives in Mayong*” or “*Maya is Mayong*.” The goddess of illusion makes Mayong her home as much as Mayong is her, making the cornerstone qualia of the place one of *deception* and *illusion* that is also identified with vital power. So, in this sense, the one can easily turn into the many (and vice versa) while what seems to be life-giving may in fact produce its opposite (see Chapter 2).

Or at least potentially so. For a second feature that shapes Mayongian cosmology is a kind of affective, phenomenological, and even topographical sense of “remoteness.” First of all, the implication that *Maya* lives in (or might as well *be*) Mayong, is that Mayongians are permanent guests in the home of their goddess. Second, and more explicitly, while everyone

*knows* practically everybody else in the Mayong area, one does not *truly* grasp others. A point of clarification: it is not others' minds or private thoughts that one does not know or grasp (compare: Robbins 2011), but others' capabilities and powers. If it seems to be a distinction without a difference, we might consider the fact that manipulation of another's intention (*obhipray/mon*) is the calling card of a sorcerer (*bej*). And while there are named sorcerers in Mayong (most of whom are rarely trusted by other villagers or who themselves adamantly proclaim no knowledge of any kind of harmful sorcery), there is also a heavy public secret that all households have elder members who know some form of sorcery (*tantra-mantra* or *bejali*), especially *ku mantras*, which are used for harmful assaults or manipulations of other's well-being or sanity (*xustomon*).

There are two contradictory effects to this. First, the efflorescence of sorcery has become a public claim to fame for Mayongians, a rallying point as something that unifies them (Chapter 2). The second effect of this public secrecy is a subtle kind of alienation—where certain questions are never asked or certain topics are never broached. To put it in the terms of one of my informants: “At some point, we wised up (*salu hoi gol*)—life goes bad quickly if you reveal too much to your family and neighbors....The problem is when we need to know [if a family or neighbor is a sorcerer], to find someone who can heal us properly, that same person can always harm us” (again, see Chapter 2). This, as I will show below, brings us into a particular, materialized practice and technique of accounting that exists in tension with the shared account.

Taking it a step further, we might say—following Rupert Stasch (2009)—that Mayong is a “society of others.” Consider that even though Assam's viral identity politics always threatens to pull the “multi-ethnic” unity of Mayong apart, the ideologies, rituals, and shared accounts of the unified kingdom remain in place to do just the opposite. The kingship (represented in both

the king and his analogues) unites Mayongians and through his actions of audit and sacrificial patronage (see Chapter 3), peace and unification become temporarily stable realities (especially when compared to large parts of the rest of Northeast India, see Baruah 2005). Perhaps, then, it is better to call Mayong a *kingdom of strangers* who share a definite perspective about themselves and their locality despite the public secret of their mutual mistrust.

This dialectic of cohesion and segmentation is felt in social organization and topography as well. Immigration (and uxori-local residence) into Mayong is a rather consistent part of oral history (cf. Hazarika 2011). And not all immigrants are “domesticated” in the anthropological sense; those who do not “convert” into a residing ethnic group or are not granted a “pardon” (*uddhar*) to take uxori-local residence (see Chapter 3), remain culturally distinct, thus creating a social topology that continues to escalate in ethno-differentiation as if Mayong was some kind of urban center. The template for this, however, is Mayong’s kingly lineage itself, which is a textbook example of stranger kingship (Sahlins 1981b, 2008, 2014b; see Chapter 1). The kingship renews its own “strangeness” through segmented lineages, a history of incomplete domestication, and rituals that emphasize the king’s divinity and alterity, but the king’s person is also multi-ethnically constituted and a unifying force. Moreover, and in a very meaningful way, the cultural and physical topography of Mayong lends itself to a feeling of phenomenal distance. For example, some villages can only be accessed by walking or boating several kilometers and are rarely visited by members of other villages except for ritual reasons. Indeed, general and non-ritual access to other villages and hospitality among Mayongians is a rather new phenomenon. The Chandrapur Road, which connects Guwahati with Pabitora Wildlife Reserve—running right through the major villages of Mayong—was only completed in 2005 when the bridge over the Kolong/Kopili River at Gobhardan/Kajolimukh was finally built (see Appendix).

Overall, while this “remoteness” does contribute to a phenomenological feeling of alienation, it does not shatter the very real and very *shared* cosmological perspective on Mayong as a place of illusion, deception, and strangeness. To borrow a sharp insight from Edwin Ardener ([1987] 2012: 520):

That there is a multiplicity of identities that coexist together from any single perspective is not strictly speaking a problem theoretically. It is one of the proofs—and one of the costs—of the apparent paradox of the continuity between the space and the individuals that constitute it. They are defined by the space and are nevertheless the defining consciousness of the space.

This is where the semiotics and pragmatics of accounting are now put into sharp focus—the capacity of Mayongians to experience a shared cosmology and frame it as a “thesis” yields one particular mode of accounting, while the opposing forces of segmentation, remoteness, fear, and phenomenological alienation yields another mode and another “thesis” (the “antithesis” of the other).

### *Secret and Shared Accounts*

There is nothing exotic about the forms of graphic technology used for accounting purposes in Mayong. In many cases, accounts extend into other communicative forms (see above), but these are almost always used in conjunction with cashbook ledgers. What’s more, almost everyone keeps such books—even children, who are tutored in arithmetic by keeping track of their pocket money. Hence, the analysis provided here should not be taken to be so specific to Mayong that we would be unable to use it to illuminate accounting in other places, times, and instances.

Single-entry cash ledgers (*hisapor kitap / tokar bohi*) are perhaps the most common (if least ubiquitous) means of accounting in Mayong. Every household keeps these on hand—usually packed away in chests, or stuffed into the hollows of bamboo pillars (*sunga*) that support a house. Per a conventional rule, most ledgers used by Hindus in Mayong (who are the

overwhelming majority) employ the sacred symbology of two deities: Mahadeu (considered to be the same as Shiva) and Narayan (Vishnu/Krishna). The first is usually represented by the familiar “omkara” mantra, and the second in name only, the name of God being the most sacred iconic representation per Assamese Vaishnavism (see Figure 0.1). Both symbols index prosperity through divine kinship—from Mahadeu to his son Gonesh (the deity responsible for protection, especially for kinds of monetary exchange), and from Narayan/Vishnu to his wife Lokxi (Lakshmi), the goddess of prosperity.

বিত্রী কৰী ১০০০ পালো	Upon sale, I received:	1000 Rs.*
খৰছ	Expenses:	
১০০ শাক পাছলি		100 Rs. (Vegetables)
১০০ কাপোৰ		100 Rs. (Clothing)
৫০০ অন্যান্য		500 Rs. (Misc.)
জমা	Credit:	500 Rs.
৫০০		
ঔ	“Om”	
নাৰায়ন	Narayan	

**Figure 0.1.** A replica and translation of an entry in a daily cash ledger. Note that in the ledger entry itself, there is no mention of what was sold, a date for transactions or names associated with the transactions; nor does the ledger show a carry over amount from how much existing cash on hand was held in deposit from previous transactions.

The ledgers often rot away, and are rarely consulted unless an emergency happens (a sudden loss of income, for example, might compel a search for an old debt that could be collected). For households, they serve as means for tracing expenses and income *individually* (both adult men and women use them). The basic procedure is one of rolling a credit (*joma*) over at the end of every list of transactions to be put against the next set of expenses or income. Yet,

in most individual cash ledgers, methods of rolling over credits or tracking deposits are not always followed strictly or carefully.

A slip of paper here, a notebook there, all cluttered with loosely traced amounts and minimal details might suggest a haphazard approach to financial reckoning. But, this minimalism is far from haphazard. Every time I had a chance to look through a household ledger, I was asked not to photograph anything in it. The reason being, I was told, is that household ledgers are secretive, discreet, and anomic (*so 'rang*). Here is where we must be very careful to not smuggle in our own moral associations as to why certain kinds of economic knowledge are secretive. Indeed, whenever I asked why these cash ledgers are kept secret, the tone of dialogue consistently turned toward the solemn and subdued, rather than the defensive and possessive. Put quite elegantly by my friend Saritra (a Bengali sharecropper who has spent most of his life as an adopted member of a Karbi family in Burha Mayong): “*Eitú 'Jadu Mayong', hisapot solabo lagibo...kintu heitú hisap raijei khabo, gotike nijor hisap tú maje-maje so 'rang thake*” (“This is ‘Magic Mayong,’ you must move within the account...but the *raij* will eat that account, so now and then keep your own accounts secret.”)

Saritra would often chastise me for talking too much about accounts and money, advising me to not bother with others’ accounts, but to always keep track of my own—simply, inconspicuously, and committing as much to memory as possible. Memory is vital for Saritra. Living with his wife and newborn in an adopted home of a different ethnicity (about 15 kilometers away from his family’s home—and only reachable by foot or bicycle), he feels isolated and under the influence of others who he feels are only partially “his own.” Saritra is under the protection of patrons in the village, laboring for them when need be, but he is essentially a bonded laborer (even if he might not agree with this assessment, and in many ways,

neither would I fully commit to it: see Chapter 3). His only solace is that he does earn his *own* income from bi-annual sales of the rice he sharecrops: “I would never wash dishes in a *dhaba*; here I am always a ‘half-man’ (*adhi manuh*), but at least I work for something. Someday I will own my own farmland and I will work for myself easily—there is no better rice cultivator in Burha Mayong than me.” Thus, over his share-cropping labor, he feels control and potential future liberation. Nevertheless, he is still partially bonded (whether he admits it or not), and from this derives his paranoia over the account. Perpetually indebted, but with no power to claim that debt, he turns to his accounts to make sure he knows who owes him what, should his precarious life situation ever improve.

“A lot of people owe me money,” Saritra would tell me often while he obsessed over financial details, carving numbers into the bamboo poles of his small mud house with no referent, “But only I know who and how much.” He keeps his ledgers out of sight, and lets no one, even his wife or elder brother (who also lives in Burha Mayong), look at them. He also rarely looks at them: “I try to remember as much as I can without looking at them...what if a sorcerer put me under his spell? He would see what I see through my eyes, so I only look at my account books occasionally to help me remember.” A sorcerer, like hostile ghosts (*bhut*) can only access senses or alter intentions; they cannot read memories.

Indeed, Saritra’s ledger entries like the one in Figure 0.1 are talked about as mnemonic devices, simple ways to remember a transaction in ways one wants or needs them to be remembered. The point is, as Saritra advises, it’s never wise to write down too much. The record of one’s livelihood is always potentially at risk—if not from the threat of sorcery, then from the threat of a jealous neighbor. These kind of accounts I will call “secret accounts” (*so’rang hisap*).

Yet, these secretive household ledgers are quite distinct in form and content from the ledgers that publicly circulate. The latter are open to public audit and inspection, and are neither minimalist nor hidden, but elaborate, expository, liturgical, and even sometimes double-entry. Within these accounts fines accrued from the breaking of taboos or laws are reckoned, expenditures from ceremonies, marriages, mortuary rites, and name-giving rites recorded, and the circulation and redistribution of livestock carefully tracked. All of these accounts are public and collectively referred to in this thesis as “shared accounts” (*raijor hisap*).

The analytical distinction I am making between “shared” and “secret” accounts is an ethnographically driven one; it speaks to the way Mayongians make distinctions between particular kinds of accounts on a token by token basis, and sometimes as a typological distinction between accounts of discretion and accounts of public audit. Below, in Table 0.1, is a quick rundown of some of the basic distinctions between the two “types” of accounts.

Two insights are important to grasp here with respect to the argument of this dissertation. First, what compels the composition of “secret” vs. “shared” accounts is the inverse of each other. For the latter, as we have already discussed, it is compelled by a thesis of “segmented diversity,” to which it offers the antithesis of “composite unity.” For the former, and conversely, it is compelled by a thesis of “composite unity,” to which it offers the antithesis of segmentation, fracture, or simply a diversity of knowledge not to be shared. Second, what my informants refer to as “secret accounts” (*so'rang hisap*) concerns the domain of the household and the individual life-course. It is a realm of information prone to sorcery attacks and, as its qualifying name implies, the content of this material is not easily shared with or viewed by anyone. Sometimes it even takes on the literal significance of being “unlawful,” i.e., out-of-sync with the general agreement of things. Out of respect for my informants’ privacy, I have not detailed the contents

of these accounts in this dissertation (see Chapter 2, however, for more reflections). Yet, as a matter of course, the *elicitation* or transformation of the content of secret accounts is precisely what goes into making the “shared account” (*raijor hisap*).

So although we might rightfully qualify the “shared account” a quasi-formal institution, as per the distinctions outlined in Table 0.1, we can only really study how it is made—and unmade—processually. This dissertation explores four different processes that go into composing the shared account: quiescence, speciation, exhortation, particularization. These are not sequential or seriated. For example, the latter three or some mix thereof need to be done in order for the first process to take hold, but if a “state” of quiescence does manage to take hold after processual quietism from analogic kings (see Chapter 3), it can also be undone by any or all of the other processes. Regarding the “elicitation” of secret accounts and *so’rang* knowledge in general into the shared account, the third process, *exhortation*, is the most crucial.

**Table 0.1.** Distinctions between “secret” and “shared” accounts.

<b><u>SECRET ACCOUNTS (<i>So’rang Hisap</i>)</u></b>	<b><u>SHARED ACCOUNTS (<i>Raijor Hisap</i>)</u></b>
PURPOSE TO BE INALIENABLE (to not be altered or available to anyone)	PURPOSE TO BE ALIENABLE (to be altered by and available to anyone)
PERTAIN TO HOUSEHOLD OR INDIVIDUAL	PERTAIN TO LINEAGE, <i>KHEL</i> , VILLAGE, OR KINGDOM
HIDDEN AND STORED IN INDIVIDUAL FAMILY HOUSES	PUBLICLY VIEWABLE AND STORED WITH KING OR CHIEF
INFORMAL / NON-RITUALISTIC	LITURGICAL / RITUALLY SANCTIONED
MINIMALIST PARTICULATE DATA	COMPREHENSIVE PARTICULATE DATA (INCLUDES: CHRONICLES, NAMES, DATES, LISTS, EXPOSITION, NARRATIVE, JUDGMENT, ORAL AND WRITTEN DECLARATIONS)
SINGLE-ENTRY	SOMETIMES DOUBLE-ENTRY
CONCEALED UNCHALLENGED CONTENT	PUBLICLY DEBATED CONTENT

**Table 0.1, continued.**

SUBJECT TO SORCERY	SUBJECT TO KINGLY/CHIEFLY AUDITS
RECKONS SIMPLE CASH TRANSACTIONS OR LARGE, ASTROLOGICAL LIFE-CYCLE CALCULATIONS & FORTUNES	RECKONS LARGE CASH TRANSACTIONS (E.G., CEREMONIAL EXPENDITURES), DEBTS/LOANS, GIFTS, FINES, ANIMAL or MEAT REDISTRIBUTION, AND EULOGISTIC/BAPTISMAL ACCOUNTS OF LIFE
MNEMONIC DEVICE (an instrument for remembering)	A NIETZSCHEAN “MNEMOTECHNIQUE” (an authoritative and normative statement on how something should be remembered)
TAKES “COMPOSITE UNITY” AS ITS THESIS TO NEGATE	TAKES “SEGMENTED DIVERSITY” AS ITS THESIS TO NEGATE

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Mayong is not an area flooded with businesses, merchants, capitalists, monks, arbiters, or really any kind of figures that we more comfortably associate with the systematicity of financial, moral, or juridical accounting. Moreover, it is not an exaggeration to say that Mayong exists on the “fringe” of the global capitalist order. In recent years, some developers and government contractors have taken an interest in turning the nearby Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary into a major tourist destination in Assam. Yet, these initiatives do not involve local residents for the most part. A very small percentage of Mayongians are low-level bureaucrats who work for the Forest Department or teach in local schools; another small percentage run small shops (*gola, dukan*) or are petty traders, but very few pay taxes or have any real need for a systematic management of their economic lives. This is a place where 80-85% of the population are—or are what used to be called in anthropological literature—*peasants*. They are subsistence rice farmers who occasionally sell their surplus to middle-men, who then distribute the harvest to regional markets in cities and towns in the surrounding area. Their seed strains are local and ancestral, and they

are not tied into the world of global agribusiness. At the most basic economic level, Mayong would not seem like a “natural” place where one would study accounting technologies and practice. Sorcery, definitely. Flooding and riparian ontologies, perhaps. Maybe even kingship if one were interested in comparing the *puwali raijyo* (“baby kingdoms”) of Assam to the “little kingdoms” of South Asian fame (Cohn 1959; Dirks 1993; Frenz and Berkemer 2015; Schnepel 1995, 2005).

Yet, it was my own academic interest in accounting that led me to Mayong. I had initially planned to conduct my dissertation research among the so-called “Marwari” community and their family firms in Assam, a people who are more commonly known for their idiomatic and intensive arts of bookkeeping. Yet in the first couple months of my fieldwork, a colleague of mine mentioned to me that he had been to Mayong recently to consult a sorcerer there (which is what Mayong, conversely, is most commonly known for), and was shocked to see that so many people were concerned with account-keeping. I had to see for myself what was going on, so around May of 2012 I left to spend some time in Mayong. I thought I would go for 1-2 weeks and get the feel of the land, figure out what this “accounting obsession” was all about and go back to work in the city with the merchant communities.

As the unexpected twist and turns of ethnography go, I ended up staying in Mayong for two years, and to this day I am still (partially) paralyzed by what Mayongian accounts are all about. Early on in my fieldwork, I took a piece of paper out of one of my notebooks, taped it above my bed, and wrote the following on it: “Wittgenstein says ‘A philosophical problem has the form: I don’t know my way about.’ But an ethnographic problem has the form: What the hell is going on here?” How would I find my way around this landscape of metaphors, ledgers, and speeches—among a dozen communities hypostatized as ethnicities and tribes with no caste-like

interdependence? Even having worked in India before on research projects among various castes, a synthetic view of the whole situation in Mayong seemed impossible to grasp. At some point I realized, however, that that was the entire point of the shared account—so I began to devise a methodology to work through it.

## **Ethnography and Ethnographic Theory**

### *Methodological Overview*

For this dissertation’s research, I devoted resources to the methods of ethnography (interviews, observations of rituals and public reckoning, participation in annual major rituals, and genealogy gathering), semiotics (discourse and structural analysis), and historiography (namely, oral narratives, but also translations and analysis of materials in local archives). In Mayong, ethnographic research began with household surveys of all residences in the ritually centric villages of Burha Mayong (“Old Mayong”) and Roja Mayong (“Mayong of the King”)—approximately 300 households in total. These surveys entailed basic questions concerning kinship organization, livelihood, styles of reckoning, and their mutual entailments.

Building on this material, I proceeded to conduct semi-structured interviews with selected informants from both villages, and then from surrounding villages (6 more in total, including Ouguri, Loonmati, Hatimuria, Chanaka, Xoti Bheti, and Hatibhangi). Each interview lasted, on average, 1-2 hours, with three to four interviews for each household (one with the household patriarch [*murobi*] and two to three with other adult members, e.g. son, daughter, wife, brother, or affine). For a broad sociological sampling, households selected for interviews were chosen based on diversity with respect to: family size, gender composition, ethnic/caste affiliation, belief and disbelief in sorcery (and whether it is practiced by a family or not), and relative access to financial institutions (e.g., did the family have a means of transportation or

not, did the family have a bank account or not, etc.). The content of the interviews focused on kinds of accounting practices conducted by family members individually and as a whole, economic histories of families, relative economic autonomy of individuals, specifics of the village and its locality, narratives about financial reckoning (i.e., accounts of accounts), and larger sets of religious or moral practices and beliefs, especially with respect to Mayongian kingship.

Alongside the interview process, I proceeded to map the means of livelihood across a larger sampling of informants, documenting economic transactions of various scales and in different regimes: commodity exchange of goods (e.g. bamboo, rice wine, clothing, electronics, edible rice, fish, etc.), gifting, barter, *adhi* (literally “giving half,” a system of livestock redistribution and sharecropping in Assam), donations to sorcerers and priests, chiefly/kingly fines, loans to kin, obligatory payments to guests and affines, sharing, *xohai* (solicited “help” or “patronage”), debts/loans, and various kinds of ritualized taxation and tithing.

I also inquired into the deictic qualities of these practices: as events, what materials, forces, and relations are mobilized in coincidence with such transactions/exchanges? In other words, what were the contexts and supplemental elements—social, material, and spiritual—that were built into or brought into these practices. Another focus of my analysis was on misunderstandings and schisms (e.g., was a given exchange interpreted as a gift, a loan, or something else from one perspective but not another; did the exchange end in payment or deferral, etc.). This afforded an opportunity to examine how belief, conceptualization, perspective, and power relations operate in these exchanges and how they are ultimately accounted for (or not).

## Schism and Land

One rather telling example of misunderstanding and schism occurring in the wake of an exchange was when a village-wide disagreement broke out about the status of a particular plot of land in Burha Mayong in 2014. It began when a man from the Koch ethnic community decided that he wanted to sell a few *bigha* (1 *bigha* = 5/8 of an acre) of land to a developer from Guwahati. Sale of land is on the rise in Mayong as it has become a hot commodity. Beginning with the Tarun Gogoi (Congress) Chief Ministership, and continuing now with Sarabananda Sonowal (BJP), the Assam state government has made tourism to Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary a central part of its rural development program. This has led to several land grabs and purchases along the Chandrapur Road through Mayong to Pobitora.

To return to the story, the Koch man's neighbor, a woman from the Karbi ethnic community, protested saying that a portion of the land he intended to sell was actually hers by customary right. Although she had never purchased the land, she had been farming it for over forty years after the Koch man's father gave it to her family as a fine to settle a marriage dispute between the two families. The Karbi woman was also able to show in a "secret" (household) account ledger the value of a few years' worth of rice cultivated from the land. It was clear, at least, that the land was not given to be share-cropped (*adhi*) and that the Karbi family was entitled to the produce of the land. The Koch man insisted though that originally the plot was neither a "fine," nor a "gift" (*upohar*), nor a "share" (*adhi*), but a "loan" (*dhar*), which his father gave for use only—and that the rice that was to be cultivated from the land amounted to payment for the marriage dispute. The Koch man insisted that the original loan was for cultivation only and not a permanent transfer; whatever damages resulted from the initial violation of marriage taboos were now paid off many times over from seers of rice cultivated, sold, and consumed over the years.

Because no formal arrangements were made on the deed of the land, the Karbi neighbor had little to back up her claim except to appeal to customary forms of law. Hence, the "case" (as these matters are literally referred to, using the English word) required intervention from the Karbi chief, the Mayong king, the government-appointed *gaon bura* (village elder), and several "big men" intermediaries from both communities. Schismogenesis ensued. At first, the debate centered around whether or not use of land was an acceptable payment for the breaking of a marriage taboo between two different ethnic groups (the Koch man's brother had eloped with Karbi woman's sister). The record of the marriage penalty was recorded in the "shared account" books at the Karbi chief's house, but it only said the following: "1 *bigha* [0.06 acres] for paddy" with no monetary amount connected to it. The current Karbi chief proclaimed that it could not have been bride price or dowry per customary rules, so it would have to have been a gift to the family only (since other fines were paid to the public purse). Still, no one could agree on whether the gift was land or land-use.

The event quickly transvalued into one of claims of indigeneity vs. evidence of legal propriety, bringing into light the pain of violence around identity politics in Assam (Baruah 1999, 2005). For the Karbi woman, because she did not have evidence of actual ownership (only records of the income produced from the land), she began to frame the matter as one of *who really* should have legitimate historical claim over the land—i.e., whose people were here *first*. At one meeting, she reminded everyone that the Karbi people were the original "discoverers" of Assam and that the land had to have been part of the Karbi community to begin with.\*

Fights and uproars went on for a few weeks. On the part of the Koch man, the case turned into a lengthy investigation at the land records office at the district headquarters. Eventually, the records showed that, in the eyes of District Law, the land legally belonged to the Koch man since there was no formal record of a gift or a sale. Realizing that the matter had escalated out of hand, the Karbi chief, the king, and the *gaon bura* all sided with the District court's findings—deferring to what they told me was an "impartial" authority on the matter (note that the *gaon bura* and current king are "ethnically" Koch). When the final

decision was announced at a village meeting, the Karbi woman stood up, and in a last attempt for moral righteousness, proclaimed:

“In our society, *our Mayong* society, marriage gifts/fines (*dan-san, fain-sain*) are given out of love (*morom*), respect (*xonman*), and tradition (*porompora*). If [the Koch man’s] father had given my family money (*toka-poisa*) and not land [in payment to settle the dispute], does this mean I would have to pay it back now? That is not tradition. Now money is new tradition. But land is not money, land is *Lokhi* [i.e., Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity].”

The crowd, however, ignored her and everyone left the meeting. It was agreed that, in any event, almost forty years of cultivated rice and its profits were more than enough to pay off a marriage fine if that was what it was. On the way home, a friend of mine, a Karbi youth, turned to me and said,

“She was wrong, wasn’t she? Land *is* money now, a thing-of-the-self (*nijor bostu*); her account was just a memory of when land was something more. In the past, land *moved* money, now money *moves* land.”

Cases like these are common in Mayong and resolutions do not always make their way into district or state jurisdiction. From these cases, however, it is clear that accounting is never quite a simple matter of finding agreement and resolution in a record. A written record, a ledger, can open many worlds, many perspectives on the whole and its history. Notice how the Karbi woman attempted to modify the cosmologic involved by deferring from marriage economics to claims of regional indigeneity. Point is, accounting can usher in different or modified cosmologies depending on how one motivates the particulate data available.

*\*A famous figure in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Assamese Literature, Bishnu Proxad Rabha, addressed the Karbi people in 1982 collectively as the “[Christopher] Columbus of Assam” — the discoverers of the land. This has become, ironically, a common trope in defense of Karbi and other tribal rights—here based on a cosmogonical ethno-history saying that prior to the Karbi people, no one lived in the region. Of course, other tribal groups radically deny this claim. The Bodo, for example, claim pure autochthony. The effect is, unfortunately, further segmentation among politicized tribal groups.*

Thirdly, in the interview process I also turned to inquiring about accounting techniques and technologies (narratives, ledgers, styles of bookkeeping, other material forms of record keeping, audits, protective measures, etc.) that were used to reckon and scale the relations and forces occurring the wake of transactional events—both for households and for the shared account. This involved attending, recording, and documenting at least 30 *raijmel*—meetings where shared accounts are composed—in Burha Mayong and Roja Mayong. In also involved documenting when ledgers and other graphic technologies were used and when they weren’t, and in what contexts secrets were kept out of the eye of the *raij*. I also documented unwritten accounts such as stories, or instances when forces of *xonman* (deferential honor), confusion, or

authority compelled actors to consult with local authorities (chiefs, the king, village headmen, “big men,” etc.) on how an accounting should be done in absence of a written record. (Data from these particular events will appear in forthcoming works.)

In light of this methodology, by focusing on the logics, techniques, technologies, and communicative ideologies of accounting, this research offers an empirically grounded and qualitative picture of how and why Mayongians symbolically manage their cosmographic situation. It looks to forces of both spiritual and socially-mediated material prosperity, and between the part-whole attunements that objectify activities of payment and exchange. This approach opens up an ethnographically driven, and holistically attuned, space to understand how and why a people account, and the ways in which accounting makes images of totality intelligible and modifiable, composable and decomposable.

### *Ethnographic Theory: Considered and Reconsidered*

Beyond just *ethnography*, this dissertation is also an exercise in “ethnographic theory” (da Col and Graeber 2011; da Col 2017), which is to say it is an attempt to write theory in the terms mobilized in the ethnographic encounter and to understand a situation through all of its conceptual disjunctures, felicitous surprises, and “not-quite-equivalent” translations. When Malinowski first coined the concept of “ethnographic theory” in Volume II of his *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1935), it was only meant to be one “...of language.” The “ethnographic” element here was meant to underline the fact that language—magical language in his case—could not be studied abstractly beyond the cultural realities in which it unfolds. Malinowski was doing pragmatic analyses of language-in-context and studying performative speech before Austin, Wittgenstein, Tambiah, Silverstein, and many others. This is not to say that we can adequately replicate his “ethnographic theory of language” today. But what we can take from

Malinowski is that an ethnographic theory has to be context-sensitive, adequate to its object, and even if in necessary dialogue with philosophy, it must not dissolve the worldviews of our informants into the arguments of others.

For my part, I consider ethnographic theory to be best when it draws on intellectual and speculative traditions from the site one studies, and then puts those speculations into comparison with other traditions *the world over* the best one can. This is not to say that the entities being compared are given in advance, but that they have to be *attuned* to each other in some capacity in order for comparison to take place (see Conclusion). I have tried to do just that in this dissertation, even though the traditions from Mayong I draw out for dialogue are hardly “great” or even “little” ones refracted from the “great” (Redfield 1956). They are, ultimately, the speculations of peasants—occasionally philosophical, most often humorous, but nevertheless theories about their world and the worlds of others drawn from their own comparisons. Sometimes they are familiar, other times exotic, but the point is that they are always Mayongian first and foremost—meaning that they derive from situations they encounter. If they effectively challenge us to what we mean by accounting, publicity, comparison, surprise, felicity, kinship, friendship, classification, etc. then they have succeeded in becoming a part of the *theoretical* record in anthropology. If they do not, then it is only the failure of the ethnographer and I, in turn, must work harder to draw them out.

Here, before concluding with an outline of the chapters and a note about this ethnography’s narrative style, I provide three critical exemplifications about how this dissertation is a work in ethnographic theory. The first involves what da Col and Graeber (2011) refer to as “conceptual disjuncture.” As they put it, rather tortuously I might add (and I can say this having

been an editor for this project for 5 years), the definition of ethnographic theory in the present moment is:

a conversion of stranger-concepts that does not entail merely trying to establish a correspondence of meaning between two entities or the construction of heteronymous harmony between different worlds, but rather, the generation of a *disjunctive homonymity*, that destruction of any firm sense of place that can only be resolved by the imaginative formulation of novel worldviews. (da Col and Graeber 2011: vii-viii)

In other words, ethnographic theory is a conceptual practice of translation that keeps in productive tension the fact that all translations are betrayals. This is da Col's conceit, via the Italian adage "*traduttore, traditore*." We translate so far as to give a foreign concept or practice a basic sense, but from there we do not render it equivalent; rather, the goal is to keep the alterity of different worldviews in play so that the only way their tension can be resolved is through imaginative wonder. In some ways, this sounds a lot like what the shared account actually tries to accomplish. This may or may not be the case—and if it is, then we have a potentially intriguing place to begin talking about "reverse ethnographic theory" (see the Conclusion to this thesis). In the meantime, however, there is one major concept that I wish to highlight as relevant to the "conceptual disjunctures" or "stranger concepts" of ethnographic theory. This is the concept of *raij*.

Second, and less in line with da Col and Graeber's explication of ethnographic theory, I will discuss the inspiration for the title of this dissertation, *goroka*, and why this term can offer us an alternative metaphor for history and historiography that also speaks to the Mayongian shared account. Something that has always irked me about modernist metaphors for history is that they are, for the most part, all *industrial* with no human operators: e.g., motors, drivebelts, assemblages, gears, etc. *Goroka*, which is literally the pedal of a foot loom, offers a way to conceptualize the dynamism of history in a register that is aesthetic, imaginative, technical,

human-driven, and not foreign to non-industrial societies. As far as ethnographic theory goes, it offers an alternative vision about how to think about history in societies whose archives are living institutions rather than static records—and also compels us to think about structure and aesthetic labor are intertwined in our own ethnographic theorizations.

Finally, I propose that ethnographic theory might be critically reconsidered in the light of analyses that focus on epistemological, psychological, and structural *depth*. If ethnographic theory is a mode of conceptualization that frames our informants' utterances and their speculative capacities as a preeminent value, then it must also affirm the fact that our informants are, like anyone, multidimensional subjects whose reasons are in need of understanding even when they are opaque or do not emerge in discourse. As I point out below, it isn't necessary for us to posit an unconscious or even a collective unconscious for ethnographic theorists to attend to structural depth, but it is necessary to overcome a naïveté that treats our informants' utterances at face value or as surface phenomena only.

WHAT IS A *RAIJ*?

When *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* was established in 2011, one of the inspirations the founding editors took for its charter was a quote from E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1962: 80):

[A]s every experienced field-worker knows, the most difficult task in social anthropological field work is to determine the meanings of a few key words, upon an understanding of which the success of the whole investigation depends.

This dissertation is, indeed and in part, the result of painstakingly trying to capture the significance of several key words beyond their “dictionary definitions.” Among the many concepts I employ—*hisap*, *goroka*, *so'rang*, *xohai*, *uddhar*, *asorit*, etc.—one stands out as preeminently important. This is the concept of “*raij*.” Throughout the dissertation, I casually (but intentionally) gloss *raij* as “the public.” “*Raij*,” however, is ambiguous and not so easily

translated as “public,”—and understanding its ambiguity is critical for understanding the main argument and all of the sub-arguments of this dissertation.

*Raij* literally means “public,” “crowd,” or “the people.” It is a derivative of the term *raijyo* (“kingdom”), and we shall explore its connection to kingship below. The shared account (*raijor hisap*, literally “account of the *raij*”) takes the *raij* as both its object and medium, a “public” working on a project of “publicity.” Yet, in English—especially the kind of academese that circulates in the humanities and social sciences—“public” is a beast of a term. From the Latin *res publica* to bourgeois conceptual histories rooted in distinctions between the public and the private, from Habermas’ (1962) “public sphere” to Warner’s (2002) ideas about “counterpublics” and his assertion that “the public” is a preeminent fiction of modern life—the concept is politically charged. In many ways, the object of study in this dissertation is analogous to Habermas’ project—i.e., to grasp how a particular conception of collectivity emerges out of and loops back into a historically specific institutional medium. Yet, the *raij*

In Assam, a *raij* can only be hailed into being by an encompassing term of address, e.g.: “*Raij*, please listen. I have this problem and need your opinions.” Persons become coextensive with the *raij* only under the authorship of a speaker addressing a collection of people. In Mayong, that hailing can only be done by a king or analogic king who calls forth the *raij* corporately, as a collective body (see Chapter 3). There can be “*raij* of the youth” (*deka raij*), “*raij* of female elders” (*burhi raij*), *raij* of any ethnic group (*Karbi raij*, *Nath raij*, *Koch raij*, etc.), and so forth. It is also spoken of as if it has its own subjectivity: the *raij* “eats,” “prays,” “kills,” “mourns,” etc. A *raij* can also connote an *assembly*, which can be called forth at any time, but most often its summoning produces a *mel* (literally, “meeting”) in which *meluoi* or *melkie* (“meeting participants”) address and exhort each other into action and collectively offer

liturgical services. Here, we come to the notion of a *raijmel* (see Barman 2005; Pathak 2014), which is a particular kind of public and a particular kind of meeting (see Chapter 3).

In Benveniste's ([1969] 2016) *Vocabulaire* of Indo-European institutions, he notes that the Ancient Greeks had two different concepts for "the people" as a political entity: *dēmos* and *laos*. The former "designates a grouping of men who are united solely by their social status and not by any bond of kinship or attachment to a political community" (ibid.: 378) The latter, *laos*, is more specific and relates directly to the people's relation to a king or chief. It is "the community of men, a warrior group which is defined by its relationship to the chief, the "shepherd" (*poimén*), or the "leader" (*órkhamos*) of the *laoi*" (ibid.: 377). He notes that chiefly/kingly titles like *poimén*, *órkhamos*, *koiranós*, and *kosmētōr* are "never constructed with *dēmos*, but exclusively with *laos*" (ibid.: 378). Benveniste covers the historical emergence of both of these terms, but then reveals something quite extraordinary about a cognate of *laos* which was its condition of possibility for being understood as a "public":

The word *laos*, or more precisely the derivative *lā(w)ito-*, occurs, though this is not generally realized, in a well-known compound of common Greek: this is *leitourgós* (ληι-, λειτουργός) with the abstract *leitourgía* (λειτουργία) "liturgy," which is to be analyzed as *\*lēito-werg-*. Thus this word *lēiton*, which in Herodotus is still given as a local word and provided with a translation, served as the base for the name of an institution which became part of the common language. The "liturgy" was in fact a *public* service, a public due paid by a citizen to the state. . . . It could have only been formed in a dialect in which the usual term for "public" was *lēitos* (ibid.: 381).

I draw our attention here to Benveniste to show that the concept of *raij* has more in common with the Greek *laos* than with *dēmos*, a term that more comfortably fits into our ordinary twenty-first-century notions of "people" and "publics." *Dēmos* is indeed something too generic, too "uprooted" (Mayongians would say *uddondo*, or "unmoored," see Chapter 5) from social context to be translated into *raij*, which like *laos*, depends upon an attachment and service to a king (or chief or analogic king) by mutual consent and in the guise of a specific retinue.

*Dēmos* might be a better correlate to the Oxomiya word *jonota*, in that the prefix *jon-* carries a much more “generic” significance (e.g. *jon-xomaj*, “humanity”). Moreover, Benveniste’s brilliant connection of *laós* with *leitourgía* (“liturgy”) also speaks to the element of *service* implied by any *raij*: the duty to participate and debate, the duty to exhort, and the duty to worship collectively—all as a retinue of a king or analogic king. The *raij* is thus strictly obligation bound to an authority in a way that, say, “mass publics” could only ever tenuously be.

But—to shake this comparison up further—*raij* does have an affinity with *dēmos* in the fact that *raij* do not have a *necessary* attachment to a political community. In a register not so specifically political, *raij* implies a transparency of minds, a collective conscious, so to speak. *Raijmel*, as one can see in Chapters 3 and 5, are sites of provocation and intention-seeking as much as they are attempts of instilling quiescence and authoritative closure (at least temporarily). In order for a *raij* to be a *raij* it must be a unified plurality with no political affiliations except to the composite whole (whatever that whole may be). Of course, this becomes problematized once “ethnic *raij*” attenuate the composite *raij* with their own subordinate claims and structures (see Chapter 1). In *raijs* and shared account composition, voices must necessarily clash in debate, but ultimately merge into a single, authoritative account. In this sense, it is but important to note that the *raij* is never counterposed with “the private,” (*nijor*, *nijei*, *nija*), only “the secret” or “the anomic” (*so ’rang*). We have seen this term before. As I mentioned above, *so ’rang* literally means “unlawful,” but in the sense of something being in disagreement with what is commonly understood or a shared sensibility. In this manner, we might also gloss *so ’rang* as “disharmony” or “what is out of tune,” but the point here is that *raij* does not oppose itself to privation; it can only be opposed to that which is *so ’rang*. Thus, I double-down on my decision to translate the *raijs hisap* as the “shared account.”

With all that being said, it may seem sloppy that I gloss *raij* on its own as “public” throughout the dissertation. Still, knowing its complexity as a concept, we then can do the work of ethnographic theory by not so carelessly calling any collective body a “public” in any given context. Indeed, the ethnographic descriptions about the *raij* that unfold in this dissertation look awkward when being glossed merely as a “public.” And this is intentional; the effect is, I think, to evoke the kind of “wonder” and “conceptual disjuncture” that da Col and Graeber argue for.

Moreover, Mayongians and Ancient Greeks make distinctions that anthropologists and social theorists don’t often do, but probably should. Consider, to borrow a term from Arvind Rajagopal (2001), the “split public” of the American electorate in 2017. The Trumpist right seem to be viewing the body politic as a *laós*, with the implication that liturgical duty is only for “their own” as hailed by their demagogue (who, perhaps, more correctly would be a *laóagogue*). The left, scattered as it may be, is *trying* to treat the body politic as a *dēmos*, a generic “people” uprooted from their particular affiliations, but it too cannot break from its own “laóogouery.” No one, as far as I can tell, is calling forth something like an American *raij*, which would sit uncomfortably between a *laós* and a *dēmos*. Even town-halls and village councils are split with no possibility of quiescence or potential unification. Perhaps something like this is out-of-reach for American politics today. But it does beg the question: what *would* an American *raij* look like? Would it necessarily need a king or an analogic king (say, the law) to make it work? As strange and unanswerable as these questions are, this kind of disjunctive thinking is what makes ethnographic theory an invaluable tool for ethnographers working around the world today.

#### GOROKA: AESTHETIC LABOR AND THE PEDAL OF HISTORY

The inspiration for the title of this thesis comes from Lokendra Hazarika, a historian from Kamarpur who teaches at Mayong Higher Secondary School. In a lengthy discussion we had

about the difficulties of grasping Mayong's history beyond patchwork data gathering, Lokendra Da compared the task of writing and understanding the history of Mayong to stepping on the bamboo pedal (*goroka*) of a foot loom (*tatxal*) (see Figure 0.2). According to him,

[It is] like with a foot loom, to write history (*itihax*) one tries to weave a tapestry out of alternating steps...the patterns that are revealed in the cloth only come from taking small steps that go back and forth between one fact and another. Oftentimes facts are inconsistent (*bixong-goti*), like...when we weave a *gamosa* and there are thick and thin lines. They do not match, but then you look at them again and say, "There can be a pattern." So you stop pedaling, adjust the threads, and then start pedaling again. Once you can see the pattern you have made, then the steps speed up. It is like this as a historian. You write, stop, look at the patterns in a new way, and write again...back and forth...this fact and that one...and this becomes history (*buranji*).

As Lokendra Da further explained to me, there is more to the notion of *goroka* than only a reference to a specific technology: it can mean "catching" or "trapping," it can mean the movement of an instep downward which makes the first sign of a footprint, and it can also mean the imprint left behind by the instep. With all these connotations, I am inclined to put *goroka* in conversation with Parmentier's (1986) discussion of how the indexical symbols of *olangch* in Palau function as both "signs in history" and "signs of history." But, since Lokendra Da's metaphor was only used with specific reference to the loom pedal, I will save that comparison for another publication.

When operating a *tatxal*, one has to use one's hands and feet. The hands control the shuttle that interlocks the weft (the transverse thread) while the feet control the warp (the template threads) by pushing the fabric forward. For textiles with elaborate designs, extra layers of thread are laid over the base cloth and require an alternate pedaling of two *goroka*. When weaving, one has to tack (or "step") back and forth to anticipate the patterns immanent in the threads, structural potentials as it were. Most designs and patterns, even for *gamosa* (the sacred towel which is a ubiquitous sign of "belonging to Assam"), are not pre-fabricated in rural

contexts. One begins with a random cross-cutting pattern and then proceeds from there to follow the flow and adjust to what becomes. And this requires a second “tacking back and forth,” between the textile-in-situ and the imagination of the weaver.



**Figure 0.2.** *Goroka*: The foot loom pedal. Photograph by Sailendra Kathar. [All photographs are by the author unless stated otherwise.]

How the metaphor works here is that one has to first imagine history, as Lokendra Da does, as something “only created by humans” (Hazarika 2011: 1). It does not have a transcendent

quality or a self-sufficient logic or dynamism. A (right?) Hegelian Lokendra Da is not. Human labor is not only necessary for the creation of history, but requires what we might call a kind of “sensuous attentiveness” to bodily hexis, but also to the shape of history one is writing. So we might further clarify that *goroka*-as-history involves a tension between imagination and structural potentials where one must cultivate both a sensuous attentiveness to and an aesthetic labor upon the various signs (or facts) we mobilize as “historical.”

There is, however, more to the metaphor; two themes especially. First, it seems clear that Lokendra Da is relating weaving and history on the basis of their *habitus*. The dynamic “speeding up” element Lokendra Da refers to is evocative of Mauss’ reflections on hunting techniques and magical action, which create a kind of confidence, a “psychological *momentum*” (Mauss [1935] 1973: 75). One is, in a sense, bound up—or *participating*—in history as one writes it, echoing Marx’s insight from “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852): “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” Second, and how this relates to *Mayongian* historiography particularly, is that there is an analogic dimension implied in locating patterns in the weft. The pedals move the warp forward, but it can only proceed insofar as that movement is “cross-cut” by the different registers of the weft. In other words, patterns unfold analogically. Mayongian senses of their own history beyond memory are so caught up in and dependent upon collective ritual, as we will show in Chapter 1, that the patterns they notice and gain momentum from are also analogical ones. They cut across time and space in an almost atemporal way. Lokendra Da agrees with this sentiment. As he told me in the same conversation where he introduced the idea of *goroka* to me: “The Mayong *buranji* is the only ‘primary source’ we have. It does not say very much. But I think the

lineage of the kings does not matter as much as what Suinat Singha [the first king of Mayong] and Xarassa Chandra Singha [the 10<sup>th</sup> king of Mayong and Suinat Singha's youngest son] did. They created the patterns and traditions that make Mayong's culture unique. . . . We live this history.”

For non-industrial people like Mayongians who lack static archives, *goroka* simply makes sense as metaphor for history. In that spirit, I have adopted it as my primary metaphor for the dynamic labor and dialectic iteration, the tacking/stepping back and forth and progressive negation, that unfolds in the shared account. As I stated above, Mayongians are not comfortable with synthesis, transcendence, or logical resolutions—they play with a contradiction, sensuously attend to it, until some surfeit hits them back with an irresistible sense of wonder, surprise, or shock...what emerges in utterances as “*asorit*” (see Chapter 5). Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to various *goroka* modes, dynamics, registers, sentiments, ideas, and cosmography with respect to the shared account. Each speak back to this multi-layered metaphor that Lokendra Da outlined for me.

For ethnographic theory, *goroka* does not just offer us a new metaphor for history or other social processes like shared accounting. It also reminds us that ethnographers are in the business of aesthetic labor in one way or the other. And when we confront an inconsistency or contradiction in the field or in analysis, *goroka* thinking compels us to see that it is “not the negation of a structural logic but its sequitur” (Sahlins 1992: ix).

#### TRULY TAKING PEOPLE SERIOUSLY

Rita Astuti (2017), in her 2015 Robert Layton H. Lecture, offers a way to use insights from cognitive psychology to take *people*—meaning her Vezo informants in Madagascar—*seriously* without necessarily positing their radical alterity or their “non-dualist ontology.” In the

ethnographic situation she unfolds, the Vezo seem to be caught in a contradiction: the dead ancestors are wholly dead. They are spirits with no will or sense. Yet, they communicate with the living in ways that show they are dependent on the desires and emotions of their wholly dead bodies. Instead of investigating whether or not the Vezo actually *do* conceive of this as a contradiction (she says they *would* immediately notice it and agree to it) and, if they do, how they live with it, work around it, or resolve it, Astuti instead argues that Vezo “contradictory” attitudes toward and beliefs around death derive from the multiple experiences of death that they encounter across life. Framing Vezo lives in terms of their cognitive ontogenetic development, she notes that knowledge about death accumulates in ways that Vezo never have the opportunity to verbalize. Being part of their *habitus*, they act according to that knowledge without reflecting on whether it is contradictory or not.

In the same issue of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* that Astuti’s Layton Lecture was published in, editor Giovanni da Col (2017: 6) reflected on her contribution as follows:

people know far more than what they say and it is incredibly hard to learn what they never feel the need to verbalize. Thus, the anthropologist could, for example, develop tasks or generate conditions that would challenge an informant to artificially raise imaginative, surprising, and abstract situations that don’t have readymade answers.

This is one method for eliciting the kind of “felicitous” equivocations/translations that ethnographic theory sets out to do (ibid.; da Col and Graeber 2011). During my own fieldwork, I would often prompt my friends in Mayong with hypothetical scenarios: What would happen if someone did not pay a fine? What would happen if everyone stopped contributing to the shared account? What if the goddess cursed everyone with sickness? Etc.<sup>18</sup> I did this so often, sometimes interjecting my Oxomiya questions with the English word “suppose,” that my friends

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<sup>18</sup> I also often participated in *jukowa*, a genre of exhortative play (see Chapter 5), which allows for the kind of felicitous revelations that also emerge from exhortative speech in Mayongian shared account.

in Mayong began to call it the “suppose game” (*suppoj’or khel*). We would drink and ask each other hypothetical questions or imagine hypothetical situations. Occasionally, these were quite revealing of situations I could never observe, but most of the time the conversations and insights were rather *ad hoc*; they often devolved into jokes and bullshitting.

All this paints an interesting picture about the limits of empirical methods, but there seems to be a subtle reticence here on the part of ethnographic theory. For Astuti, knowledge about death is still accessible to a subject who gathered it from life experiences. It is part of their cognitive development. Nothing is repressed or forgotten—just simply not verbalized. For da Col, it seems as if something isn’t being *said* in the field, then maybe we should try to provoke it out through thought experiments or tests. Given the previous elaborations on ethnographic theory from da Col and Graeber (2011), I get the feeling that ethnographic theory isn’t yet prepared methodologically or theoretically to handle epistemologies, psychologies, or structures of *depth*. The whole matter of focusing on translations, “stranger concepts,” “conceptual disjunctures,” has recently led me to think: are we, as ethnographic theorists, taking what our informants say at face value? Are we only attending to “surface networks,” “surface interpretations,” and “surface explanations”—or is there a place for something like the “unconscious” in our ethnographic theorizations (cf. Keesing 2012)?

When Mayongians say something like “that house is poor and infertile because they were attacked by a sorcerer for decades and also were sorcerers themselves,” I have no problem taking that at face value—that is to say, as an explanatory statement about the reality of the situation. There is no reason to be mystified here. Sorcery is a common explicans in Mayong and sorcery is real for Mayongians whether they believe in it or not (see Chapter 2). When someone doesn’t have an esoteric understanding of a ritual or when the shared commitment of the shared account

fails in “shared understanding” (ibid.; cf. Sperber 1995), that is par for the course. Not everyone understands the symbolic worlds they inhabit, let alone are they able to articulate them reflexively. And failing is what the shared account is best at. But when, for example, Mayongians aver proudly, loudly, and passionately that that all their ethnic communities have always been virilocal, but over 65% of 300 households I surveyed were uxori-local within 1-2 generations and myths about both the sacred geography and kingship of Mayong are based on uxori-local events, one begins to wonder whether or not some kind of repression or disavowal is happening. Mayongians, for their part, reject any contradiction. Most say the myths have no bearing on marriage and residency so it doesn’t make any difference. And when it comes to the hard evidence of kinship patterns, they find many reasons to deny the reality: whether they claim that the majority are exceptions or simply say that they are *so’rang*. This may not be repression in the proper Freudian sense; it might rather be evidence of the tension between ideology and practice (Lincoln 1991). Either way, there is something going on beneath surface explanations and interpretations.

By no means am I advocating that ethnographers should also become psychoanalysts or adopt its methods and assumptions. Save, perhaps, adopting one insight: that “knowledge”—especially of the ethnographic kind—is not always a matter of “surfaces.” The anthropological turn from structure to “discourse,” and more recently from “culture as epistemology” to “culture as ontology,” or even ontology as opposed to culture (see Holbraad in Carrithers et al 2010), seems to be one long turn back to E. B. Tylor, back to the idea that we simply have to take what our informants say at face value (cf. Horton 1968, 1997). Taking a “native’s point of view seriously” of course means attending to their myths, their religious worldviews, their symbolic lifeworlds...to the reality of witches (Viveiros de Castro 2015), to the non-representational truth

that “powder is power” (Holbraad 2006), etc. But it also means taking them as more than flat surfaces, only capable of cognitive knowledge or discursive iteration. We need not be skeptical or critical of our informants, but we should consider that not everything they say is worth taking another “turn” in anthropology for. Moreover, the ethnographic encounter creates certain kinds of revelations not so distinct from Freud and Breuer’s (or, really, Anna O.’s) “talking cure.” The “exotopic” relation (to borrow a term from Bakhtin) of the ethnographer to the “ethnograph-ied” elicits reflections of all kinds, from minor “contradictions” to major questions about cosmology and ultimate principles. If, as William Mazzarella (2017/forthcoming) argues, this kind of “encounter” is like all encounters that constitute social life, then an ethnographic theorist cannot really conceive of herself merely as a “translator,” no matter how elaborate our conception of translation is. She also has to be an analyst of what gets mobilized in her wake or in the wake of any “encounter” and what the deep structural congeners are of those encounters. I try to show this in Chapters 1, 4, 6, and the Conclusion especially.

Moreover, we need not necessarily refer to this world of epistemological, psychological, or structural depth as an “unconscious.” Mayongians call it the realm of *so’rang*—that which, being discreet and inaccessible, is most likely “unlawful” because it is in disagreement with what is good for the public. As a limit of the ethnographic method, one cannot really provoke others enough to show *how* or *why* something became *so’rang*. It is simply enough to posit the existence of this domain: a conceptual place that we are often not aware of, or we push aside because we cannot deal with it, or we acknowledge is the ultimate source of all things public.

In sum, ethnographic theory remains in need of theories and analyses of cosmological, cultural, and psychological depth—of structures beyond discourse. And it needs this from several perspectives, not just from a single editor of a single journal. It took an entire century—from

Lévy-Bruhl to Viveiros de Castro—to prove not only that the “others” are rational, but that they are metaphysicians as well. Somewhere along the way, many anthropologists seem to have forgotten, denied, or simply avoided the fact that the “others” also have an unconscious—or at least a capacity to disavow, equivocate, or stumble their way through life unawares like we all do. I am not suggesting that this applies to all anthropologists, especially over the past century, but it does seem to be the current state of things among those invested in both the ontological turn and ethnographic theory. To *truly* take our informants seriously, we have to also take them light-heartedly (which is often how they take us) and embrace them as the multidimensional subjects they are.

### **Outline of the Chapters and a Note on Narrative Style**

The dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I, “A Cosmographic Situation” outlines, roughly, what could be called the dual problematique of Mayongians in the present: (1) the larger political situation of kingship, tribes, and the state (fueled, in part, by “durable disorder”), and (2) the world of sorcery, secret accounts, and deception immanent to Mayongian cosmologies. These pertain to Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. Part II, “The Making and Unmaking of the Shared Account,” which borrows a dialectical image/phrasing from the work of Brad Weiss (1996), illuminates the processes by which the shared account (re)creates the situation sketched in Part I, yet draws in irresistible (if ambiguous) surfeits from other domains to propel the dynamism of the account forward, even in its unmaking. Each chapter in this second part focuses on a single process, which is only isolated from the others only for analytic and descriptive purposes. As one will notice, features of each different process show up in Chapters 3–6.

Chapter 1 might be called the “history chapter” of the dissertation, although I do include historical reflections, and especially *goroka* historiography, into all chapters of the dissertation.

More specifically, this chapter describes and analyzes the historical and political situation in which the shared account has emerged. First, it explores the relative absence of the Mayong from both medieval and colonial archives. This, I propose, has allowed for a certain degree of freedom and surplus in how Mayongians interpret their political past. After describing the “official” foundation myth of the kingdom and some of its critical reinterpretations, I proceed to show how Mayongian mytho-history unfolds “paradigmatically” through annual rituals of kingship. The annual deification of the king ceremonial—a two part ritual known as *Goxai Uliuwa* (“Bringing out the Gods”) and *Gor Bhanga* (“Smashing the Embankment”)—is then analyzed with respect to Mayongian mythologies of “stranger domestication” and framed as a Hocartian coronation rite that recaptures the king’s divinity, alterity, and capability to access prosperity. From there, we move to what Valerio Valeri ([1990] 2014) has called “syntagmatic history”—i.e., the unfolding of events sequentially in the time of memory. Here, we look more closely at Baruah’s notion of “durable disorder”—especially ethnonationalist violence and state “counterinsurgency” programs. From the perspective of recent contingencies, I argue how both tribes and kings can and should be read as “state effects” (Scott 2009) in the present moment, but their significance is nevertheless recaptured by the paradigmatic mythemes that provide a template for how the Mayongian king relates to “his people”—in this case, the *raij*-as-tribe being the “active” principle and the king being the “passive” one. Yet, because myth cannot sufficiently control the implications of events in syntagmatic history, surfeits emerge and both the king and his people have had to redefine their relationship to each other. Ultimately, this chapter argues that politics in Mayong plays out mythopoeically in the present moment even as it negates previous mythopoeic orders. This, I suggest, is more or less the same kind of “negative dialectic” or “*goroka* dynamism” at play in the shared account: history doesn’t repeat itself, but because it does rhyme it concretizes the poetic function of wonder that

carries Mayongian politics into further transformations of mythic themes.

Chapter 2 describes a different side of this “cosmographic situation.” It begins with a brief description of “secret accounts” or *so’rang hisap* and why they resist ethnographic description. It follows with a general description of the related “*so’rang* realm” of sorcery (*bejali, tantra-mantra*) in Mayong and how, like secret accounts, it is an ambiguous institution. Sorcery, which in Mayongian moral discourse is understood to be *so’rang*, confronts a strange attractor: today, Mayongian “mass publicity” in Assam and across the sub-continent focuses on the place being *famous* for harmful sorcery and black magic. What was once a colonial backwater, absent of any legal structures or self-serving imperial attentiveness that would grant Mayong a larger sense of publicity, now finds itself represented by a “tradition” that locally lacks both public affirmation and virtue (cf. Kelly 1991). Now, what both sorcery logics and secret accounts attempt to do, I argue, is access and condense the enriching and prosperity-producing “forces of life itself.” Yet, the problem is that in any objectification of the forces of life, especially *xokti (shakti)*, *life* becomes something other than life. It cannot be captured in representations, only *participated* in, less it becomes destroyed or transformed in the process. This, I suggest, makes the category of “life itself” deceptive, which is something Mayongians tentatively understand as part and parcel of their cosmographic situation. Maya, the goddess of illusion, lives in Mayong and deception is somewhat of an expected phenomenon: things are never quite what they seem to be. In order to flesh this out concretely, this chapter focuses on the myth of a cursed talisman, a magic coin called the Hanuman *marka*, which shares a family resemblance with sorcery and secret accounts as being part of the “*so’rang* realm.” Unpacking various narratives and experiences of the *marka*, from being a counterfeit commodity to a sacrificial gift, the chapter concludes with reflections on the *marka* as a sublime object. The *so’rang* realm of Mayongian cosmology permanently faces the sublime

impasse that representation (or objectification) fails to capture the forces of life. This, I argue, is what has compelled an ideology of transparency and publicity in Mayong, renewed kingship as the preeminent source for accessing and distributing the forces of life, and given the *participatory*<sup>19</sup> logics and experiences of the shared account a commanding presence as a cosmographic art.

Thus, if sorcery is the implied domain of secret accounts, then kingship is the explicit domain of the *shared account*. Chapter 3 attends to the ordinary features of Mayongian sovereignty in order to outline how the shared account is made and unmade as a kingly project, especially with respect to a process of *quiescence*. I refer to quiescence as a process rather than a “state,” in that establishing a degree of inactivity involves rhetorical labor and sometimes violent outbursts on the part of the *raij* and more importantly on the king and his “analogues” to provoke a quietist order. The chapter begins with reflections on the character of the *raij*, especially from a subaltern point of view which sees it as a kind of “python” that eats patrons (big men) whole. From here I offer a more detailed description of shard accounts and the scene in which they are composed—a *raijmel*. In the historical literature on *raijmel* from Assam, they are often treated as exemplifications of a primal, village-based “participatory democracy,” but through an analysis of their mythic origins as well as their functioning today, one comes to see that they are always presided over by a figure who replicates the capacities of an ideal king. Hence, I turn to develop a concept of “analogic kingship” to account for the capacity of these figures—both gerontocratic nobles (chiefs and junior kings) and charismatic upstarts (big men)—to do the work of the king. In somewhat of a long, but I think necessary, digression into Roy Wagner’s (1977) theory of “analogic kinship” I parcel out why analogy works here on the basis of “controlled differentiation,” even if we have to accept the fact that kinship and kingship are, in some manner, logically opposed institutions. Following this, I

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<sup>19</sup> In Lévy-Bruhl’s (1975) sense.

show that at the basis of Mayongian analogic kingship is a ambiguously “quiescent” concept known as *uddhar*, which, being based on a larger sense of debt ownership, can mean either “pardon” (if given by an actual king or consecrated noble) or “exemption” (if given by a big man). After exploring these two meanings ethnographically with respect to the king, chiefs, and big men, I return to the subaltern image of (or perspective on) the *raij*. Here, I propose that processes of quiescence ultimately “unmake” the shared account by instilling a sense of “social rot” or “fermented value,” a kind of intentional “standing back” to allow relations to remain “open” and just active enough to draw in new revelations and wonders. Such revelations and wonders often emerge in the way kingly voice and solicitude are mobilized during compositions of the shared account during *raijmel*. Two ethnographic examples—a chief’s speech and a big man’s speech—are thus compared and together reveal that quiescence cannot maintain itself without collapsing via the logics and other processes immanent to the shared account. The chapter concludes by returning to the figure of the python as a speciating patron who doesn’t eat big men, but does eat their fish.

Chapter 4 picks up on the theme of fish by working out a theory of what I call “ichthyonomics.” We will return to that in a moment. Primarily this chapter illuminates a second process in the making and unmaking of the shared account: *speciation*. Recalling Chapter 3’s insights into how analogic kings (and the king himself) manage ethnic intermixing in shared accounts by putting “everything in its right place,” this chapter explores how human and non-human logics of speciation emerge most dramatically in what Veena Das (1997) has called “critical events.” Here, we thus shift our focus away from specifics in the *raijmel* and shared account composition and into an analogous “*goroka* register,” as I call it (a domain beyond the shared account in which processes in the shared account are taken or draw their inspiration from). This is the annual flooding of the Brahmaputra River which inundates Mayong each summer.

During the “critical event” of flooding, the stakes for inter-ethnic understanding, management, and order are quite high. As for humans, so for *fish*. The time of floods is a time of species management, especially in that fish are abundant yet leaking out of their containers (legal and territorial) which also demarcate ethnic boundaries. This chapter thus develops a notion of *ichthyonomics* to understand how the kind of speciations that occur and are managed during flooding make their way into Mayongian cosmologies and thus into the shared account. The central analytic question of this chapter is how we are to understand *jati* in Mayong—not on the basis of caste or even “ethnicity” (which is its normal register in Oxomiya)—but on the actual basis of species differences. To propose answers to these questions, the chapter explores technologies of containing and sieving, which throw into relief the boundaries upon which *jati* is both ontologized and undermined. The chapter concludes with reflections on the obvious tension between a world ordered by *jati* and one in which *jati* can be overcome by a composite unity. Being an expression of the same antinomy in shared accounting, it allows us to see how this tension constantly pushes against the kinds of quiescent unity shared accounts attempt to demarcate.

Chapter 5 concerns a third process of making and unmaking shared accounts: *exhortation*. The chapter begins by examining exhortatory speech during shared account composition at *raijmel*. It attends to the specific forms of “intention revelation” and provocation/elicitation made on the part of analogic kings. We then follow into another “*goroka* register.” This time domain is in the interactional order—specifically a genre of inconsummate, verbal play known as *jukowa*. This genre of play is all about exhorting another to respond with excessive humor or some other form of provocation. Literally meaning “foreplay,” *jukowa* is all about the conditional and deferred. Like Simmel’s conceptualization of “flirting,” it cannot logically have any consummation without becoming that which it figurates. And what *jukowa* figurates is precisely the inter-ethnic

animosities of “durable disorder.” Through an in-depth analysis of what *jukowa* is and what it does, this chapter seeks to show the efficacy and centrality of exhortatory speech and narrative in compelling the antinomies of the shared account. After the mobilization of a generous amount of ethnography (including reflections on how *jukowa* relates to the classic “joking relationships” of kinship studies), a critique of the abuse of “felicity conditions” in performative theories of language, and an acknowledgment that elder women might be ultimately responsible for the legitimacy of shared accounts, I turn to consider how the elements of surprise and shock (*asorit*) resulting from exhortative speech and narratives are not only the preeminent force behind the *goroka*-pedaling of the shared account (i.e., its dynamic production of surfeits), but are also a model for second-person oriented ethics. Reflecting on Gandhi’s sentiment that the *world* had a stake in what would ultimately happen in the Salt March, I argue that what we might call “*asorit* ethics” offers an “ethical affordance” (Keane 2016) of second-person orientations hitherto unnoticed in the booming ethical turn of anthropology.

Chapter 6 explores the particulate data—i.e., primarily names, but also numbers—through which shared accounts are composed, negotiated, and ultimately decomposed. In other words, here we explore a fourth process through which shared accounts are made and unmade: *particularization*. Although I do analyze shared account ledgers in this chapter, the “*goroka* register” I turn to here is the realm of taboo containment, specifically what happens when one speaks the name of one’s name-sharer. Through a theoretical discussions of untouchable and unmentionable taboos, this chapter follows the logic of how a personal name is understood to be a “cosmic singularity,” with implications for how Mayongians distinguish between kinship and friendship. Ultimately, we confront yet another decomposition of the shared account in that the *mutual destiny* implied by a shared name entails a compulsion to distance oneself from *mutual*

*belonging*. The sense of unity inherent in the identity between persons and their particulate appurtenances is, for Mayongians, a dangerous thing cosmologically. It beckons hard lines of differentiation and segmentation even when there may be no other warrants for it. Yet the ambiguity remains between singularity and identity in that there is something irresistibly magnetizing between two people who share the same name. Such thus provokes a return to composite unity, but in a new guise, and the dynamic of the shared account pedals forward. This chapter then ends with a brief reflection on the proper names of substances (like food and alcohol) and whether or not the nominalist politics they mobilize imply singular destinies as well.

In the spirit of the shared account and *goroka* historiography, the conclusion of the dissertation is entirely non-synthetic. Rather than rounding out the argument with some sort of resolution or ethnographic image that further condenses the dialectical processes outlined in the previous chapters, I instead negate my own thesis that Mayongian accounting is ultimately a matter of part-whole attunements that render the cosmos intelligible and modifiable. Here, I instead flirt with the possibility that those attunements might actually be modes of *comparison* in which Mayongians are up to a kind of “reverse anthropology” (Wagner [1975] 2016) or perhaps even an “reverse ethnographic theory.” Three ethnographic vignettes are considered in this regard: (1) reflections on an event from early on in my fieldwork period when I was accused of being a *so’rang* sorcerer, (2) the role of folk music and folk instrumentation as a means to make the cosmos resonate, and (3) what it might mean to step twice into the Luit (Brahmaputra)...or any other river from the perspective of *goroka* cosmography.

Finally, I have included a translation of the Mayong Buranji (the historical chronicle of the Mayong line of kings, first synthesized in 1928) along with an editorial note as an Appendix. I have included this for many reasons, a few of which can be outlined here. First, no English

language translation of the Buranji yet exists, and both the current king (Deoroja Taranikanta Singha) and the Buranji's first editor/transcriber (Sri Pawan Kumar Bishaya) felt that it would be an excellent initiative to undertake. As a small token of reciprocity on my part (and on the part of Ms. Daizi Hazarika, the primary translator), I found it fitting to include it first in this dissertation before publishing it in book form at a later date (further editing and annotations will be required). Moreover, being the only "primary" historical document relating to the Mayong kingdom, and only a mere 40 pp. double-spaced at that, it seemed intuitive for me to include it as an exemplification of *goroka* historiography. Finally, the Buranji serves as an excellent complement to Chapters 1, 3, and 4 and offers the reader an opportunity to read the excerpts I use from it in the chapters in the context of the larger chronicle.

One final note on the style of the ethnographic writing and pattern of reference in the dissertation. The "narrative" approach I adopt for both analysis and description in many chapters is intentional, but in a way that might not be immediately apparent.

On one hand, one may notice the ubiquitous first-person perspective that frames the ethnographic descriptions and narratives. This is not in response to any of the "reflexive turn" anthropologies of the 1980s and 1990s that went boo-boo-baa-baa about the necessity of an autobiographical presence in the construction of ethnographic corpora. My intentions are not so epistemologically correct. Rather, they are quite simply snapshots of the ethnographic encounter that was only possible because I was incorporated into Mayong as a "domesticated stranger" in the structural pattern that Mayongians understand. The revelations and wonder I developed about Mayongian cosmology were par for the course for any other person who was brought into the society by means of marriage, adoption, conversion, solicitation, etc. In other words, my voice in the ethnography is already pre-figured by Mayongian structural expectations. As I use it,

however, it is subordinate to Mayongian voices. In utilizing this double voice, I have tried to err on the side of both humor and gravity that would resonate in Chicago as much as in Mayong.

On the other hand, there is a literary precedence to what I am doing here. I take my inspiration from the “little stories,” of Irish oral tradition (e.g., Sean Ó Faoláin) and riparian Americana (e.g., Mark Twain). Many of the ethnographic narratives in this dissertation are episodic, little stories that do not exhaust the world of description. Rather, they are meant to exhort us into reflection. Mayongians, too, are not so fond of epics; when they recite myths or ritually perform them, the form is also episodic and truncated in nature. As my research assistant Tirtha Saikia would often tell me, “one finds great things in little stories” (*xoru kothat dangor bostu pai*).

PART ONE

A COSMOGRAPHIC SITUATION

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Mythopoeic Politics**

#### **Or, Two Kinds of History**

*Alternating continuously, these processes never stop:  
Sometimes things come together into one whole through the power of Love,  
And sometimes they are all borne apart again through the hatefulness of Strife.  
Thus, insofar as the One has learned to issue from the Many  
And the Many result from separating out of the One again,  
By this process they come into being, and their allotted time is not lasting.  
Insofar as they never stop alternating continuously,  
Thus they are ever motionless in the cycle.*

– Empedokles, Fragment B17: 6–14

#### **The Bronze Sandal**

As far as the cosmology of Empedokles goes, there can never be anything new issued in a world where the great antimony of the One and the Many are bound to be composed, decomposed, and recomposed from each other. If the universe is dynamic in this pre-Socratic worldview, it is only, and perhaps ironically, from the perspective of the evanescent snapshots in which we capture things coming into and out of being. From the perspective of the cyclical whole, the parts only oscillate motionless. Hence, as legend has it, when Empedokles threw himself into Mount Etna with the intention of committing a great disappearing act to prove he was a god, his death was, in so many cosmic terms, nothing more than a transformation of a previous—and cosmologically equal—transformation: everything that was once fire to fire returned. Except, strangely, for one of his bronze sandals, which the volcano spit back out—seemingly in defiance of Empedokles’ arrogance. According to Diogenes Laërtius (Bk. VIII.73), those sandals were not just symbols of Empedokles’ mortal hubris, but a blatant aristocratic appurtenance:

[F]rom [Empedokles’] abundant means he bestowed dowries upon many of the maidens of the city who had no dowry. No doubt it was the same means that enabled him to don a

purple robe and over it a golden girdle, as Favorinus relates in his *Memorabilia*, and again slippers of bronze and a Delphic laurel-wreath. He had thick hair, and a train of boy attendants. He himself was always grave, and kept this gravity of demeanour unshaken. In such sort would he appear in public; when the citizens met him, they recognized in this demeanour the stamp, as it were, of royalty.

Aristocratic vanity notwithstanding, Empedokles' bronze sandal reveals an irony about the disjuncture between society and the cosmos. Agents of the former may use the latter through myth and other semiotic or ritual means to legitimize their place in the world, but the cosmos itself has no duty to conform to any such cosmography. As Bruce Lincoln (1986: 171) simply and elegantly puts it, "While the structure of the cosmos may be eternal, the structure of society certainly is not." Thus, even if myth, ritual, sacrifice, and a host of cosmographic media might do the insidious work of rendering an arbitrary ideology *objective, permanent, and necessary*, society is always only a part or subset of the cosmos, of a complete totality, no matter how hard cosmographers strive to make it into a discreet entity that has to be an alloform of the latter.

In the Introduction, I referred to this particular tension as one between *representation* and *participation*. As I intimated (but did not properly flesh out), Lévy-Bruhl got it all wrong. It is not as if certain *people* (non-Western, non-dualistic, pre-Modern) have the latter as a rational *mentalité* and others (Western, Cartesian, Modern) have the former. Rather, it is that both are two, non-contradictory ways of rendering the cosmos intelligible and aligning its parts to its whole. The cosmographer can and often does operate on a logic of *pars pro toto* as much as he attempts to represent the cosmos in a way that justifies a given (often social) order of things. But, the cosmological experience of *participation* tends to push back. Like Empedokles' bronze sandal being tossed out of the molten lava, certain experiences have a way of challenging the representational order by producing surfeits that cannot be integrated into the totality.

Nothing I am saying here is particularly new, but it speaks loudly to the dilemma of Mayongian cosmography and historiography. Mayongian politics plays out in the contemporary

moment *as if* the present were an “alloform” of the past; that is to say, both are conceived *alternative shapes* of the same consubstantial form (Lincoln 1986: 5). And that might be enough to settle the matter if one were to look only at the ritual orders in which Mayongian politics play out—from the dramatic ceremonials of kingship (described below) to the pageantry of sacrifices (see below; Chapters 2 and 6). From the perspective of ritual, everything looks like Empedokles’ cosmos: reruns of the One and the Many in archaic (or primordial) forms. Of course, and to quote Valerio Valeri ([1990] 2014: 117), “the world is not reinvented every morning.” Beyond the cyclical temporality of Mayongian ritual, the everyday brings with it *new* encounters, *new* events, and *new* frames that, if important enough to push back against the received significance of the cosmic order, are either incorporated into the ritual cycle or end up, like Empedokles’ sandal, serving a sign that the cosmographic premises of the Mayongian ritual-political order might be fundamentally flawed. As with the Sahlinsian structure of the conjuncture (see Sahlins 1981a), contingencies are by necessity understood in terms of the received categories of cultural knowledge. But this does not mean that reality must conform to those categories. Newness, difference, and sometimes large-scale change emerge from the encounter between a structure and a contingent event. But sometimes contingent events (like the naked man ordeal described in the preface), produce an indeterminate remainder that, because of its inability to be resolved in a symbolic order, is irresistible to speculation. As I argued in the introduction, this is never quite the “collapse” of structural logic, but rather its sequitur. The “remainders” or “surfeits” produced compel a structural dynamic forward.

As for Empedokles’ bronze sandal, Aristotle was the first to take that remainder into a new direction. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle proposed that strife, rather than destroying unity, also produces singular, differentiated beings (in determinate relationships) out of an

undifferentiated whole. Similarly, love (or friendship) can destroy those singular beings by constituting a composite unity. The Stoics, for their part, reviled hereditary aristocracy. For Seneca, especially, *nobilitas* (hereditary nobility) counted for nothing on the path to cultivating *uirtus* (virtue) and the prerogatives of *dignitas* (dignity). The bronze sandal, for Diogenes Laërtius and probably for Seneca as well, was more than a sign of the arrogant aristocrat as mistaken cosmographer—it was a surfeit that history as Fortune produces: everyone has the same number of ancestors, kings have slaves and slaves have kings, but “the passage of time confuses everything and Fortune turns them topsy-turvy” (Vessey 1973: 335).

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This first chapter attends to the exigencies of such “bronze sandal events” in Mayongian history. It sketches out one side of what I have called Mayong’s “cosmographic situation” (Chapter 2 will sketch the other side). Here, we shall focus on the historical and ritual structures of the Mayongian kingship, and then follow up with focus on the relationship between “Tribes” and the Indian/Assam state nexus in the contemporary moment. Together, this discussion shall reveal how the two come together in the present moment as a “mythopoeic politics”—the topsy-turvy grounds from which structural logics are “reproduced” analogically, but are nevertheless carried forward into new situations by remainders that cannot so easily be incorporated into structure and, thus, carry a dynamic of speculation forward.

We will first focus on the political-ritual order of Mayong: from the founding of the kingdom in the late 1530s by the wandering “prince” Suinat Singha to the establishment of the kingdom’s bureaucratic ritual order by the 10<sup>th</sup> king of Mayong, Xarassa Chandra Singha, at the turn of the seventeenth century. Ethnographic focus will primarily attend to the interpretation of myths surrounding the founding of the kingdom and the deification rites of kingship and its related tutelary deity worship. Drawing on Valeri ([1990] 2014; cf. Sahlins and Graeber

forthcoming), we will frame the ritual reenactment of the annual ritual apotheosis of the Mayong king(s), or the *Goxai Uliuwa Mela* and *Gor Bhangra Utsav*, as a “paradigmatic history.”<sup>1</sup> The ceremonial, it will be shown, is a variation on the Hocartian “installation” or “coronation” rite in that it restores the kingship into its necessary role of sacrificial patronship, unification, and the embodied concentration and dispersal of forces of life—but it does so by troping on the oppositional contrasts contained in the foundational myths. It follows that this mode of historical imagination, mobilized with respect to the kingship, is primarily analogic rather than sequential, with all the necessary features of this kind of thinking entailed therein. However, being an “annual rite” it must also be read in terms of the “syntagmatic history” (ibid.) unfolding through present memory and everyday politics, where political events qua events have revalued (and continue to revalue) the significance of kingship. As “Tribes” and “tribal councils” become the modern royal road to political autonomy in contemporary Assam—being sanctioned and recognized by the state as bearers of legitimate political authority—the Mayong kingship has adapted to this by re-presenting itself as “tribal” or by making what I call “*taibol* thinking” the key feature of its revised political charter.

What I ultimately argue is that this contemporary political domain, driven by living memory and sequence, ends up being “mythopoeic” in both form and content. Both tribes and kings can and should be read as “state effects” (Scott 2009) in the present moment, but their significance is nevertheless recaptured by the paradigmatic mythemes that provide a template for how the Mayongian king relates to “his people”—in this case, the *raij*-as-tribe being the “active” principle and the king being the “passive” one. Yet, because myth cannot sufficiently control the

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<sup>1</sup> As the term suggests, Valeri’s structural theory of history owes a conceptual debt to both Jakobson and Saussure. In Jakobson’s terms, the “paradigmatic” element of history would be the “axis of selection” whereby, for example, a god or an original king are substituted in the present by a new king. The “syntagmatic” element of history would be the unfolding of events in sequence (often on the basis of existing memory), or the “axis of combination.”

implications of events in syntagmatic history, irreducible surfeits emerge and both the king and his people search for some kind of quiescence in the stability of a divine order. Ultimately, politics in Mayong plays out mythopoeically in the present moment even as it negates previous mythopoeic orders. This, I suggest, is more or less the same kind of “negative dialectic” or “*goroka* dynamism” at play in the shared account: history doesn’t repeat itself, but because it does rhyme it concretizes the poetic function of wonder that carries Mayongian politics into further transformations of mythic themes.

### **When was Mayong?**

In a very general sense, this dissertation is about how a people locate themselves in time and space, and via an antimony between the constitutive and destitutive features of their ritual and political lives. The majority of the dissertation focuses on how this locative aspiration plays out through the mediations of an emergent semiotic institution. Yet, this institution—what I refer to as the shared account—must reckon with a murky past referenced only by patchy details found in ritual and oral history, or in the footnotes of historical tomes. It also must reckon with a chain of national and regional events, from the mid-twentieth century to the present, which have reframed the legitimate terms through which political belonging and political subjectivity can manifest. In this situation, the movement of the loom pedals of history weave together a perpetually unfinished and awkwardly shaped tapestry that draws heavily upon the patterns found in myth. Without a recorded past that can defend itself on its own terms, Mayongians reckon their present political situation via rituals and narratives that inevitably go against the grain of prevailing political sense in Northeast India. To state it much more simply, Mayong seems to have always been a sort of political backwater—an exception constituted by its political

surroundings yet never really fitting the scene of the prevailing order. Yet, in myth, Mayong pulsates as a center of the universe and looks more like an exception that proves a rule.

*A Brief Sketch of “Durable Disorder”*

Before moving forward, we need to zoom out and then zoom back in on the prevailing political situation. To begin, let’s consider the awkward political entity, a colonial invention, now known as “Northeast India.” Aside from three major valleys (the Brahmaputra, the Barak, and Imphal), “Northeast India” is largely mountainous and comprises the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.<sup>2</sup> Both Tripura and Manipur were officially recognized as “princely states” by the British Raj and were “annexed” as part of the empire, the former in 1809 and the latter in 1891. Arunachal Pradesh, a Himalayan state formerly known the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), was created as a quasi-autonomous and administrative “buffer zone” due to its contiguity with Tibet/China, and its policies were drafted largely on the basis of the anthropological guidance of Verrier Elwin (see, esp., Elwin 1959). The remaining states were part of what is often called “Undivided Assam” in the post-colonial literature. “Assam” was annexed by the British Empire in 1826 after the Anglo-Burmese war and the Moamoria Rebellion (1769-1806),<sup>3</sup> both of which crippled the Ahom Kingdom,

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<sup>2</sup> Sikkim, which is not contiguous with the other seven states, was included “administratively” as part of Northeast India in 2002 by becoming a member of the “North East Council,” which coordinates regional development programs via India’s central government.

<sup>3</sup> The “Moamoria Rebellion” was a decades-long crisis between rebels aligned with independent Vaishnavite monasteries (*sattra*, *xotra*) who followed the *Eksarana* or *Mahapuruxiya* religion of Srimonto Xonkardeu (Srimanta Shankardeva) on one side and the Ahom Kings on the other. The rise of the independent monasteries, with their strong adherence to universalizing *bhakti* devotion, created a labor and military shortage for the Ahoms and conflicted with the latter’s emphasis on Shaivite and Shakta cults. Led by guerilla warfare of the Moran, who were by-and-large ethnically Chutiya (Sutea), the rebellion spread throughout the Assam leading to a complete sapping of *paik* (corvée) troops and laborers. For a brief period, the Moran managed to topple the Ahom Raja. With the help of Captain Thomas Walsh of the British Bengal Army (and a failed alliance with the Manipur Raja), the Ahoms were finally able to replace their lost soldiers and laborers and end the rebellion. But, by that time the damage was done. The Burmese king took this opportunity to wage war throughout the Brahmaputra Valley and the Naga Hills. With the *paik* system virtually destroyed, the Ahom Raja had to once again depend on the assistance of the British-led Bengal army (see Guha 1991; Baruah 1993).

which slowly from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century onwards had come to control almost the entirety of the Brahmaputra Valley east of Goalpara. During the British Raj, these areas were first administered as part of Bengal until 1874 when it became the “North-East Frontier Province” and in 1905 part of Eastern Bengal & Assam. A few years later in 1912, Assam became its own singular entity administered from the hill station of Shillong (in what is now Meghalaya).

The British interest in the region was late-coming for the empire and driven mostly by the “introduction” of the *assamica* tea variety of *Camellia sinensis* to Scottish adventurer and entrepreneur Robert Bruce by a Singpho (Jinghpaw) chief named Bessa Gam in 1823 (MacFarlane and MacFarlane 2009; Sharma 2011). This followed with the establishing of tea gardens throughout submontane areas of the valley. Plantation laborers were brought into Assam from tribal communities in what is now West Bengal, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. The plantation economy, in turn, created a situation wherein the British began marking off non-administered areas of the highlands by creating policed “inner lines,” ostensibly to prevent “raids” from highlander parties encroaching onto the plantations in the valley (see Guha 1977, 1991). All the while, they prevented ownership of tea gardens by any “indigenous” landed gentry, a policy that has continued de facto until the present moment (Sharma 2011).<sup>4</sup> The exigencies of the “Planter Raj,” coupled by an ethnographically informed administration, made sharp divisions between the cultural, political, and economic character of highland communities and those living in the valleys, veritably erasing centuries of complex relations between them (Chatterjee 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> A few “inner lines” that police movement in and out of quasi-restricted areas, meanwhile, have continued to function de jure at the behest of the Indian government. In 2009, unrestricted access to Nagaland was allowed for both Indian citizens and visa-holding foreigners, but Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and parts of Sikkim have retained their inner line policies.

Beyond colonial effects, the “mountain-valley” distinction in the region is often considered to have a political ecology more in line with Southeast Asia than South Asia. Although there are many resonances with Indo-Gangetic civilization, the area that concerns us is a part of what is sometimes called “Zomia”—the large Southeast Asian massif of highland societies that James Scott (2009; cf. van Schendel 2002) among others, thinks to be historically anti-statist: a region of anarchism, in other words. While this might be a gross oversimplification, the dynamic political ecology between highlands and lowlands in the region is not to be ignored (see Burling 1967; Karlsson 2011; Ramirez 2014). Colonial policies intensified what was already a political and economic theme for the valley kingdoms and chiefdoms preceding the British Raj: the hills were difficult to administer and were flooded with chieftanships of various sizes and alliances. Today, the movement of people between the highlands and the plains is dramatized in myth, concretized in various rituals and ritual appurtenances, and a sense of cultural distance has become regimented into one where “tribes” are rooted in the hills and “caste Hindus” are rooted in the plains. [Of course, this does not reflect reality, but it creates the staging for various political issues that plague, especially, the Brahmaputra Valley. We shall return to this below.]

Now to the specific political entity of Assam. In the first decade after India’s partition in 1947, new “federated” states began to break off from “Undivided Assam” between the 1960s and 1980s (Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram), due in large part to linguistic nationalisms, self-determination movements, the continuation of “inner line” policies that had separated plains people from highland people, and bureaucratic problems with a distant, centralized administration. Language, here, was a crucial problem—and remains a heated matter in the Brahmaputra Valley. With a current population of around 32 million, Assam has at least 58 recognized “living indigenous languages” (a disputed statistic, without a doubt, but a pointed one).

It has around 150 “officially” recognized “indigenous ethnic groups”—an even more disputed statistic, but not without good reason. Since the 1950s, Assam has been beleaguered by ethno-nationalist violence; in the Brahmaputra Valley it was first spearheaded by the Assam Movement (1979-1985), which was largely a reaction against the growing dominance of Hindi and Bengali speaking dominance in the region. The movement reached its height and followed into the 1990s with the rise of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which sought to make Assam a sovereign nation-state. Concomitant with ULFA, dozens of “tribal” liberation movements seeking their own degrees of political autonomy flourished as well. Today, new “tribes” claiming competing versions of indigenous sovereignty and political autonomy form by segmenting off from existing ethnic groups almost each year, fueled in part by the affordances provided by Schedules 5 and 6 of the Indian Constitution; the former grants “reservations” for public education and officer posts (a kind of affirmative action) and the latter grants territorial autonomy for political and economic administration.

The multiple and overlapping struggles for ethnic sovereignty here and in surrounding states, have led political scientist Sanjib Baruah (1999, 2005) to diagnose the region as suffering from “durable disorder.” By this, Baruah means a historically specific, yet enduring crisis: (1) local militias and the Indian paramilitary function as omnipresent security forces with a great deal of legal impunity, (2) *bandhs* (shutdowns of markets and services) occur at least 3 - 4 times per week, often in conjunction with bombings, kidnappings, or publicized killings; (3) general livelihood and collective prosperity are increasingly a function of access to black markets and other informal networks, part of a larger phenomenon of advanced economic decay; and (4) in the historical wake of carving up Assam first into federated states (as shown before) and now into smaller and smaller autonomous districts, the horizons of where a particular community might live and

prosper are increasingly uncertain. As the Assamese novelist Aruni Kashyap frames it, “the thirty-something generation in Assam have lived their entire lives against a backdrop of state-oppression, insurgency, and decay; with violence accepted as the norm, they have no nostalgic memories to cherish.”<sup>5</sup>

All this may seem a hyperbole, but politics as hyperbole—just like politics as myth—is grist for the mill for Mayongians as much as for most communities in the region. Decolonization did not go well for Northeast India, and if “post-colonialism” means anything to people across the region, it is more a farce than a tragedy. My friends and informants make it quite clear that they desire something radically different: a form of life that is non-violent, where myriad ethnic groups can live together with mutual understanding and care despite their entrenched differences. They seek out these possibilities not simply in anti-statist politics, but in everyday interactions, “institutions” like the shared account, common hospitality, etc....often with the explicit hope that a “durable order”—a *notun jogot* (“new world”), in their words—is something their children and grandchildren will *actually* experience.

All this is part of the cosmographic situation behind the Mayongian shared account. But it is too general and too sweeping to pinpoint the problems of politics and history for Mayongians especially. Mayong has its own provincial situation in which this larger picture of “durable disorder” has played out. I would contend that this situation is largely one of a temporal dilemma rather than one that needs to locate Mayong only within national and geopolitical space. The temporal dilemma, which frustrates Mayongians to no end, is not *where they are* in the universe (that is, at least, comfortably known), but *when they were* and *whence they have come*.

### *Historia in Absentia*

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<sup>5</sup> <http://arunikashyap.com/q-and-a-with-the-author-aruni-kashyap/>

“Medieval” and “early modern” records in Assam—from various regional *buranji* (literally “stores that teach the ignorant,” i.e., historical chronicles composed by the courts of the Ahom, Kachari, Jaintiya, Koch, and other kingdoms) to the *Yogini Tantra* (a religious text centered on the Shakta “goddess cults” of the region, composed in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century), and from first-hand reports of the region by travelers, pilgrims, or armies (e.g., the 17<sup>th</sup> Century *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*) to hagiographies of Vaishnavite saints—are, occasional footnotes or passing references aside, rather silent about the Mayong kingdom. Colonial-era records seem to have followed suit. Despite the fact that General Butler’s 1845 map (see Map 3, Introduction), which established the borders of Nowgong (Nagoan) District, shows “Desh Myung” to be an expansive kingdom, more “considerable” (see Pollack 1879: 100) than the Dimoria Kingdom south of the Kolong River, and despite the fact that, together with Jagi, it had a population of 70,680 in 1855 (Assam Mission Papers 1855: 72), one can count on two hands the entirety of colonial-era references to the Mayong kingdom.

The few archival references are, in the *goroka* model of historiography, hint at a pattern for how Mayongians conceive of and ritually or politically enact their provenance. The hints, the minor yet evocative details of archival sources, I have included in bold below.

In Captain Thomas Welsh’s correspondences to the British crown (1790s), Mayong was listed in his attached ledgers as one of the “districts” that, at the behest of the Ahom king, would have to pay fees to offset the costs of the crown’s military detachment in the region. Mayong and Panbari were listed together as “Mayan and Panari,” paying only a total of 400 rupees between the two of them. The remaining “districts” owed anywhere between 2,000 and 80,000 rupees

(Bhuyan 1949: 362; cf. Robinson 1975).<sup>6</sup> Given that colonial account ledgers were often meticulous in terms of taxation and collection, this suggests that Mayong **did not have sufficient resources**, in cash or kind, to support any significant amount of provisions for the British troops.

In S. K. Bhuyan's PhD thesis, Mayong is listed as one of the many "vassal states" that the British encountered when attempting to map out the general administration of the Ahom Kingdom in the last two decades of the eighteenth century:

The province of Darrang enjoyed complete autonomy in its internal administration, as well as the other vassal states, Rani, Beltola, Luki, Barduar, Bholagaon, Mairapur, Pantan, Bangaon, Bagaduar, Dimarua, Neli, Gobha, Sahari, Dandua, Barepujia, Topakuchia, Khaiharia, Panbari, Sora, Mayang, Dhing, Tetelia, Salmara, Garakhia, Baghargaon and Bhurbandha. Each state was ruled by a vassal chief who was bound to furnish a stipulated number of *paiks* to work on the [Ahom] king's account, or pay the commutation money if exemption from personal service was granted. In case of war the vassal Raja was expected to take the field at the head of his contingent of *paiks* by the side of his liegelord. (Bhuyan 1949: 9–10)

Like others following him, Bhuyan also identifies the Mayong kingdom as one of the "chiefly" principalities near Guwahati whose "kings"—listed in groups of **five (*paso roja*)** and **seven (*sato roja*)**—were reduced to the role of *mouzadar* or *zamindar* by the last decade of the eighteenth century (ibid.: 331). Even though Bhuyan uses the, rather unfortunate, term of a "vassal state" to describe these kingdoms, it is clear from his account and others that Mayong held a degree of **independence and autonomy** as to the matter of its own administration—even the capability to wage war (see Appendix, entry for Xarassa Chandra Singha in the Mayong Buranji).

A decade later, the first edition of John Peter Wade's *An Account of Assam* (1800: v)<sup>7</sup> lists the "Maccongh Rajah" as one of the "nine petty rajahs of Nohdooria" (i.e., one of the nine

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<sup>6</sup> Only two other "districts," a place called "Dooria" ("Duaria," maybe a *duar*) and another named Chaunadiriya ("Sonadiriya"[?]), were taxed at a rate of Rs. 400, each. But Mayong and Panbari had the lowest rate at what can most likely be assumed to be Rs. 200 each.

<sup>7</sup> Wade was a doctor in the Bengal Medical Service (1762–1802) who was commissioned to take note of his travels through west and central Assam.

“*duar* kings” who exercised control over the passages between the hills and the plains or along the tributaries of the Brahmaputra). According to Wade, these “rajahs” were responsible for legally administrating the areas of the Ahom Kingdom at the **intersections of various trading routes**. The second impression of Wade’s account, printed seven years later, “corrected” this reference of “Maccongh” to “Mayung or Maeyong Rajah.” And the 1927 version of Wade’s account, edited by Srijut Benudhar Sharma, finalizes the edit to “Mayang.”

Between 1807 and 1814, Francis (Buchanan) Hamilton compiled material from many petty British officers working along the Bengal/Assam “border” as well as from “Assamese fugitives in Bengal and Bengali visitors to Assam” (1963: x). Drawing upon Wade’s material as well, Hamilton tried to synthesize the various accounts of Assam into more concrete and detailed descriptions of the administrative system of the Ahoms and their relationship with the highlands.

In his *An Account of Assam* (1963: 32–33) he writes the following:

The best informed persons, whom I consulted, knew nothing specific concerning the Rajas of Myungh, Koleetah, Borutteah, Ogooreah, or Goorookeah, whom Mr. Wood found on the island which lies between the Brahmaputra and Kolong river. The two first are said to be very petty chiefs who live south from Gohati,<sup>8</sup> and possess a village each. It is probably that the others are persons of a similar description, who in the confusion of the times had assumed some degree of consequence, and usurped a power to which they were not entitled, and which was instantly dissolved by the vigour of the Bura Gohaing.<sup>9</sup>

We might adopt a critical pause to Hamilton’s conjecture that the “times were confused” and that petty Rajas may have “assumed” and “usurped” a territory and position of power without any

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<sup>8</sup> The reference to being “south from Gohati (Guwahati)” is an intriguing one, for it suggests that Mayong may have been considered, at this point, to be a dependent or subordinate kingdom to either Beltola, Rani, or Borduar—noting that, at that time, Guwahati did not have the eastern reach it does now. Anything “south” would have pertained to the Southern Duars west of the Kolong river, and even further than that. In this hypothesis, it would have made Mayong subordinate to the Koch kings (Beltola) or to one of the *duar roja* who patronized the religious cults and trading zones at the foothills of what is now Meghalaya (see Ramirez 2014). For my part, I think Hamilton was relying on bad information, or at least controversial information where Mayongian sovereignty was being claimed by a competing *puwali roja*.

<sup>9</sup> Here is a bureaucratic assumption on Hamilton’s part that the Ahom administrator in Guwahati, the *Borgohain*, had real control over the interstitial kingdoms of Central Assam.

entitlement. Misrecognition of Indic political authority and pageantry on the part of the British Raj are, of course, legion (Cohn 1996). When it comes to speculation on the Mayong kingdom, as we will see in the mythic accounts below, questions of usurpation, propriety, and entitlement take a back seat to more predominant mythemes of alliance, gifts of civilization, and divine patronage. But Hamilton’s assumption indexes another hint for *goroka* historiography, which is that Mayong was, in fact, *not a feudatory outpost* for either the Ahom or Koch kingdoms—in other words, it was not established or conquered or absorbed into the great kingdoms of the valley. In Oxomiya, it was **neither *Ahomparia* nor *Kochparia*** (Ali 2005: 7; Deka 2009: 29).

By the 1830s, Mayong was merely an administrative dot on the imperial map, a poor *mouza* backwater that the Raj—which was now colonizing and reconstructing the political landscape—paid little attention to, except for the capturing of revenue.<sup>10</sup> According to the “revised” dating system of the Mayong Buranji (see second table in the Appendix) between 1855 and 1875, Mayong was **hijacked of its *mouzadar-ship*** and no longer reaped any of the benefits from the colonial government. This was most likely a penalty inflicted by the British Raj in the aftermath of the “Phulaguri Peasant Uprising” that occurred in Nowgong District in 1861, in which the Mayong King, as one of the *sato roja* (“seven kings”) of the interstitial zones between Guwahati and Nowgong, the Brahmaputra and the Southern Duars (Rani, Beltola, Dimoria,

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<sup>10</sup> The relation between Mayong (as a *mouza*) and the British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century would be of particular interest to scholars of colonial Assam. Should an archive be located, we would have an opportunity to see how the exchange of recognition—especially in terms of honor and honors (Cohn 2013)—played out between a backwater *raja* and a District Officer. The same would apply for British interactions with any of the minor kingdoms, but as far as available documents at the Assam State Archives reveal, the “district-ification” of central Assam between Kamrup and Nowgong suggests that British interactions with the minor kings of Central Assam between 1830 and 1860 were mediated by administrators of the former Ahom Kingdom. In the Mayong Buranji it is mentioned that 25% of total annual revenue (presumably from wet-rice production) was to be paid in tax to the Raj’s District Headquarters in Nagaon (Nowgong) Town, and that the Mayong king was allowed a portion of that revenue as his own royal allowance. The Oxomiya text refers to this allowance as *dana-munoni*, i.e. “Payment of *Dān*”; I am fairly certain this term does not carry the sense of caste-based pollution transfer that it does in North India (see Parry 1986; Raheja 1988); it refers most likely to an “offering” of honor given the term’s use as form of payment for sorcery services (see Chapter 2).

Barduar, Roha), took part in (cf. Pathak 2014: 211; S. K. Goswami 1986).<sup>11</sup> Several British officers were killed during this uprising, which was in response to a threatened increase in tax on areca nuts and betel vine as well as a prohibition against opium cultivation. According to the Mayong Buranji, after the rebellion was squashed, some comprador official (*mohori*) aided the British in transferring the Mayong *mouzadar* to a satellite kingdom of Mayong known as Bothora. Aside from occasional legal matters concerning land transfer, Mayong fell off the imperial map until the turn of the twentieth century (when it was then being referred to as a famous site of sorcery and witchcraft, see Chapter 2). But for 30 years or so, except for a few minor reports here and there, especially in reference to the *kala-azar* (“black water fever”) plague (see Kar 2003), Mayong’s colonial destiny was to be ultimately nothing more than a backwater kingdom with a “petty chief.”<sup>12</sup>

What to make of this relative absence from written historical records? On one hand, I would be the first to admit that absence of historical evidence is not evidence of historical absence. The Nowgong District archives (*Mahapesh Khana*) in Nagoan town might ultimately unveil an entire new archive of colonial sources for one to do a history of Mayong in a more detailed, if still “minor note.” Moreover, various *buranji* manuscripts are still being translated and collected across middle Assam. On the other hand, I think the absence serves a functional purpose in the present. From the 1980s to the present, the proliferation of references to Mayong in local literature exploded. Various publications made on the part of “ethnic” or “political”

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<sup>11</sup> B. B. Hazarika (1987: 385), drawing on a November 22, 1976 news story from *Dainik Asam*, makes a rather careless, but nevertheless understandable (given the ethnopolitical climate of the late seventies) claim that the “Pancha Raja (5 kings)” and “Sata Raja (7 kings)” of the *Lalungs* (= Tiwa Tribe) played the prominent role in the uprising. He follows by listing these Sata Raja as “Mayang, Kumai, Baghara, Kalabari, Ghagua, Teteliya, and Gokhanagug.” The labeling of the Mayong king as a king of the Lalung Tribe is sloppy historiography, but nevertheless reveals that an absence of historical details about the interstitial kings allows for an interpretive license that can play easily into ethnopolitical claims.

<sup>12</sup> The Mayong *buranji* confirms several massive outbreaks of disease (often referred to as “cholera”) decimated the population in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

groups aligned with the Koch, Tiwa/Lalung, Karbi, Dimasa Kachari, Bengali, Bodo, and other communities (see, e.g., note 11, this chapter) consistently make claims to Mayong as part of their “Tribal” constitution. Connections made to sorcery and magic, territory, kingship, kinship, the ubiquitous proliferation of the kingdoms allied into groups of 5 and 7 (a duodecimal reckoning which is replicated throughout the region), and even the name of Mayong itself (which local etymologists propose has at least 9 possible interpretations [see Hazarika 2011: Chapter 2]), all become focal points for linking the place to a specific people.

Mayongians, however, latch on to the several specifics I highlighted in bold above. For them, the patchwork archival record of Mayong has two major affordances: (1) it creates “hooks” on which to pin the beginning of a historical narrative, and (2) it creates a degree of freedom from history itself, opening up the interpretive possibilities of whence and wither Mayong. The hooks, as we will see, are crucial particulars that when read alongside myth create a picture of Mayong as independent, autonomous, and impoverished kingdom which was, however, linked to vital trading routes, allied to other smaller kingdoms, and not beholden to heavy taxation from the British, Ahom, or Koch Raj. On top of that, independence is underscored by being neither Ahomparia or Kochparia, nor locked into an administrative connection with the British. In terms of political and economic history, the template is wide open for how Mayong is to determine itself in the present moment. For now, we move from this question of absent records of “official” history to subaltern narratives and texts that speak to the composition of Mayong as a kingdom.

### **Foundational Narratives**

#### *Water Princesses and Stranger Kings*

Medieval sovereignty is a big deal in contemporary Assam. Ethnonationalist groups have drawn upon its historiography to justify not only claims of indigeneity and autonomy, but also as political models for how to manage “ethnic difference” and the “caste-tribal” spectrum in Assam (see Chapter 3 on the patronly tactics of ULFA). For all intents and purposes, history doesn’t *really* begin until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century for many people in Assam. This was the period of the rise of Sankardeva’s (*Xonkordeu*’s) school of Vaishnavism, the consolidation and expansion of the Ahom Kingdom in the Eastern part of Assam (and the beginning of its “Hinduization”), the retreat of the Kachari and Jaintiya Kings into the periphery, and the rise of the Koch (Hajo) Kingdom in the West. In between the Ahom and Koch Kingdoms were dozens of minor principalities that the Mayongian literature refers to as *puwali rajjyo* or “baby kingdoms” (Kalita 1992; Deka 2009; cf. Ramirez 2014). The baby kings or “kings of the borderlands” (*datiyalayar roja; duar roja*), as they are sometimes referred to in regional chronicles (*buranji*),<sup>13</sup> were by-and-large *not* kings established by the Koch or Ahom kingdoms as vassal lords. They were neither “feudatories” (*samanta raja*) in the Indic sense nor were they resultant from the creation of “inner frontiers” in Owen Lattimore’s (1940) sense. Rather, they were founded by wayward nobles from the Kachari and Jaintiya kingdoms or by upstart chiefs connected to highland communities (who now identify by the ethnonyms Garo, Khasi, Karbi, Tiwa, etc.). Sometimes independent, sometimes at war with each other, sometimes allied, and sometimes having claims of sovereignty over each other—they all seemed to have emerged in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries from the breakup of previous political entities.

In the historical literature, Mayong switches from being a *baby kingdom* to a *duar kingdom*, but because it only had sovereignty over riparian passages (the Kolong and Sonai

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<sup>13</sup> See, esp., the *Deodhai Asam Buranji* (Bhuyan 1962).

rivers) rather than being submontane “gateways” between the vast highlands and the plains, it makes more sense that it would be classified as a *baby kingdom*. Indeed, this is how oral history in Mayong refers to itself. Now, as I mentioned earlier, this area on the Southern side of the Brahmaputra—which encompasses huge swaths of what are now Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup Metro, Hojai, Karbi Anglong East, and Karbi Anglong West Districts—was flooded with kingdoms, usually grouped into allied collectives of 5 and 7. In terms of cosmic arithmetic, the duodecimal reckoning is sufficient as a short hand that accounts everything that is in the universe. In reality, there were probably between 100-200 kingdoms in the entire area—each significant village cluster having its own Roja (Rajā) or Chieftan.

It would be shortsighted to assume that this “land of the rajas”—as the area is often called in local publications (see, e.g., Burha Gohain 1994)—was a kind of “buffer zone” that acted solely as mediators between the more powerful Ahom and Koch kingdoms (cf. Sinha 1987; Roy Burman 1994). Although these baby and borderland kings did seek protection from the larger states, and although the larger states also made claims of sovereignty over these smaller kingdoms, these kings held a degree of independency and interconnectedness that never quite made them pure “satellites” in the sense of Tambiah’s galactic polity. Below, I will refer to them collectively as a kind of “liminal state” in both geographical and ritual senses—and propose a way to understand the term “*puwali*” in a more structurally consistent way with the Mayongian ritual order. For now, I turn to the foundation myths of the Mayong kingdom. To start, we must note that the majority of baby and borderland kings trace their lineal origins to a wandering prince, chief, or celestial agent—a classic Sahlinsian “stranger king” (Sahlins 1981b, 2008, 2014b). The key to their sovereign orders is one of maintaining links beyond the kingdom they govern, only being “partially” domesticated into the local order. The local order—i.e., the

indigenous people—are, paradoxically, both the source and the recipient of the stranger king’s power.

In Mayong, this dynamic between the foreign sovereign and the local people is filled with oppositional contrasts that shift over the sequential unfolding of syntagmatic history. But before we get to that, we need to locate the basic mytheme, forgiving minor differences, that the origins of these kingdoms share. The condensed version is the following:

*A tribal chief or “prince” comes out of the hills (or ascends into the hills), marries a princess born from water (rivers or ponds), adopts the princess’ lineage as his own (or establishes a particular line of descent with respect to the princess’ lineage), civilizes or unifies a fragmented community, and then establishes a new kingdom that attenuates its order among neighboring political communities.*

Consider the following origin myths of the Gobha Raja (the king of the *Gobha Duar* at what is now Jagiroad, and who is now called the “King of the Tiwa-Lalung People”):

When Tiwas came down from the hills they had no kings. They called upon Mahadev [=Shiva?]. Mahadev came and met Parvati on his way, so that his semen fell into a pond. A *mali* fish swallowed it. Out of its womb, a baby girl was born, Gobha Hari Kunwari [chief princess], the ancestor of Gobha’s royal lineage....

While hunting, Langbor [a wandering hero] finds the daughter of Jaintia *raja* bathing in a tank. They fall in love. The *raja* hears about it, has Langbor arrested and condemned to death. The princess and her mother faint and all women become deeply affected. Thus, the king changes his mind and decides to marry Langbor to his daughter, to have him made a general and to hand over to him the northern part of his territory [i.e. *Gobha*, the foothills on the Assamese side]. (Ramirez 2014: 144–45; cf. Gogoi 1986)

Further west, the kingdom of Rani (another *duar* kingdom) has the following as its origin myth:

The genealogy of Rani, another submontane principality, stems down from Bhagadatta, the first ruler of Kamrup, established by Krishna himself. One of his descendants set up his capital west of Pragjyotishpur (Guwahati). One day the city was flooded. From the water sprang three sistersL Dharmayanti “submits the Garo” and settles in Rani. Her daughter’s son would become the first Rani *raja*. Ayanti, the second sister, settles in Barduar, the next *duar* (gate) to the west. The third sister, Jayanti, goes to the east and founds, as her name suggests, the Jaintia kingdom. (Ramirez 2014: 147)

The Jaintia (Jayantia) Kingdom, which was not a *puwali* or *duar* kingdom, also has the following two versions of its origin myth that resonate with the Gobha and Rani narratives:

The first version describes Jayantapur's royal lineage as spreading out from a Brahman dynasty with its origins in the *Mahabharata*. The king finds himself childless. The Goddess offers to bring forth a girl, who will be his heir. Some years later, the royal princess, Jayanti, is married to Landabar, the son of the royal priest (*raj purohit*).

The outrageous behaviour of Landabar towards both his wife and the Goddess causes him to be expelled from the capital. He is then adopted as a son by a "Garo" named Suttanga....Landabar shifts from one world to another, i.e. from the (civilised) plains to the (wild) hills....

The second version starts at this point, with the hero being merely qualified as a "Garo bachelor of Nartiang." Nartiang is situated in the heart of the hills. Until the nineteenth century it was alternatively an autonomous principality and the Jaintias' summer capital. Its Devi sanctuary was of major importance to all the communities on the eastern Meghalaya plateau. The following events are almost the same in both versions: a fish-girl, Matsyodari, is captured by the Garo bachelor. She reveals her divine origin and becomes his mate. In the first version, Jayanti deplures having expelled her husband. The Goddess consoles her by sending a shadow in the water during Jayanti's menstruation. It is this shadow that enters the womb of a *barali* fish (freshwater shark, *Wallago attu*) to give birth to Matsyodari. Matsyodari predicts that wealth will come for the bachelor and that he will no longer need to work in the fields. They conceive a son, Borgohain, endowed with skills and fortune.

Borgohain becomes the head of the group of Garo villages which clashes with the neighbouring Jayantiya kingdom. Borgohain is summoned by Jayanti, who reveals that he is the son of her own sister. She asks him to become the new *raja*, while she herself disappears to be worshipped as a goddess, Jayanti Devi, who is actually the dynasty's tutelary deity. (ibid.: 149–51)

For these kingdoms, the establishing of matrilineal descent is crucial to deciphering the origins of the sovereign, and we will return to this matter below. There are also more myths relating to the founding of these kingdoms, and they usually turn on an idiom of "three-part" or "four-part" sibblingship. I will attend to these—and to the Mayongian resonances—in a future paper. For now, though, I wish to highlight the common theme of the wandering prince/hero/celestial agent and the water-borne princess and why this matters for the origin myths of the Mayongian kingdom. I would like to begin with non-official narratives and then move back into the "official" ones. The following "non-official" version of the Mayong kingdom's origin myth was narrated me by the current Karbi *bor bangthai* (senior chief), Jadab Teron:

Mayong was founded, as you know, by Suinat Singha. He was a Kachari prince...meaning of the Dimasa tribe. He deserted his people in Maibong [second capital of the Kachari Kingdom, in what is now the N. C. Hills or Dima Hasao District] during a time of war and corruption. He fought well but could not win against the more powerful kings, so he and his troops wandered this way and that until he arrived at the Mayong hills. There he met a king named Joy Singha. He was a Karbi chief (*bangthai*)...people say he was a Koch king, but there is no proof of that. We [Karbi] understand that he was our ancestor, that's why we call his place in the hills "*bangthai bheti*" ("place of the chief"). Joy Singha worshipped [the goddess] Kamakhaya, who lives in these hills, at that place. He had no sons, but he had a daughter named Phuleswari....The names are very important! My father explained it to me so I will explain to you. Joy Singha had some other Karbi name, but he was remembered for being victorious in battle, so his name meant that he was a "war chief" (*juddhor bangthai*). His daughter was born from the Luit [Brahmaputra] and Kamakhaya, and some old manuscripts written in Bengali say that the Kolong River was once called "Phuleswari." We do not know the original name in the Karbi language, but Phuleswari means a river. She was given to Joy Singha as his own daughter. Our people tell the story that Suinat Singha fell in love with Phuleswari when he saw her emerging from the water. She was beautiful, like a lotus....Now, some agreement was made and Joy Singha allowed Suinat Singha to marry Phuleswari as long as he became a "house husband" [*ghor juwai*; i.e., that he took uxorial residence]. This turned Suinat Singha from a prince fighting wars for his brother to a peaceful leader and father of a new people. Then, because Mahapuruxiya religion [i.e., Shankardeva's *bhakti* Vaishnavism] was becoming popular, Suinat Singha left the hills and Burha Mayong, which used to be called Borgaon ("big village") and took *xoron* [i.e., converted to a Vaishnavite sect] in the plains. He moved his house to Roja Mayong, which used to be called Deka Mayong ("little Mayong" or "Koch Mayong"). He and his children stayed there, but he remained a part of the house of Joy Singha and promised to be a brother to all Karbi people who remained here. Should any ancestor of his refuse to do so, seven generations would be condemned to hell (*norok*). The Karbi people would become his army and he would become their peaceful leader, a man of Krishna, who by marriage would still be devoted to our goddess.

Here, is another "non-official" version of the origin myth as told to me by a Koch elder from Hatimuria village who traces his lineage to one of the children of Suinat Singha (see more on this below):

Joy Singha was the Koch king of Topakuchi who descended from the fish-king Arimatta [see Chapter 4]. Arimatta's father was the Luit River [Brahmaputra]. Joy Singha had no sons, but he ruled over seven kingdoms: Mayong, Tetelia, Toroni Kalbari, Sukhunagong, Ghagua, Kumoi, and Baghora. When Suinat Singha arrived from Maibong enduring the march of war, Joy Singha was praying for a son to be born on the river bank. The mother goddess did not give him a son, but produced a daughter for her from the river. Joy Singha brought her to land with his fishing net and named her Phuleswari. The goddess instructed him that Phuleswari's youngest son would become a great king loved by all, but that she must marry an immigrant to make this happen. So, when Joy Singha went

hunting and found the Kachari prince Suinat Singha camping in the hills near his Kamakhya *than*, and teaching the people there many things, he believed it was a sign from heaven. He gave Phuleswari to him and Suinat Singha joined Joy Singha's house. Suinat Singha became Koch after that when he took *xoron*.

Both of these versions of the Mayong kingdom's origin myth have an obvious "ethnic" bias concerning who the indigenous people were (Koch or Karbi) Though both agree that Suinat Singha was a wandering Kachari (Dimasa) prince from Maibong who married a water-borne princess named Phuleswari—the daughter of a local chief named Joy Singha—and eventually became "Koch" by taking *xoron*. As mentioned in the introduction, "taking *xoron*" means being inducted into a Vaishnavite order. In pre-colonial central Assam, this also meant "becoming Koch," thus converting to a new "ethnicity" (see Chapter 4). The Koch people in Mayong all admit that prior to becoming Koch, their ancestors belonged to various tribes (Kachari, Karbi/Mikir, Tiwa-Lalung, etc.). We must, then, understand that by taking *xoron*, Suinat Singha was not abandoning his Kachari princely heritage to join with the "Koch Kingdom," but was becoming a Vaishnavite and, therefore, a new person—no sovereign allegiances are implied. The story of Suinat Singha (or his children) "becoming Koch" is vital to the overall narrative of the Mayong kingdom and we will return to it below. For now, I would like to linger on the question of the alliance with the indigenous chief via marriage to his "water-born" daughter.

The "official" narrative of the origins of the Mayong kingdom derives from oral history and scattered *xasipat* manuscripts that were codified into a formal *buranji* in 1938 by officers in the court of the 37<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong, Baneswar Singha. Our translation, which can also be found in the Appendix, describes the founding of the kingdom as follows:

The youngest brother of [Kachari Raja] Shatrudaman came to Mayong and became the king. But his ancestors ruled this place even before the kings of Dimapur, or even before Narakasur [the mythical king of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa]. After his family had ruled for a long time, and after getting defeated by the Ahoms and some others rulers, Suinat Singha fled from Maibong and sought refuge in a hilly plateau [*bangthai bheti*] at Mayong [ca. 1526 AD]. But due to some unfavorable circumstances in the hills, he

decided to come down to the plains and started living in Mayong. The area of the hills came to be known as Burha Mayong for the king first came and stayed here; the area in the plains where he stayed came to be known as Deka Mayong [later, Roja Mayong] for he settled at this place after leaving Burha Mayong. When Suinat Singha first came to Mayong, there were only a few households at that place. He stayed secretly and gradually gathered some other people and made them settle there. During this time Suinat Singha was between 30–35 years of age. After settling everything at the age of 45 years, Raja Joy Singha married off his daughter, a girl called Phuleswari, to Suinat Singha. After that, he undertook a lot of work to teach the public (*raij*) how to farm paddy and gradually, from 1535 AD [or at the latest by 1538 AD] he started ruling the Mayong *raij*. He brought many people into his kingdom from elsewhere and made them settle in Mayong by marrying the women there. He tried to fulfill the demands of the *raij* accordingly, but he died in the year 1545 AD due to some illness.

Briefly, before moving on, we must note the significance here of “Deka Mayong,” which will help us below in deciphering the meaning of what a *puwali roja* (or “baby king”) actually means. Here, the author of the Buranji makes it clear that “Deka” signifies something “secondary” or, when compared to the word “*Burha*” (“old”) something “young” or “new.” We will return to this term shortly.

Lokendra Hazarika in his *Mayongor Itihax* (2011)—another “official narrative, which draws upon other oral histories—further elaborates on the story of Suinat Singha as follows:

The royal family of Mayong claim themselves to be the descendants of the family of Ghatotkacha.<sup>14</sup> Ghatotkacha ruled his kingdom [Dimapur] as a “matrilineal kingdom” (*hari kuwari raijyo*) because it was his mother Hidimbi’s place. His descendants also ruled this kingdom for ages. One of his descendants named Shatrudaman was constantly at war with the neighboring Jayantia Kingdom. There were also some internal clashes among the Kachari royals and as a result, Shatrudaman’s youngest brother Suinat Singha (seventh brother) had to leave Maibong. After eloping, initially he sought refuge in a place called Khagorijan (presently Nagaon). But later, not able to adapt himself to the situation there, he moved to Mayong. According to the history found with the present royal family, Suinat Singha became the king of Mayong in 1546 AD. It is said that when Suinat Singha came to Mayong, the king who ruled there did not have an heir to his throne. So he married off his only daughter to Suinat Singha who later became the heir to his father-in-law. (Hazarika 2011: 26, translation mine)

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<sup>14</sup> The mythical stranger king/founder of the Kachari Kingdom; also the half-Pandava and half-Rakaksha son of Bhima and Hidimbi in the *Mahabharata*. Hidimbi’s home was said to be in what is now “Dimapur” (current Nagaland), the former capital of the Kachari Kingdom. The Kachari legend has it that before Ghatotkacha’s death, he took a secret tunnel back to the kingdom of his

There are more themes here from the “official narratives” that need parceling out. According to the 40<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong, Taranikanta Kunwar Singha, as well as historian Lokendra Hazarika and Jadab Teron, the current Karbi senior chief or *bor bangthai* (pers. commun.), Suinat Singha was basically a “deserter” (*era-poroliya*) who evaded his post sometime around the Battle of Roha (see Appendix) and ended up in what is now a place called *Bangthai Bheti* (“place of the chief”), a 1.5 kilometer<sup>2</sup> clearing in the Mayong hills. This site (see Figure 1.1) has long since been abandoned, but for many years it was used as a ward of punishment, where people who broke incest taboos (taking endogamy too far) were banished to (*egoriya kore*). Today, the site is known as a clearing in the forested hills where *jatibah* (domesticated bamboo used for spears) and several other “plains-based” plants thrive. The few people living there at the time of Suinat Singha—most say they were Karbi (Mikir), others simply say “tribals”—“knew nothing about wet-rice cultivation.” They had a few plots for swidden agriculture (*jhum*) and, as the non-official narratives put it, there was a place here for the worship of the mother goddess. Whoever the indigenous people were, the perception now is that they mainly hunter-gatherers. When Suinat Singha and his entourage arrived at *Bangthai Bheti*, these indigenes were shocked. Here was a person who knew how to grow rice in the floodplains, spoke many languages, and showed a capacity for moving effortlessly between the hills and the plains.<sup>15</sup> But, and this is according to both the current king and the *bor bangthai*, he most importantly also showed “a strange ability to make others want to live here. . . . He convinced (*potiya korisile*) others to marry women and live in this place where flooding is terrible and the mountains have too many rocks to do any large-scale cultivation” (Jadab Teron,

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<sup>15</sup> As a friend of mine who accompanied me to *Bangthai Bheti* in the jungle once (a four-hour hike from Burha Mayong, by the way), put it: “Suinat Singha was able to adapt to his environment whether it was in the plains or in the hills. This is something we Plains Karbi cannot do today. Our ancestors must have saw the value in living in the plains and followed him out from this place.”

pers. commun.). Lokendra Hazarika (2011: 11) refers to this as the “house-husband” or “uxorilocal” (*ghor juwai*) theme in Mayongian history.



**Figure 1.1.** The entrance path to *Bangthai Bheti* in the Mayong hills.

The theme of *ghor juwai* is, perhaps, more important than the theme of “civilizing” the natives. First of all, it emphasizes alliance and residence over-against descent in the first instance, although it does imply that a man will not only live in his wife’s house, but will also adopt her clan as his own. In the myths we saw above concerning the founding of the Gobha, Rani, and Jayantia kingdoms, each had a stake in establishing a matrilineal descent pattern whereby a daughter’s son ascends to the throne upon the latter’s marriage to his mother’s brother’s daughter. *Ghor juwai*, which we will return to in Chapter 2, is ideologically frowned upon across contemporary Mayong—ironically so, given that a vast majority of the families

living in Mayong today were established via uxorilocal residence. But not only is Mayong founded upon a kingly *ghor juwai* alliance, Suinat Singha built a kingdom out of inviting others to do the same. The question is, what might this have to do with the descent pattern of Mayongian kingship?

There is an ambiguity in what *ghor juwai* would have meant for Suinat Singha. The Dimasa Kachari people have an ambilineal mode of descent, meaning that they reckon property and title succession according to their patriline, but reckon residence and clan affiliation according to their matriline. For Suinat Singha, and this is hypothetical on my part, the “contractual” marriage alliance with Joy Singha was a felicitous “working misunderstanding” (Sahlins 2004). From Joy Singha’s perspective, it was a non-negotiable requirement that Suinat Singha join his house in order to marry his daughter. We can assume that, as the Koch-centric narrative put it, this was to ensure that his grandson (via his daughter) would become a great king—thus, this might imply that Joy Singha’s kingship followed matrilineal descent. Yet, there are two problems with this: first, if Joy Singha’s kingship (or chieftanship) followed matrilineal succession, then it would be implied that his daughter’s son would have married his son’s daughter. But in all the myths, Joy Singha had no male sons. Thus, it raises the question as to whether the Koch-centric myth above predicted a structural pattern or forecasted a contingency. Thus, and second, from Suinat Singha’s perspective, there was no necessary “loss” of his patriline nor of managing descent and succession according to Dimasa Kachari rules if he were to live in the house of his wife and adopt her clan as his own. It would have been impossible for matrilineal succession to continue through Phuleswari’s line in strict terms. And, indeed, this structural logic is revealed in the Mayong Buranji and in the current king’s own testament that Dimasa Kachari rules of succession—preferring brothers in a line from primogeniture to

ultimogeniture, and after that sons in the same ranked succession—held as the rule of the king’s house up until the 38<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong (Maniram or “Mina” Singha).

Coincidentally or not, Suinat Singha’s name in the Mayongian dialect of Oxomiya, “Xuinoṭ,” is a play on the word for “zero” (*xuinno*). There are cosmological implications worth considering here. First, from the contemporary Mayongian perspective, his initial *ghor juwai* with Phuleswari, the water-born goddess, establishes two salient speculations: (1) that the “home” or “destiny” of the king was to be connected to the plains/riparian water sources and not to the forested highlands from which Suinat Singha came; (2) being a resident of Joy Singha/Phuleswari’s home and a part of their clan would imply that Suinat Singha would join a goddess-worship cult. Yet, and second, even though the “plains destiny” of his kingship was quite certain, historically contingent events intervened into what the kingship’s relation to the goddess would be. Suinat Singha, or his three sons according to the Mayong Buranji, first took *xoron* and this effectively established an entirely different order of religious worship with new implications for how the kingship would relate to the indigenous people. According to the Mayong Buranji, Suinat Singha had three sons: Muhit, Maniram, and Xarassa Chandra, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> kings of Mayong respectively. The Buranji argues that these three sons took *xoron* from three different *xotra* (Vaishnavite monasteries) and by the time of Xarassa Singha’s rule in the last decade of the sixteenth century, the sons of each of Suinat Singha’s sons were aligned with a particular *bhagi*, meaning a kind of segmented lineage. Muhit had four sons, so his patriline would become known as the *Sari Bhagi*; Maniram had nine sons, so his patriline would become known as the *No Bhagi*; and Xarassa Chandra had fourteen sons, so his patriline would become known as the *Soiddho Bhagi*. This is important because it reveals that the “counting” of the kingly lineage does not begin with Suinat Singha. He was, for all intents and purposes, a

“zero king” from the perspective of the Vaishnavite kingship—conditionally establishing a religious and political order that would only become realized through the reign of his youngest son. Whether fortune or prediction, the grounds for Mayongian kingship meets the topsy turvey effects of contingent events.

There is still the matter of the kingship’s long term relationship with the mother goddess. We will get to that shortly. But first, we need to double back and locate the significance of Mayong as a “baby kingdom,” which I will argue has everything to do with how Xarassa Chandra Singha codified a new kind of bureaucracy in the kingdom and began to attenuate his office’s own power. Once we understand this, we can turn to his ritual inventions as well, which will allow us to see what relation the king and the goddess have created with each other since the beginning of the seventeenth century.

### *The Semiotics of Kingship*

The attenuation of the powers of the king begins with Muhit Singha, the 2<sup>nd</sup> King of Mayong, who between 1547 and 1552 established the posts of *deka roja*. Muhit Singha nominated two men, known as Xoruman and Muhiram Deka, for this post. Their relation to either Suinat Singha or Joy Singha is uncertain, but the narrative in the Mayong Buranji reveals that they were worthless at their posting. (Xoruman was actually killed by the 6<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong for committing regicide against the latter’s father, the 5<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong.) “*Deka roja*” is an ambiguous political category because the term “*deka*” is a shifter that can mean any of the following, depending on what term it is in opposition to: junior, new, youth, prince, or the title of Xoru Koch (recent converts to Mahapuruxiya Vaishnavism). According to the current king, Taranikanta Singha, the term in this context means “junior” only. The two *deka rojas* were meant to be “junior kings” that helped the “senior king,” or *bor roja*, with matters of

administration. But it wasn't until the rule of the 10<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong, Xarassa Chandra Singha, that this post was formalized as part of the king's bureaucratic order of nobility.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, Xarassa Chandra Singha began to create myriad posts, transforming several local lineages into noble ones and making “kings” out of others. First, according to the Buranji, he distinguished his own office from that of his eldest son (the prince) by formalizing the himself as the *bor roja* (“big or great king”) and his son as *Xoru Roja* (“little king”). The office of *xoru roja* no longer exists—in fact, it seems to have ended with Xarassa Chandra Singha's reign itself. However, the kingship was also further divided into specified offices with particular provenances.

First, before his death, Xarassa Chandra Singha declared that the three different *bhagi*—the segmented lineages of the three sons of Suinat Singha—would each have a post of “king” in relation to each other. The *bor roja*—here taking on a meaning of “senior king” would be selected from the largest lineage: the 14 sons (*Soiddho Bhagi*) of Xarassa Chandra himself, the youngest son of Suinat Singha. The first *deka roja*, retaining the sense of a “junior king,” would be drawn from the second largest lineage: the 9 sons (*No Bhagi*) of Maniram Singha (the 3<sup>rd</sup> King of Mayong and middle son of Suinat Singha). The second *deka roja* would then be drawn from the smallest lineage: the 4 sons (*Sari Bhagi*) of Muhit Singha (the 2<sup>nd</sup> King of Mayong and eldest son of Suinat Singha). The two *deka roja* would be responsible for replicating the powers of the king himself in the areas of Kalxila and Hatimuria: patronizing administrative works and religious worship, maintaining peace among their respective *raij*, and ensuring that their two lineages continue to take *xoron* from their respective *xotro* sects. So, we get three different “Koch” kings, each belonging to a different Mahapuruxiya sect of Vaishnavism and all operating as peacemakers and patrons of a sort.

But Xarassa Chandra did not stop there. According to the Buranji, he also created several posts for the “Mikir” people (read today as “Karbi,” although it is quite possible that this term meant “highlander” much like “Garo” did at the time and referred to a mix between what are now Karbi and Tiwa-Lalung people). Of these many posts, two were given the role of “chief” with connotations of also being “kings” of a sort. The first was the *bor bangthati* or “senior chief.” From the perspective of the ritual order of Mayongian kingship, the post serves three main purposes: (1) serving as the ritual “head” of the Mikir/Karbi people in Burha Mayong, responsible for administrating and litigating all matters relating to those particular people; (2) standing in opposition to the *bor roja*’s peaceful *gravitas* as a figure of *celeritas*, a “war chief” as it were; (3) being the patron for the sacrificial goddess cults of the entire Mayong kingdom. Beneath the *bor bangthati*, the king established the position of *senapati*, or “commander-in-chief” who would be responsible for the king’s army (composed of the young “Mikir” men of Burha Mayong). Today, this post has morphed into the position of the *deka bangthai* (“junior chief” and/or “chief of the youth”). The *deka bangthai* is actually an invention of the Karbi *raij* that has been mapped back onto the Mayong kingship.<sup>16</sup> In that Mayong can no longer wage any wars, the role of the *senapati* has no practical function. But given that the *senapati* was responsible for training the youthful “Mikir army” of the Mayong king, and the *deka bangthai* is responsible for being the chief of the youth, whose central ceremonial and political function is to train village youth (especially boys) in the arts of dance, song, dress, and custom, the two have mapped onto each other. As far as both the current *bor* and *deka bangthai* understand it, the

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<sup>16</sup> The Burha Mayong Karbi Bangthai Committee, formed in the 1980s, is composed of 10 officers who occupy different leading roles in the Karbi *raij*: (1) *Bor Bangthai* (senior chief), (2) *Deka Bangthai* (junior chief or “chief of the youth,” also known as the *riso bangthai*), (3) *Bisar Dhora* (“judge” who litigates on behalf of the *raij*), (4) *Oklengsar* (minister to brings concerns of the *raij* to the *bor bangthai*), (5) *Rajbarika* or *Bordhuliya* (messenger and announcer for the village, also the caretaker of the ceremonial drums), (6) *Rongbong Kathar* (head priest for entire village), (6) *Bak Kathar* (junior priest, non-sacrificial), (7) *Bor Deuri* (head priest for maintenance of village *than* and temples), (3) *Bor Kali-Ai* (chief player and caretaker of the *kali* reed instrument [see Conclusion to this thesis]).

*senapati* was also a “chief of the youth” because someone always had to teach the youth the dances, songs, marches, and arts of war. The youth, in this sense, were the *lower-ranked* guard. But from the perspective of the Mayongian kingship as a whole, the *deka bangthai* is structurally equivalent to the *deka roja*—the former is the junior of the “war king/chief” as the latter are the juniors of the “peace king”:

	<b><u>PEACE</u></b>	<b><u>WAR</u></b>
<b>SENIOR</b>	<i>Bor Roja</i>	<i>Bor Bangthai</i>
<b>JUNIOR</b>	<i>Deka Roja (x2)</i>	<i>Deka Bangthai</i>

Collectively, we can refer to these kings/chiefs as the “pentarchy” of Mayong—the *bor roja* is the encompassing king while the others are “analogic kings” (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). Though, viewed in oppositional contrasts, the kingship is also a cosmic *diarchy*. Below them, there have been myriad posts in the bureaucratic order established first by Xarassa Chandra Singha. All of these can be examined in the Mayong Buranji (see Appendix). For our purposes, only two more need to be mentioned. First is the office of the *Bixoya*, a kind of ministerial position held by Koch members of the *No Bhagi* lineage in Hatimuria and some Jugi-Nath clans. Today, the *Bixoya* are responsible for managing the king’s public affairs, especially the organization of his various ritual appurtenances. Second are the *Medhi*, “priests” of sorts from the Jugi Nath clans who are responsible for housing and maintaining four of the five *goxai*.

This bureaucratic order helps us decipher the meaning of why the Mayong *bor roja* is also referred to as a “baby king” in the local historical literature. To recall, various historical documents argue that the so-called “baby kings” (*puwali roja*) of Dimoria, Rani, Beltola, Topakuchi, Nellie, Luki, Roha, Gobha, and others were either Jaintia, Kachari, Ahom, or Koch

vassal states,<sup>17</sup> here meaning that they were largely founded on the behest of the latter’s kings or as representatives of them. The Mayongian narratives and the patchwork details in colonial literature conflict with this position.<sup>18</sup> Philippe Ramirez (2014: 134) also argues that this theory is short-sighted in that these kingdoms had mixed relations of fidelity, sometimes aligning with the Kachari, sometimes the Ahom, sometimes the Koch, and other times the Jayantia. But what is the significance, then, of the theme of being “*puwali*”—a diminutive noun signifying a “baby,” a “child,” or simply something “little.” The “little kingdoms” of South and East India immediately come to mind as resonances here, but I would like to suggest that there is a literal sense to why the extant historical literature refers to this motley collection of dozens of kings in the interstitial areas between the Ahom and Koch kingdoms as *babies*. Ramirez (ibid.) suggests that it ultimately has to do with a hierarchical sense of fragility that also resonates with “father-son relations”—the larger kingdoms watching over the smaller ones in a kind of paternalistic relationship. But when we look at the terms mobilized in the Mayongian bureaucracy, we can see that there is a lot of slippage between terms that most generally evoke hierarchical order:

<b>BIG / GREAT / HIGH RANK / GRAVITAS (PASSIVE) / SENIOR / ELDER or ELDERS / OLD</b>	<b>SMALL / LITTLE / LOW RANK / CELERITAS (ACTIVE) / JUNIOR / YOUNGER or YOUTH / BABY</b>
<i>Bor</i>	<i>Deka</i>
<i>Dangor</i>	<i>Xoru</i>
<i>Burha</i>	<i>Puwali</i>

The family resemblances between these terms, which are almost always used in contextually specific contrasting pairs, cannot be reduced to a single meaning of hierarchy.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Bhuyan 1962. Hamilton (1963) records that Dimoria, Roha, and Rani were vassal states with “Garos” chiefs, whom he ascertains as being connected ethnically to the people of the Garo Hills in what is now Western Meghalaya. However, the term “Garos,” like the term “Kukis,” were not originally ethnonyms at all, but terms denoting “highlanders” (see Ramirez 2014: 149).

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, according to the Mayong Buranji, the Ahom kings had no knowledge of the Mayong kingdom or the Dimoria kingdom until the time of the 10<sup>th</sup> king, Xarassa Chandra Singha (see Appendix under entry for Xarassa Chandra Singha).

“*Puwali*” can be “small” or “junior” when it is paired with “*bor*” or “*dangor*,” but it can mean “youth” or “baby” if paired with “*burha*.” In this latter sense, the relation is sequential or generational, not hierarchical. In the historical literature, however, the *puwali roja* or the *puwali raijyo* are never contrasted with an oppositional pair. They are simply named as such. Given the fact that all these kingdoms were actually small, independent states, I disagree with Ramirez that their significance should be understood as a hierarchical metaphor signifying “children” to “father kingdoms” or even “little” to “great kingdoms” as if the term was derived from the hubris of the Ahom or Koch authors of their *buranji*. Recall that the prominent mytheme that unites Mayong with the other *puwali* and *duar* kingdoms has to do with an initial marriage alliance between a wandering prince and an (indigenous) water-born princess. The marriage establishes a line of kings in which both the stranger prince’s origins and the indigenous, water-born princess’ origins are kept intact and recalled—neither being dissolved into a form of unilineal descent that disavows the other. Even the matrilineal kingships show that both lineal identities remain in the origin narratives.

So it is quite possible that the “baby kings” were indeed literal *children*, not of “greater kingdoms,” but of a literal union between a foreign and an indigenous power. Moreover, this union implies a relation built on a set of contrasting semiotic pairs. First of all, the movement of sovereignty via marriage always begins with a symbolic binary linked to ecology:

Hills (Forests)  $\leftrightarrow$  Plains (Bodies of Water)

This basic model then allows for various, and for the most part morally-charged, oppositions that represent both sides of the alliance:

King  $\rightarrow$  Indigenous People  
 Indigenous People  $\rightarrow$  King

Wild  $\rightarrow$  Civilized  
 Civilized  $\rightarrow$  Wild

Wandering → Stable  
 Stable → Wandering

War → Peace  
 Peace → War

Male → Female  
 Female → Male

By the time that the Mayong king, for example, became “Koch” after taking *xoron* (read: religiously converted to Vaishnavism), all these oppositional contrasts take on a new significance

“Caste Hindu” (Vaishnavism) → ”Tribal” (Goddess Cult)  
 “Tribal” → “Caste Hindu

Effectively, we can parcel out the way that Mayong, as a “baby kingdom” transformed itself along binaries implied by the union of contrasting pairs. The arrival of Suinat Singha in Mayong operated along the following set of structural binaries:

<b><u>STRANGER KING</u></b>	<b><u>INDIGENOUS PEOPLE</u></b>
Male Principle	Female Principle
Hills / Forests	Plains / “River” (Luit & Phuleswari)
Civilized	Wild
War (or Active)	Peace (or Passive) <sup>19</sup>
Wandering	Stable

When Suinat Singha (or his children) settled in the plains and become Koch, the following transformation happened:

<b><u>MAYONG KING</u></b>	<b><u>“TRIBES”</u></b>
Male Principle	Female Principle
Plains	Hills
Vaishnavite	Shakta
Peace	War
Center	Periphery

Now, in the present moment, the relations have transformed again, becoming ethnicized yet still retaining elements of the original oppositional contrasts.

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<sup>19</sup> In the *bor bangthai*’s narrative of the founding of the Mayong kingdom, however, the “war principle” belongs equally to the indigenous chief.

<b><u>KOCH KING</u></b>	<b><u>KARBI TRIBE</u></b>
Male Principle	Female Principle
Plains	Hills
Patron of Krishna (is Krishna)	Patrons of Goddess
Passive	Active
Stable	Wandering

We will return to this new view of Mayongian kingship in the conclusion for this chapter. But with this view into the basic narrative and semiotic elements of Mayongian kingship, we can now turn to the question of what ritually unites these contrasting pairs, what the king’s ultimate relationship with the mother goddess is, and how the politics of Mayongian kingship today operates paradigmatically.

**“Bring Out the Gods and Smash the Embankment”**

*If nation-states require narratives, stories of their past, present, and future, then surely rituals are quintessential moments of power in which such narratives are made and sustained, contested and overthrown, accommodated or transformed.*

– John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan, *Represented Communities* (2001: 121)

What Kelly and Kaplan note for “nation-states,” we could also note for any political community. Mayong, especially, derives any sense of its political order not only on foundational narratives, but on the annual rites that “lock” the kingdom into a religious complex that seems both necessary and inevitable. Each lunar new year, in occurrence with the spring harvest month of Bohag, the five tutelary deities of Mayong are taken out from their “homes” (*sora*) and shuttled around the kingdom in palanquins for worship. Prior to their procession the *bor roja* and his four affiliate *rojas* (the two *deka roja*, the *bor bangthai*, and the *deka bangthai*) become gods themselves—“doubles” of the five tutelary deities. This ceremonial is referred to as *Goxai Uliuwa* (“bringing out the gods”). The whole ordeal lasts for three days. At the end of the third day, around dusk, the second part of the ceremonial, known as *Gor Bhangha* (“smashing the embankment”) unfolds. I will explain this rite below, but it is a kind of “closure” (*bidai*) rite

wherein the sexual, political, and religious elements of the *Goxai Uliuwa* are dramatically staged and lead to a conclusion where the masculine principle of kingship overcomes the feminine principle of life itself. More on this to follow.

This ceremonial has its origins in the tenure of the 10<sup>th</sup> Roja of Mayong, Xarassa Chandra Singha. According to the Mayong Buranji, he was the youngest son of Suinat Singha. Deka (2009: 33), who claims to have had access to the original *xasipat* (aloe bark) manuscripts held by the Mayong king, argues that he was actually the son of Muhit Singha, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Roja of Mayong (thus Suinat Singha's grandson). Other theories—espoused by the royal family of Mayong—propose that he was a new stranger king himself (a wandering prince from another *puwali raijyo*), or was an unsuspecting, minor relative of the king's patriline—a kind of charismatic “boy-wonder”—who was so beloved by the people that they installed him as a king. All of these are equally plausible interpretations, but the point is that during his kingship, which begins around 1590 AD, the Mayong kingdom “came of age.” In the sixty years between Suinat Singha's dramatic entry and Xarassa Chandra Singha's rule, the kingship was weak—mired in assassination intrigue and sickness (see Appendix). Xarassa Chandra Singha emerged some 50 years later as both a picture of health and morality. Not only did he establish a religious cult in Mayong (thus connecting it to Hindu circuits of worship to the west), and create a royal bureaucracy to manage both the ritual and administrative duties of the kingdom (see above), but he also—and seemingly *ex cathedra*—reworked the entire cosmic grounds on which the Mayong kingdom's legitimacy was held.

The story of *Goxai Uliuwa* begins with a pilgrimage that Xarassa Singha and his son, Prem, who he nominated as the Xoru Roja (“little king”), took to Nawadeep in what is now West

Bengal.<sup>20</sup> There, they acquired 10 idols of various deities made of stone, wood, and some as fossilized *xologram* (see below).<sup>21</sup> Per Mahapuruxiya religion, these are referred to as *goxai* (or *guxai/gosain*): each being both “gurus” and representations of Krishna at the end of the day. Lokendra Hazarika (2011: 42) notes that these 10 idols were of Basudeb, Gopal (infant Krishna), Lokxi-Narayan (Lakshmi and Vishnu), Shiva-Parvati, Vishnu, Garuda Pakshi (the thunderbird vehicle of Vishnu), and other Vaishnavite forms.

A century later, these 10 *goxai* were reduced to 5, supposedly to align with the *Smarta* philosophical tradition of Panchayatana (Panchadeva) worship of Shiva, Vishnu, Devi/Durga (Mother Goddess), Surya, and Gonesh. The gods collectively are supposed to form a quincunx mantra that represents all aspects of Brahman as reality. Today, the *goxai uliuwa* ceremonial is also often referred to as the *Pancha Devata* or *Pancha Goxai* (5 Gods) ceremony. But, as in Wendy Doniger’s (2010: 6) concept of “*deshification*,” it would seem that in Mayong the 5 Gods are roundly Vaishnavite in composition. There are two Basudeb idols (one belonging to the king only), one of Lokxi-Narayan, one of Gopal, and one of Shiva-Parvati (the only non-Vaishnavite centric idol, although it is a common sentiment in Mayong that Shiva-Parvati is the sexualized expression of Lokxi-Narayan). According to Lokendra Hazarika (ibid.), each of these idols has a special name. Respective to the previous list, they are: (1 and 2) Gandaki Murti, (3) Surdarshan Murti, (4) Dadhimukhi Brahman, and (5) Jugal Milan.

The gods have two forms: stationary idols (*murti*, “statues”) and “virtual” or “moveable” forms referred to as *xologram/xalgram* (*shaligram* in Bangla and Hindi). The *xologram* are

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<sup>20</sup> Guneswar Deka (2009) says it was in Koch Behar. Alternatively, the Mayong Buranji says “Majuli,” but the current king and other royal figures deny both claims, arguing that Nawadeep would have been a major pilgrimage site for all practitioners of *Mahapuruxiya* religion at the time.

<sup>21</sup> Guneswar Deka (2009: 33) argues that Xarassa Chandra and his son, Prem, only acquired only three *goxai*.

fossilized shells (*Ammonoid*), which are representations of Vishnu in his universal form. These are the forms of divinity that are placed in the palanquins in order to “bring them out” into all parts of the kingdom (see below). The statues themselves remain stable, but as the chief priest (*bamun deuri*; *raj purohit*) of the king explained to me, “the force [*xokti*] of the idols [*murti*] leaves the stone and goes into the *xologram* when we perform the rite of and offer the *goxai* ‘*prasad*’...this is only temporary so that the *goxai* can go to the people instead of the people coming to him. When the *mela* (‘festival’) is over, we have to transfer the *goxai* back into the *murti* by giving him the same offerings.” No one is certain what happened to the remaining 5 idols that Xarassa Singha brought to Mayong from Nawadeep, but in any event they are no longer the deities mobilized during the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial.

As the name implies, the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial is all about bringing the gods out of their stationary homes and parading them across the kingdom for others to worship. Making the tutelary deities of Mayong moveable has to do with their relationship to the kingship itself. When Xarassa Chandra Singha purportedly created the ceremony, he did so with the intention of adopting the role of a proper “kingly patron” and not only an administrator (Lokendra Hazarika, pers. commun.). According to Guneswar Deka (2009: 34), Xarassa Chandra Singha also used this opportunity to bless his royal farms (*pam*) which were cultivated at various parts of his kingdom. Yet, whatever his intention, the structural result has been nothing short of a complete reordering of the cosmic grounds for the Mayongian kingship. Let us, then begin, with a day-by-day description of this ceremonial based on my observations in 2013, 2014, and 2015.

- (1) *Day One*. The first day of the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial begins with a *puja* to the king’s personal tutelary deity, Basudeb (a form of Krishna that evokes his patrilineal heritage). The stationary idol, which is kept on an *asana* (“seat”) in the *manikut* (literally “jewel hut”) of the king’s *nam ghor* (“name house,” where devotional worship to Krishna is done), is treated to a private worship by the king’s royal priest (*bamun deuri*). Once this is done, a “transfer ritual” takes place where the priest and

his assistant incite the *goxai* to leave the idol and enter a *xologram*. Once this is done, the *xologram* is placed into its palanquin (*dola*) and brought out to its central *asana* in the middle of the king's *namghor* (see Figure 1.2).



**Figure 1.2.** The *Bamun Deuri* (left) and his assistant (right) prepare the transfer of the Basudeb *xologram* to the palanquin.

Shortly thereafter, the remaining four *goxai*—who have undergone identical rites of worship and transfer—are brought by the *medhi* to the king's *nam ghor* in their palanquins from their “homes” located in four different residential units (*jak*) in Maj Khel. These *goxai* “belong to the king and the kingdom,” but are maintained by four priests who occupy the position of “Medhi” in the Jugi-Nath community. Soon after, the *bor bangthai*, the two *deka roja*, the *deka bangthai*, and the *bixoya* arrive. The first day has no procession. The five *goxai* in their palanquins are kept on display at the king's personal *nam ghor* while *nam kirtan* (a.k.a. *hori kirtan*) is performed by the families of the king, his affiliate kings, the *medhi*, and *bixoya*. Members of the public start trickling in to the *nam ghor*, though they are few in number and most often are persons seeking blessings to remedy a problem or help for future fortunes. Various speeches by royal officers and kings are given retelling the origins of the ceremonial (especially Xarassa Chandra Singha's pilgrimage with his son). The king refers to this

as his own “*roja darbar*” and often invites neighboring kings from what are argued to be “subordinate” kingdoms to Mayong: Tetilia, Kachari Gaon, Ghagua, etc. (see Figure 1.3). This *darbar* is actually a public event that mirrors a “closed” and prior one where the two *Deka Roja*, the *Nath Medhi*, the *Koch Bixoya*, invited *gaon bura* from various villages, and the *Bor Bangthai* meet to discuss their shared accounts and issues that have arisen over the previous year (see Chapter 3). The public *darbar* is basically a scene of bestowing honors upon both the *goxai* and the kings by a small section of the public. As Cohn (2013) notes, there is a subtle paradox of hierarchy and reciprocity in the act of bestowing honors; in this case, a subordinate public bestowing honors upon their kings and tutelary deities. The kings, especially, have to receive the honors and acknowledge/recognize the act as both a recipient and a giver of blessings, which they will provide on the following day. Once the *roja darbar* is over and *nam kirtan* is performed for a few hours, the *goxai* are returned to their homes and the first day concludes around 2:00 pm in the afternoon.



**Figure 1.3.** The *Roja Darbar* on the first day of the *Goxai Uliuwa Mela* (2014).

- (2) *Day Two*. This day begins the same as Day One. The Basudeb idol is given *puja* and its moveable form is transferred to palanquins. The other four idols are kept at the *Nath jak* and will not be gathered until later. Around 9:00 am, the *bixoya* and *deka roja* of both *No Bhagi* and *Sari Bhagi* (*Hatimuria* and *Xalxila khel* in *Loonmati*)

arrive at the king's *nam ghor*. They take their place next to the king and are given garlands and bestowed with more honors. Various ritual appurtenances of the king are placed before the Basudeb palanquin: the king's sword and shield (*nok-song* or *dhal-torwal*), the royal priest's copy of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the royal drums (*dhol*), horn instruments (*pepa*), and other items. Here, the 3 kings and Basudeb *goxai*, along *bixoya* who perform *nam*, wait for the arrival of the 2 *bangthai* and the Karbi *deka raji*.

Meanwhile, in Burha Mayong, the *bor bangthai* and *deka bangthai* gather together the boys of the Karbi *deka raji* in full costume, each with a *nok-song* (sword and shield).<sup>22</sup> The *burha raji* (the *raji* of the elders) consumes several glasses of rice wine (*kesa mod; lau pani*) while garlands and other costume elements are prepared for everyone. Once all are ready, the *burha* and *deka raji* offer a *puja* to Hemphu (also called Mahadeu), the encompassing household deity at the *bor bangthai*'s home in front of the *lai xuta* (or *nonpu armu*), a three part pillar where each "part" (*bhag*) represents a different aspect of their life as Karbi people: the top is for the village (elders and ancestors), the middle is for the *raji* (socius in localis), and the bottom is for the *devata* (in this case, Hemphu/Mahadeu). The *deka raji*, accompanied by the *bor kali ai* (chief *kali* player) and the *rajbarika/bordhuliya* (chief drummer) march down the road to the *Bamun goxai than* (a sacred area marking the path that goes directly from Burha Mayong, through the rice fields, to the King's home is). Here, Hemphu *puja* is performed once again. The boys get up and march along until they arrive at the *Bhagabati than* (near the place the 5 *goxai* will sit when they arrive in Burha Mayong the following day). Here, another Hemphu *puja* is performed. Once again the boys get up and march down the road until they reach the edge of the village near Nambari *suburi* (a Koch hamlet) where they—these days, at least—all climb into the back of a truck and are shuttled off to the king's residence in Roja Mayong. The *burha raji* follow in another truck. Upon arrival, the *bor bangthai* and *deka bangthai* take their seats among the King, several *bixoya*, and the two *deka roja* and are given garlands and anointed. At this point, the *bor roja*, the two *deka roja*, the *bor bangthai*, and *deka bangthai* make a transformation into divine beings. This is accomplished in a very subtle act, whereby each prostrate before the Basudeb *goxai* in the palanquin, touch the king's *nok-song* (shield and sword) sitting in front of the Basudeb palanquin, and then are anointed by the king's *bamun deuri*. During the ritual periods and processions over the next two days, they are all divine and substantially linked to the *goxai*.

Once the kings-as-gods arise, the Karbi *deka raji* appears at a makeshift gate in front of the king's *nam ghor*. They shout traditional war cries, begging to be let in. A *bixoya* approaches the boys and asks why they have come. One of the elder members of the *deka raji* responds in a chant (quickly picked up by the rest of the boys in the *raji*):

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<sup>22</sup> The two eldest members of the *deka raji*, who will lead the processions for this day and the next, are given both *bangthai*'s ancestral swords and shields. The swords are 1.5 meters long and the shields are made out of rhino hide.

*A xomalo, oi xomalo, damahi bikang!* [We gather here to dance!]  
*A xomalo, oi xomalo, damahi dam!* [We gather here to sing!]  
*Joya bihu, joya roja, oi!* [Long live Bihu, Long live the king!]  
*Joya goxai, joya goxai, oi!* [Long live the *Goxai*, Long live the *Goxai*!]  
*Par Ai Bhagabati, Burhi Ai,* [From the mother Bhagawati, the old mother,]  
*A xomalo, oi xomalo, oi!* [We gather here (to dance and sing)!]

The *deka rajj* is greeted by the kings and allowed in. The boys march in formation until they reach the *nam ghor*. They prostrate before Basudeb and then begin dancing for him. Once the kings all take their seats on the left side of the *nam ghor*, the boys turn to them and begin a new dance. The dancing goes on for sometime until the boys retire and *nam kirtan* resumes. The *burha* and *deka rajj* are then all led into the courtyard of the king's house where they are welcomed by the *rani* (queen), the *bixoya*, and treated collectively to a feast (the *bor bangthai* and *deka bangthai* remain behind in the king's *nam ghor*). The king's people bestow honors on the Karbi *rajj* and speak of their brotherhood. The king's youngest brother gives a traditional speech reminding them that it was Suinat Singha's promise that should the king ever not take care of the Karbi *rajj*, seven generations of his family will be cursed to hell. The *rajj* then eats and some elders from the *Burha rajj* reciprocate with honors and speeches of their own.<sup>23</sup>

Once the Karbi *rajj* finish eating, they pick back up their *nok-song* and march to the gate of the *nam ghor* where the 5 kings, the Basudeb palanquin, royals, and a huge crowd is awaiting. The Karbi *rajj* then begins a procession to Maj Khel, followed by the *goxai* and the kings. Around 5 minutes later they arrive in Maj Khel at another gate, where a Medhi from one of the Jugi-Nath clans meets the procession and exclaims, "Basudeb looks so lonely without his brothers. We now join the 5 *goxai* of Mayong together and begin our journey!" A huge dance breaks out with Bengali and Jugi-Nath performers chanting *nam* in the style of Chaitanya ("Hori Krishno, Hori Ramo, Hori Hori"). After the dancing, the procession continues down the road to Hatimuria (now joined by members of the Koch, Nath, and Bengali communities) (see Figure 1.4). Along the way, women (some men, but mostly women) have laid out *gamosa* on the road and prostrate as the kings and *goxai* pass by. The royal priests give blessings to them on the laid out *gamosa*, accept another home-woven *gamosa* in return, and drape it over one of the palanquins. The kings-as-gods then bless each of the women. The women never look up during this process and remain in full prostration the entire time. Men also come out to the procession on the road and prostrate (especially before the kings-as-gods), taking blessings as well. On the way to Hatimuria, the procession only stops at the *Kesakhaiti than* where the kings-as-

<sup>23</sup> In 2015, the Karbi *rajj* was around 2 hours late in arriving at the king's house. Once they were brought in for the collective feast, one of the *Bixoya*'s lamented the following, "It is our king's duty to take care of you all, and we live by that promise every year. Today, when you did not arrive until 2 hours after the program was to begin, the king became very sad. He mentioned to me that you are all growing apart from him. Please remember that as long as you are of Mayong, he is not only your king, but also your father and your *goxai* [slippage here between "guru" and "deity"]. Today we know no differences between us, which is why the king brings you into his house and feeds you from his own money/treasury (*nijor toka-kuxagor*). Ashamed, two members of the *Burha Rajj* apologized profusely and humbled themselves before the *bixoya*.

gods (and the *goxai* with their palanquin bearers) all bow before the temple of the goddess and the royal priests give her an offering.



**Figure 1.4.** The *Pancha Goxai*, followed by the kings and nobility, on procession toward Hatimuria village (2014).

Once the procession arrives at the gate to the road entrance to the Hatimuria *nam ghor*, an entire crowd on the other side of the gate prostrates in unison and in silence. After a minute or two, the Karbi *deka raji* begin their war chants again and the people arise. After their chant is completed the gate is opened and the procession enters. The *goxai* are placed on their *asana* in the Hatimuria *nam ghor* (with Basudeb in the center), the kingly appurtenances are again placed in front of the palanquins, and the kings-as-gods take their sets (again on the left side of the *nam ghor*) (see Figure 1.5). The Karbi *deka raji* again performs their dances, now to a larger audience filled with everyone from Hatimuria. The priests from Hatimuria perform then perform a *puja* before the *goxai* and the kings-as-gods and then distribute *prasad*.

After the rituals are completed, the Hatimuria *raji* begin Rongali Bihu celebrations with dance and song in front of the *nam ghor*. The whole affair slowly turns into a carnival-type fair and just before nightfall, the *goxai* and the kings-as-gods leave in a solemn procession to return to their homes.

(3) *Day Three*. The third and final day begins in the exact same way as Day Two, except the Karbi *deka rajj* does not go to the king's home (although the *bor* and *deka bangthai* do). The procession from the house of the king to Maj Khel to pick up the other four *goxai* follows the same route and same stoppage as the day before, but with no Karbi “warriors” leading the procession. Along the way, people on the road again take blessings and more people join the procession as it passes by. Once it arrives in Hatimuria, a short *puja* is again conducted and the procession makes its way down the three-kilometer road to Burha Mayong, passing through Loonmati and Xoti Bheti villages (again taking honors and receiving blessings, and prostrating at any temples—especially goddess ones—along the way).



**Figure 1.5.** The *Pancha Goxai* on their *asana* in the *nam ghor* at Hatimuria village (2014).

Meanwhile, in Burha Mayong, the Karbi *burha* and *deka rajj* repeat the routine from the previous morning. Except by the time they reach Nambari *suburi* (“hamlet”) at the edge of the village, they do not leave. Rather, they join the crowd waiting for the 5 *goxai* and the 5 kings-as-gods to arrive. A very large gathering of villagers (especially women) from Burha Mayong wait at the edge of the village with a huge *gamosa* laid out before them on the ground and several offerings set up to be given to the *goxai* and the kings-as-gods (see Figure 1.6).

Once the procession arrives, speeches are made by Karbi elders and big men, honors are bestowed, blessings given, *gamosas* received, and the procession begins again with the Karbi *deka rajj* at the helm. Now, however, the procession has picked up more followers: dancers from the Tiwa *deka rajj* of a neighboring kingdom, from another Karbi *deka rajj* from Thakurkuchi, from a Garo *deka rajj* from Garo Basti in nearby Kajoli-Mukh, and from a Bodo *deka rajj* from Kachari Gaon and Tetlilia. Kings from nearby *puwali rajjyo* have joined the procession as well (see Figure 1.7).



**Figure 1.6.** Women and children from Burha Mayong (Nambari Suburi) await the arrival of the *Pancha Goxai* and the kings-as-gods. This strictly gendered form is replicated all over Mayong throughout the procession.

The procession snakes down the road in Burha Mayong, stopping for the kings-as-gods and the *goxai* to worship Kamakhaya (at *Kesakhaiti than*), Bhagawati (at *Bhagawati than*), and Burhi Ai (at *Bamun goxai than*). More than any other village, residents (again, mainly women and children) from Burha Mayong flock to take blessings from and bestow honors to the *goxai* and kings-as-gods. Members of the Karbi *burha rajj* do as well, in an almost stunning display of humility (see Figure 1.8). Once the *puja* is completed at *Bamun goxai than*, the procession loops back and settles at the *Pancha Goxai than* next to the school in Burha Mayong. Again, the

Karbi *deka rajj* dances for the kings-as-gods and the *goxai*. The kings-as-gods are bestowed with honors from big-men and elders from Burha Mayong.



**Figure 1.7.** The *Pancha Goxai* procession at Burha Mayong (2014). Photograph by Mohsin Hussain.



**Figure 1.8.** Members of the Karbi *burha rajj* worshipping the *bor roja* (2014). Photographs by Mohsin Hussain.

The *ai* (village oracle) then takes a seat in front of the *goxai* and goes into divine possession (*ai-jokhoni*, see Chapter 5). During her possession, she occasionally gets up and taunts the *bor roja* in unintelligible language. At one point, the *bor bangthai* and the *rongbong kathar* (head Karbi priest) step in and bless both the oracle and the *bor roja* allowing the goddess to be released from the body of the oracle. Soon speeches are given about the connection between the “Mikir army” and the Mayong king, their brotherly love, and why today the kings become Gods for the Karbi people. After some time, the Burha Mayong *raij* begin their Bihu festivities and the *goxai*, *bor roja*, two *deka roja*, *bixoya*, *medhi*, and members of the Koch, Jugi-Nath, and Bengali communities leave in a non-ritual procession back to the house of the king (about an hour before dusk).

- (4) *End of Day Three*, or the *Gor Bhangra Utsav* (“The Festival of Smashing the Embankment” or “The Festival of Penetrating the Queen’s Gate”). At the end of the third and final day of the *goxai uliuwa*, the *bor roja*, the two *deka roja*, the *medhi* responsible for care of each of the 5 *goxai*, the *bixoya*, and other “non-tribal” members of the Mayong *raij* return from Burha Mayong to the house of the king, leaving behind the *bor bangthai* and the *deka bangthai* in Burha Mayong where they are blessed by the oracle and released of their divine presence. Bihu festivities then continue there until late night. As the procession reaches the *khel* of *Rojar Sowki*, the “seat/fort of the king,” they are stopped and prevented from moving forward by the family of the Rani (Queen). Hundreds of people are gathered at the king’s house on the opposite side of a makeshift “gate” or “embankment” (*gor*). Shouting commences as villagers choose a side: either the king’s or the queen’s. The Rani, with her brothers, make a statement that they “refuse to let Krishna enter because he has lied about where he has been.” The men on the king’s side grow angrier and begin taunting and shaking at the makeshift gate. Men on the queen’s side motion hold strong to the gate and motion in a “you shall not pass!” gesture (see Figure 1.9). Some speeches are made by big men, including historian Lokendra Hazarika who explains the history and mythology of the rite (which we will get into below). But the energy keeps amassing until the *bor roja* “pays a fee” of 300 rupees to his queen’s brother and finally gives a sign to “his people” to break down the gate. All effervescent hell breaks loose and the rite turns into a pure carnival (see Figure 1.10). The king, his two *deka roja*, and the 5 *goxai* penetrate the crowd and take their seats inside the *nam ghor*. *Puja* is performed and *prasad* is then distributed. Once here, the queen enters the *nam ghor* and takes her side by the king. The royal priest blesses them both along with the two *deka roja* and, as he informed me, this is the point where the “*goxai* in their bodies is released.” This is followed by Roja Mayong’s Bihu festivities, which continue through the night. When the festivities are over, the *xologram* are removed from the palanquins, the *goxai* are transferred back to their stationary idols and the ceremonial comes to a close.

Before we begin the analysis, a little more information on the *Gor Bhangra* rite is needed.

Guneswar Deka (2009: 36) describes the significance of the rite as follows:

After the returning of the Royal procession, all the people assemble in the precincts of the Royal Temple. Before entering the Temple, a traditional rite is performed by the people on this auspicious occasion. It is said that this ceremony is in commemoration of Krishna's return from [visiting] Ghunucha [Ghunusa]. The story runs that once, Lord Krishna went out on a procession to the "city of Ghunucha" where the divine consort of Krishna resided and he stayed there for at least seven days. This is the ceremonial day of returning. So the supporters of Goddess Lakshmi make a strong bamboo-fencing to impede the army accompanying the Lord Krishna as he lied to his legitimate wife, Lakshmi. Finally, the King's side, that is, the members of the procession representing the side of Lord Krishna pays an amount of three hundred rupees to appease the barricade holders. After that, Basudeva enters into the Royal Temple and takes *prasada* that is, the sacramental food is offered to a deity and the royal festival comes to an end.



**Figure 1.9.** Taunting at the gate during *Gor Bhanga Utsav* (2014). Photograph by Mohsin Hussain.

The Mayong Buranji, in its mythopoeic register, describes this festival in such a quickness of prose that the syntagmatic shift between ritual time and mythical time is striking :

After returning [from Burha Mayong on the third day of the *Goxai Uliuwa Mela*], the king and his other officials saw that the king's gateway was being surrounded by a crowd and the *goxai* were not allowed to enter the *namghor* because Lord Krishna had gone to

town would not return until the seventh day of Bohag; he stayed at Ghunusa Devi's place. So, the goddess Laxmi built an embankment and blocked the road, and the people plundered the Ghunusa Devi temple. As a result Lord Krishna sent consoling to his wife Laxmi. The next day, when he returned, he was shocked to find out that the road to his home was blocked. So he sent his Panda ("priest") to talk to Laxmi Devi, give an amount of Rs. 300, and asked them to return. The followers of the *goxai* then unblocked the path by breaking the embankment wall. The followers of Laxmi Devi revolted, but at last the road was finally unblocked. As a result, the *goxai* were welcomed and placed at the *nam ghor* but had to face some confrontations from Laxmi's people for being out in the town. After that, they celebrated and concluded the meeting; Shri Krishna and Laxmi now remained under the temple together. But because of Lord Krishna's behavior, the entire expenses of the *goxai* had to be taken from the king's treasury.



**Figure 1.10.** Effervescent mayhem after the breaking of the gate (2014). Photograph by Mohsin Hussain.

### *Apotheosis, Installation, and Paradigmatic Efficacies*

The "public secret" to the *Gor Bhanga* rite is quite fascinating and will take us into understanding the "paradigmatic" mythopolitics of this ritual. First, as a supplementary rite to the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial, the *Gor Bhanga Utsav* "proves" that the *bor roja* and Krishna are one.

Moreover, the slippage between the story of Krishna sneaking out for a tryst with Ghunusa Devi and the *bor roja*'s own trip to Burha Mayong—the home of the mother goddess, patronized by the Karbi people—is a perfect exemplification of myth playing out in ritual-political life. Throughout the festival, the *bor roja* and the other four kings-as-gods attend to the goddess by supplicating and humbling themselves to her. On the third day, the king is “out of town” in the home of another goddess (at the foot of the Mayong hills) where he is literally (and quite sexually) taunted by her through her oracle. The payment of the fee to the brother of his “legitimate wife” (the queen of Mayong) is basically a “taboo transgression fine,” which we will see a lot of in this dissertation. It settles the king’s account and he, like Krishna, can thus literally *penetrate* the queen’s boundary suggesting that the masculine principle has triumphed over the feminine principle.

Well, almost. For, in the Krishna myth, the only thing we know about what happened to Ghunusa Devi is that her temple was plundered by Laxmi’s people. But in a deep symbolic sense, what happened on the third day of the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial in Burha Mayong was nothing less than a “marriage” of the king to the “female principle” of the indigenous people, repeating—in a paradigmatic/analogic rather than identical sense—the marriage of Suinat Singha to the water-born Phuleswari. The third day of the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial is always the most intense of the three days and it is filled with multiple *pujas* to the goddess. But when the *bor bangthai* blesses both the *bor roja* and the oracle (something I only noticed in 2015), the act symbolizes a renewed union between the stranger king and the female principle through the indigenous “war chief’s” blessing! What’s more, throughout the processions on Day Two and Three of the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial, the king (via and with the *goxai*) is blessing *women* and their *children*, receiving the honors from *them* (no men present *gamosa* to the kings-as-gods,

only the women). This, I think is more fundamentally about the king-as-god being able to access and distribute the forces of life that reside in the power of the goddess only—but he cannot do this on any day of the year; he can only do it when his body undergoes apotheosis and is thus not destroyed by the power of the goddess (see Chapter 2). This argument is testified to by Mayongians as well: they aver that this festival is the time when the goddess’ forces of life rain down through the medium of the divine kings (especially the *bor roja*).

Of course, the *Goxai Uliuwa* and *Gor Bhanga* ceremonial cannot be pinned down to a single function. Alongside the access and distribution of the forces of life, I would also argue that the entire ceremonial is a renewal of the kingship itself.<sup>24</sup> As an annual rite, coinciding with the first days of the Lunar New Year (Bohag Bihu), it serves as a “restart” mechanism of both purification and transformation for the 5 kings, especially the *bor roja* (see Chapter 6 on the ritual of *oxus*). The ritual apotheosis of the kings transforms them from the annual degradation of their being who must not only patronize sacrifices (in an anti-sacrificial, Vaishnavite-dominated milieu), but must carry the weight of all the shit that everyone has gotten into over the year. Without Brahmanical rites to purify the kings on an ordinary basis in Mayong, they can only rely on the annual *transformation* rites that the various clerics in Mayong are capable of doing (see Chapter 6 for more elaboration).

This makes the ceremonial look more like a Hocartian installation rite. Although a new king is not installed during the ceremonial, the collective rites “regenerate the kingship by

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<sup>24</sup> During the 2015 *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial in Mayong, I met an elder from Topakuchi, a neighboring “baby kingdom,” who explained to me that there is also a *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial in Topakuchi—as well as in four other erstwhile baby kingdoms who claim to have their own *paso roja* circuit, possibly sovereign satellites of Gobha (Topakuchi, Barapujia, Dandua, and Charaibahi). In each of these kingdoms, the annual ceremonial has a formal similarity with the Mayong ceremonial: a “Koch” king is responsible for the care of a particular idol, a *guxai/goxai* who is then brought out for the people each year to bring prosperity. Then a “Tribal” group—marked as Tiwa in Topakuchi and its related kingdoms—receive the king and his patron deity as an “army.” They dance for the king, perform mock fights, and their “chief” hosts a collective worship of the mother goddess. I have yet to do any research on the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonials in these neighboring kingdoms, but it is quite possible that the Mayong festival is part of a larger ritual complex, the origin of which is entirely obscured.

removing any pollution that accumulates at the royal center” (Quigley 2005a: 10). Hocart’s fundamental argument, after all, is that kingship is primarily a ritual rather than political organization. For him, ritual is “an organisation to promote life, fertility, prosperity by transferring life from objects which are abounding in it to objects deficient in it” (Hocart [1936] 1970: 3). And the main ritual for facilitating this transfer of life is the king’s installation or coronation ritual, which is both sacrificial and associated with the cosmic sacred marriage (ibid.: Chapter 20). We see features of both in the *Goxai Uliuwa* and *Gor Bhanga* ceremonial. Hocart, however, takes it further by arguing that the kings (like gods) must undergo a kind of metaphorical (or literal) death and rebirth via the installation rite. There is no fictive killing of the 5 kings or 5 gods during the Mayongian annual ceremonial, but—and this is the case with Hindu rites across “indigenous” groups in Northeast India (see Ramirez 2014)—it is filled with *transformations*. This is more important than purification in Mayongian rites. The fundamental substance of persons have to be changed in order to be purified. Here, I think the apotheosis of the kings fulfills this function without having to dramatize a killing of the king or the gods. And, perhaps, here is where Hocart was wrong about funeral sacraments being the “ultimate promotion.” Marriages are less about promotion in status than they are about transformative alliances—in Mayong, for sure, but also in most societies where marriage implies a political dimension on top of a ritual one. To the point, marriages—like the founding one of kingship in Mayong and its annual analogic form—do not just transform a single entity, but by necessity two parties that are united into a composite form.

Annually, then, we can clearly notice the paradigmatic features of Mayongian ritual politics. The present is an alloform of the past wherein a union between the stranger king and the indigenous people play out. But Xarassa Chandra Singha also fundamentally altered the cosmic

order that grounded Suinat Singha's kingship. At what I think was his deepest cosmic transformation, he shifted the "active" principle from the king to the indigenous people whereas the king himself became passive. At the divine level, the same transformation happened between the male principle and the female principle. This seems to be the basic crux of Mayongian kingship in the medieval and early-modern periods—and the kernel of its sense bleeds into the ritual forms of the present. A transformative reversal (or inversion) like this is still, however, a paradigmatic one. What we now have to wrestle with is how Mayongians got to the point that the kingship and the indigenous people not only became hyper-ethnicized (with new cosmic transformations and inversions), but why the kingship in the present moment is on unstable, shaky ground in reference to the syntagmatic politics of recent history and everyday life in Mayong.

### **Tribes and the State**

In 2014, I was hired by a small film company from Los Angeles to assist an "adventure actor" and his videographer who were in Assam making a travelogue about Northeast India. They wanted to visit Mayong to document sorcery practices and needed someone who could translate for them and show them around. I agreed and they came to Mayong and stayed for two days. I introduced them to a few sorcerers and did my duty of translating, trying all the time to give them a bigger picture about this place and its history. At one point, I was talking about the current state of Mayongian kingship and they asked if they could take an interview with the king. So, I phoned the *bor roja*, told him about the film crew, and scheduled an interview. When we showed up, the king was dressed in full regalia, with his Bengali crown, iron sword, and rhinohide shield. I noticed that he was wearing a Karbi *sula*—a ceremonial vest with the *jambili aiton*, a totemic representation of the 5 *kur* (clans)—stitched into its fabric. He was also wearing a Tiwa

towel/scarf (*gamosa*) underneath an Oxomiya *gamosa*, a Vaishnavite *bhokot*-style *dhoti* and *kurta* (“*ponjabi*”), and other ethnically marked items (see Figure 1.8). I thought this was an excellent way to present himself since it “incorporated” the diversity of his kingdom sartorially. When they began the interview, the first thing the king said was, “Listen, basically, I am a Karbi king” (*Xuno, basikly, moi Karbi roja*). Before translating, I shot back, “Deuta (“Father”), why would you say that? You know this is not true. You have explained the king’s lineage to me many times.” The king responded in his typical gravitas, “Yes, it is not true in the past, but it will be true in the future.”

The king’s utterance was a perfect projection of the paradigmatic history of Mayongian kingship into the syntagmatic history of political events qua events in the present situation. In order to understand why this is a remarkable “poetic” alignment of the axis of combination (syntagmatic structure) with the axis of selection (paradigmatic structure), we need to know a little more information about what “Karbi” means here and why the current *bor roja* would project such a seemingly impossible transformation into the future identity of the Mayong kingship. In other words, we have to understand the syntagmatic chain of historical events that would lead the king, who usually proclaims quite forcefully that his ethnicity is a complicated mix of being Koch, Kachari, and “tribal.” So, even more than understanding what “Karbi” means, we have to understand what “tribal” means in the present moment.

### *The Tribal and the Taibol*

The pre-modern binaries that legitimized kingship in myth for Mayong and the other *puwali roja* have underwent a major “downstream transvaluation” (see Preface) in the last 50-70 years. Recall that, previously, the mythemes that legitimized their rule related to an alliance (contractual and marital) between a wandering prince and the indigenous people represented by a water-born

princess. Today, however, kingship in Assam has taken a strange turn: it now is only “legitimate” if a king is a king of a recognized *Tribe* (i.e., the King of the Karbi, King of the Dimasa, King of the Tiwa-Lalung, etc.). This is all the more ironic when considered in the light of established anthropological and critical definitions of “Tribes” as pre-state political communities, or anti-state communities conditioned by state discourse (see Sahlins 1968; Fried 1975; cf. Cattelino 2008; Richland 2008; Simpson 2014). This new legitimacy is not rooted in ritual; rather it is rooted in the state and in state effects. And it seems to be a problem localized in Northeast India. Here, tribes are *supposed* to have kings and legitimate kings can only be kings of a specific tribe.



**Figure 1.11.** Taranikanta Singha, the 40<sup>th</sup> King (*Bor Roja*) of Mayong. Here, wearing multi-ethnic attire (encompassing the Karbi, Koch, Nath, Tiwa, Bengali, and general Oxomiya peoples). His shield and sword—ancestral appurtenances handed down the from Xarassa Chandra Singha to the present king—are in the design of the Karbi *nok-song*. Photograph by Mohsin Hussain.

The politics of tribalism in Northeast India is extremely complicated. No “brief sketch” can sum up this crucial feature of “durable disorder.” What I can provide, however, is a picture of what the situation looks like from the perspective of the Karbi people in Mayong who rally behind the tribal identity of being “Plains Karbi” (the English word is used). For all intents and purposes, the Mayongian Karbi are the only major “tribe” in the kingdom. Most of the Tiwa people have converted to being Karbi, leaving only a handful of houses who hardly take part in the ritual order of the kingdom. There are a few Bodo, Garo, and Mising people here and there, but not enough to substantially produce something like the Karbi *raij*, which, as we have seen, looms large in Mayongian kingship. Although the Karbi in Mayong profess ad nauseum (perhaps an effect of their ideological alignment) that there is only a single, unified Karbi tribe, they also face the reality that the state does not recognize them as Karbi or as a “Scheduled Tribe” (ST), per the 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. On official rolls, they are listed as an “Other Backwards Caste” (OBC). Yet many of the Karbi people in Mayong have been aligning with various political organizations and movements to acquire ST status—and sometimes a degree of autonomy beyond that. Most of them have put their money on identifying as a new tribe in the eyes of the Indian state: the “Plains Karbi.”

The reasoning behind this is because ST Status in Assam is locked into location and the politics thereof more than a simple performance of identity. Currently, the only Karbi people receiving official recognition as Scheduled Tribes are those who live in the Hill Districts of East Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, and the North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao). Any Karbi people living in any Plains Districts are not qualified for the benefits that would accrue from an official scheduling. In this context, the oppositional contrast between the hills and plains looks less innocent than it did in the mythopoesis of ritual. On the face of it, this distinction makes

little sense. The Indian Constitution has provisions for tribes living in plains districts in Assam: the Tiwa-Lalung and the Bodo, for example. But like the Meitei people in the Imphal Valley in Manipur, tribal status has yet to come. A lot of this has to do with the fact that the Indian government is notoriously slow in changing their ST rolls, but it also has to do with the sheer number of communities in Assam who are trying to acquire ST status. Here are just a few who are currently in limbo waiting on a decision: the Tai-Ahom, Plains Karbi, Amri Karbi (see below), Moran, Matak, Chutiya, Koch-Rajbongshi, Adivasi (Tea Tribes), Saraniya Kachari, Halam and many others. There is a massive amount of opposition to these attempts as well, especially on the part of existing ST communities would have to compete for reservations. One of the main things “durable disorder” has taught people in Assam is that the moment a state recognizes a tribe and its territorial autonomy, a large amount of people lose out. As the opposition claims, if only six of these communities (Tai-Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutiya, Koch-Rajbongshi, and Adivasi) acquire ST status, then Assam will become “officially” 50% tribal and recognized tribal groups will suffer the competition. But, just as the Mayong kingdom is not recognized as a “legitimate” kingdom by the state and nevertheless operates as such de facto, these communities already operate as de facto “tribes” whether the state recognizes them or not.

Consider the fact that many Plains Karbi in Mayong have official “ST certificates” (acquired on the black market) and most refer to themselves as “ST Manuh” (“Scheduled Tribe People”) when speaking to journalists or political figures that visit Mayong and want to know the socio-political lay of the land. This is not to even mention the ritual and mythic mediations that feed into a notion of tribe (see above). Yet, from the first month I arrived, it was made unequivocally clear to me that the Plains Karbi people do not yet have ST Status. “Plains,” here, by the way, does not denote actual geography, but how a state district is categorized. In Assam,

as of mid-2017, there are three Hills Districts: West Karbi Anglong, East Karbi Anglong, and Dima Hasao (N. C. Hills).<sup>25</sup> Each of these districts includes plains geography in them, just as many Plains Districts have highland components. And the matter is far from being one of individualistic opportunism on the part of people vying for ST Status. Consider that anyone can get an ST Certificate fairly easily. If an extremely wealthy, only English-speaking Plains Karbi family from Guwahati, who knows nothing about Karbi traditions or customs, moved to Diphu in East Karbi Anglong, they would easily be issued ST Certificates in an instant. Politics, votes, and potential control over territory, however, are all serious motives. In Assam, having ST Status is the first step toward mobilizing autonomy over land, politics, and economic flow. So how does a community acquire it?

During my first year of fieldwork, I worked closely with the former General Secretary of the Karbi Students Union (KSU), Sri Biren “Bangthai” Timung of Burha Mayong village to understand the relationship of the “Plains Karbi” people to the other *jati* living in Mayong and in neighboring areas. Biren Da gave me stacks of formal letters and memoranda written by the Karbi Students Union and various other “Plains Karbi” organizations who were pushing for their acquisition of ST Status. I poured over the material, much of which was based on research by “state ethnographers” (see Middleton 2015). One of these documents, dated April 30, 1992, was a formal report and ethnographic memorandum sent to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of Assam. It was written by Dr. B. N. Bordoloi, the Director of the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes. The report applies the situation and culture of the Plains Karbi people to the five criteria for determining whether a community qualifies for Scheduled Tribe

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<sup>25</sup> The term Dima Hasao is used both colloquially and in official (state and district) media throughout Assam, but the Indian central government still does not recognize the name of “Dima Hasao,” largely because of the pressures of non-Dimasa “tribal” communities also living in the District who, collectively, out-number the Dimasa population 3:1.

Status as laid down by the Lokur Committee in 1965 (see Government of India 2005): (1) indication of primitive traits, (2) distinctive culture, (3) geographical isolation, (4) shyness of contact with community at large, and (5) backwardness. Here, I reproduce the “findings and recommendations” of this report word for word as it will illuminate for us what “Tribal” means “officially” when trying to match a token to a type:

### Introduction

The Karbis (Mikirs) are a scheduled tribe in the two Autonomous Hill Districts of Assam.<sup>26</sup> There are many villages inhabited by the Karbis (Mikirs) in the Plains Districts of Assam. While in the southern border areas of Nagaon and Kamrup Districts they live in compact areas, in the other plains districts, namely, Golaghat and Sonitpur districts they live in scattered areas. Their exact population is not known since in the 1971 Census they have not been enumerated separately.<sup>27</sup>

### Application of Criteria

#### (1) Indication of primitive traits

The Karbis (Mikirs) living in the border areas in the souther areas of Nagaon and Kamrup districts in fact, have primitive traits. Their habitats are being hilly areas, almost all the Karbi (Mikir) families practise shifting cultivation. They also practise wet paddy cultivation wherever such flat lands are available. Their methods of cultivation are also primitive in the sense that in some villages instead of using a pair of bullock and a plough for tilling land, the herd of buffaloes are used for trampling the wet soil making it muddy. But hose Karbi (Mikir) families who are living in the other plains areas are found to practise settled cultivation only. Anyway, the very way of their life indicates that they have primitive traits.

#### (2) Distinctive culture

The Karbis (Mikirs) in the plains of Assam are still maintaining their distinctive culture inspite of the fact that they have been living with the non-Karbis (Mikirs) for centuries together. Their pattern of living, performance of socio-religious ceremonies like marriage, death ceremony, clan exogamy, preferential marriage for cross cousin, wearing of traditional dresses and ornaments, folk dances and folk songs, etc. are distinctly maintained. Many of them, of course, have forgotten their language totally and in their day dealing they use Assamese only.

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<sup>26</sup> In 1992, this would have been in reference to the North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) and Karbi Anglong.

<sup>27</sup> See Cohn 1996, but we might note here that in post-colonial India, absense of enumeration in the Census is equally as powerful a sign of the “ethnographic state” (Dirks 2001) than naming and presence.

### (3) Geographical isolation

So far as the Karbis (Mikirs) living in the plains areas of Kamrup, Nagaon, Golaghat and Sibsagar Districts are concerned, it is seen that their villages are interspersed with the non-Karbi villages and they are not geographically isolated. But so far as the Karbis (Mikirs) inhabiting hilly border areas adjacent to the Karbi Anglong and Meghalaya, it is seen that their pockets are geographically isolated to some extent because of lack of infra-structural facilities like road communication. It is, therefore, seen that this criterion is partially applicable to the Karbis (Mikirs).

### (4) Shyness of contact with community at large

The Karbis (Mikirs) are generally of meek and mild nature. Their shyness to contact with community at large specially among the female folk is still there. Of course, among the educated ones this criterion cannot be applied. It is, therefore, seen that this criterion is also only partially applicable to the Karbis (Mikirs).

### (5) Backwardness

The Karbis (Mikirs) living in the plains districts of Assam are backward educationally and economically. The number of persons receiving higher education is too small. School drop out is also very rampant. They are found to be quite indifferent towards girl's education. Economically also they are poverty stricken. Although agriculture is their primary occupation the yield they get from Jhum [i.e., swidden] cultivation in the hill border areas is not fully remunerative to the extent of labour they put. Compared to the neighbouring non-Karbi people their economic conditions are not found to be satisfactory. One can appreciate their conditions if one travels from Mainakhorong to Chakordo along with the southern bank of the Dweepar Beel where there are 12 Nos. of Karbi (Mikir) villages. Our field studies show that most of the families, not to speak of cultivable land, even don't have any homestead land. The lands on which they put up their houses belong to somebody else residing in Guwahati city itself. All these show that the criterion of Backwardness is also fully applicable to them.

### Conclusion

It is now seen that all the five criteria are applicable to the Karbis (Mikirs) in varying degrees. We, therefore, recommend the inclusion of the Karbis (Mikirs) inhabiting the Plains-Districts of Assam into the list of Scheduled Tribes (Plains) of Assam.<sup>28</sup>

First, as a rhetorical document for recommending a people to have an official status as a Tribe, this report is not only lackluster but undermines itself several times over. Aside from the fact that the criteria for determining Scheduled Tribe status have strong Victorian anthropological assumptions, the author does not make a very strong case for figuring the Plains

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<sup>28</sup> Government of Assam, NO.TRI (RC-SC/ST) 271/89/9018, Dated the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1992.

Karbi people as tokens of the general “Tribal” type. The “findings” here could apply to practically any ethnic community living in the Assam plains. It seems, however, that this document ultimately passed review at the Register General of India and the National Council for Scheduled Tribes and is now pending with the State government for final recommendation to the central government. In part, and in concurrence with Middleton (2015), the actual process of acquiring ST Status is less reliant on empirical material and more on political access and connections. The last time I spoke with Biren Da about the status in 2015, he was confident that within 5 years the Plains Karbi would be recognized as a Scheduled Tribe.

But something else in this report and memorandum peaked my interest. I began finding several documents critiquing the emergence and ST application of a group known as the “Amri Karbi,” who populate the Dimoria, Sonapur, and Khetri *duar* across the submontane region between Jagi and Rani. In Biren Da’s stack of papers and KSU communiques, the Amri ST movement was castigated as foolish, opportunistic, and built on false ethnohistorical premises. In the Bordoloi Memorandum and report cited above, the introduction letter to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of Assam contained the following plea:

It may further be stated that a prayer for special reservation for Hill Tribe quota to the Amri Karbi (Mikir) students living in the district of Kamrup for admission into different institutions was made by a few persons. We have not taken up this matter separately since inclusion of the Karbis (Mikirs) living in the Plains Districts of Assam in the list of Scheduled Tribes (Plains) will automatically solve the problem of quota for admission into different educational institutions. The term ‘Amri Karbi’ does not signify a separate tribe. ‘Amri’ simply signifies a place of inhabitation of the Plains Karbis.

Similarly, in a memorandum from KSU to the Register General of India dated August 9, 2012, the argument against a separate ST Status for “Amri Karbi” is put forth forcefully:

[T]he Karbis have the same homogenous, economical, historical and anthropological background among the Karbis living both in and outside the sixth schedule areas of Assam (i.e. Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao Autonomous Districts). They have the same language, same culture, tradition, custom, rites and rituals. The Karbis have no sub-tribe among them. The Karbi tribe or community is assumed of five major clans. They are

Ingti, Inghi, Timung, Teron and Terang. The Karbi tribe inhabited dominantly in four different customary provinces, known as the Ronghang, Chintong, Amri and Domara within the geographical boundary of present Assam. So, the term “Amri” does not signify a sub-tribe, or clan or sub-clan, while it is a name of legendary habitation of Karbi people. But, ridiculously, few member of social blunder persons, tried to misinterpret the history and legends of Karbis. Few number of Karbi people in Dimoria locality in the district of Kamrup, Assam called and introduced themselves as “Amri Karbi,” which is totally wrong concept. The major part of the Karbis in the Districts of Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Nagaon, Sonitpur, North Lakhimpur, Golaghat, Cachar and Jorhat do not agree with such ridiculous and deteriorative ideas. Regarding the controversial term “Amri Karbi,” research scholar Dr. B. N. Bordoloi, former Director of Assam Institute of Research for Tribal and Scheduled Castes, clear by commented on his research report vide No. TRI (RC-SC/ST) 271/89/90/8 dt. 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1992 as “the term Amri does not signify a separate tribe, “Amri” simply signifies of place of inhabitation of the plains Karbis.”

When I inquired with Biren Da about the “Amri Karbi” matter, he exasperatedly argued the following:

Listen, I...I am Karbi! There is only one Karbi people, not Amri, Dumrali, Hills or Plains. Just one Karbi people. The names of Amri, Ronghang, and Chintong were names of places not of people—they were found in folklore, marking where people landed during migrations, just like the name of Mayong is from Maibong. . . . This politics in Dimoria will divide us. They do not think like *taibol* people...they only think like government officers and business people. They invite us to become Amri with them, but why would we name ourselves something we are not? If we join them, their Christian leaders would not speak for Hindu Karbi people.

As far as the “Amri Karbi” in the Sonapur/Dimoria/Khetri area have it, they feel the exact same way. As one Amri Karbi student activist I met in Khetri told me,

The Plains Karbi movement is frightened because many Amri are Christian and they think we would not treat Hindu Karbi people equally. But we are all Karbi. Amri is the name we have always called ourselves in the plains. You can read this in [Edward] Stack’s book *The Mikirs*.<sup>29</sup> This is more about politics. They say they want unification, but they reject our name.

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<sup>29</sup> Stack, in his monograph on “The Mikirs” edited by Sir Charles Lyall, notes the following:

The Mikir people proper—that is, those who continue to live in the hills—are divided into three sections, called Chintòng, Rònghàng, and Āmrī. In the days of the migration eastward from the Kopili region, Āmrī stayed behind, or loitered, and Chintòng and Rònghàng waited for him as they moved from stage to stage. At last, on arriving at the Dhansiri river, Chintòng and Rònghàng resolved to be only two sections in future. The laggard Āmrī afterwards arrived, but was not received back into full fellowship. He has no honour at the general festivals, and in the distribution of rice-beer at feasts he gets no gourd for himself, but has to drink from those of the other two. These are the conditions as they exist in the Mikir Hills and Nowgong

The schism between the “Amri Karbi” and “Plains Karbi” is but one instance of the viral politics of segmentation in contemporary Assam. It is, without a doubt, a “state effect” (Scott 2009)—or, more precisely, an effect of the “ethnographic state” (Dirks 2001). In most likelihood, both groups will acquire formal recognition of ST Status by the Indian government and their destinies, like their different names, will be separate. Yet, to return to Biren Da’s exasperated statement on the composite unity of the Karbi, he mentions that there is a identifiable form of cognition called “think[ing] like *taibol* people.” I asked Biren Da later what he meant by that. His response was intriguing:

*Taibol* people think that that their future is in their past, in their traditions and rules/rituals . . . others think that their past is something to forget or make into false stories—it has no place in their future. . . and, well, a *taibol* person also knows how to be many people at the same time. First, I am Karbi, second I am a man of Mayong, third I am a man of Assam, and fourth I am an Indian. I am all these everywhere, in that order. I am not a man of Assam only when I am in Delhi. This is how *taibol* people think.

I have left the Oxomiya pronunciation of the English word “Tribal” intact here in that it marks a surfeit that cannot be captured in the English concept. States see Tribes: primitive, shy, opportunistic, backwards, frozen in time. Yet Tribes see themselves as *Taibol*: a past and future rooted in the same consubstantive form, which can participate in many identities without contradiction or paradox. While Mayongians may not have a hand on the *Tribal* situation in Assam, they do have a sense of what *Taibol*—the way the English word is pronounced in

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(Duār Bāguri); in Ni-hàng, however (the region of the Kopili), Āmrī is on an equality with the others. The Mikir Hills are chiefly inhabited by the Chintòng section, North Cachar and the hilly parts of Nowgong by the Rònghàng, and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills by Āmrī; but individuals of all three are found dwelling among the others.

These names, however, do not indicate true tribal divisions, supposed to be derived from a common ancestor and united in blood, and are probably in reality local- or place-names. Āmrī, in particular, seems to be a Khasi river-name, and Rònghàng is the legendary site of Sòt Rēchō’s capital. The real tribal exogamous divisions run through all three, and are called *kur* (A Khasi word: Assamese, *phoid*). Each of the three sections of the race has within it the same *kurs*, and the individuals belonging to these *kurs*, whether in Chintòng, Rònghàng, or Āmrī, observe the same rules of exogamy. . . . The Mikirs who settled in the plains of Nowgong and took to plough cultivation are called *Dumrāli* by the Mikirs and *Tholuā* by the Assamese. . . . They also have the same *kurs* as the other three sections of hill Mikirs (Stack and Lyall 1908: 15–17).

*Mayongor Upabhaxa*—is today. For the Plains Karbi in Mayong, *taibol* indexes hills, war, pork, goddess worship, and booze, plus a lost language, a host of customs that don't really match to mainstream Vaishnavite religious society, "color" (meaning pageantry in dance and textile), and most importantly *autonomy*. For the Koch, Nath, and other Caste Hindu groups in Mayong, *taibol* means ancestry that has been overcome (morally and religiously), laxity in customary rules, and most importantly, again, *autonomy*.

### *The "Liminal State"*

Between 2000 and 2016, Assam went from having 23 to 33 Districts, from having 2 to 4 Autonomous Districts, from having 2 to 9 Autonomous "Councils," and from having 0 to 31 Development Councils for "economically backward" ethnic and tribal communities. The Amri Karbi have a Development Council; the Plains Karbi do not. In fact, it was one of former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's last promises to provide Development Councils for, believe it or not, both Brahmins and Plains Karbi before the Congress government lost the recent elections. The BJP government has been mum on whether or not it will ultimately provide a new development council for Plains Karbi or force them into either merging with the Amri Karbi or remaining recognized as an "Other Backwards Caste" in the state's rolls. But Development Councils, like ST Status, provide strong inroads toward building an autonomous council or eventually an autonomous district. But what does autonomy actually mean in this potential situation?

As far as political and economic matters go for autonomous districts and autonomous councils, the significance of "autonomy" is complicated by what my friend Philip (a Dimasa Youth Congress leader and contractor from Haflong in N. C. Hills/Dima Hasao) calls the "tribal-political paradox." Philip, who is a savvy and cunning character, can speak over a dozen languages fluently, and is able to build alliances and funnel money across party lines in an

almost Machiavellian way, once described this paradox diagrammatically for me. To hammer his point home, he drew the following permutational diagram in one of my field notebooks in 2012:

A = Bureaucrat (any government officer who represents the Assam State Government)

B = Politician (anyone who stands for elections and wins, or any local cultural activist)

(-) = Stupid: fails at concentrating power and money

(+) = Smart: succeeds at concentrating power and money

A (+)  $\leftrightarrow$  B (+) ----- Good for everyone, but never happens in autonomous districts; sometimes in autonomous councils without districts because the state government still has political and bureaucratic control; e.g. Tiwa Autonomous Council

A (-)  $\leftrightarrow$  B (+) ----- Good for politicians and interests of local people, but bad for state government; no ability to funnel state government money to locals; Bureaucrats have money but no power, politicians have power but only local money; e.g. Karbi Anglong

A (+)  $\leftrightarrow$  B (-) ----- Good for state government, but not local politics and local people. Lots of power and money in bureaucracy, but no way to filter it down locally; Politicians have power but no money (so they lose power quickly); e.g. Dima Hasao

A (-)  $\leftrightarrow$  B (-) ----- Good for no one except the bureaucrats and politicians who take all money for themselves, but have no real power; power ends up in hands of militants and leads to constant violence; e.g. Bodoland (or Dima Hasao 10 years ago)

This brilliant four-part permutation is from a unique mind coming from a unique situation (i.e., the political experiences of an autonomous district that was at war with itself for 25 years). Yet, Philip made something quite clear to me with respect to the uniqueness of autonomous councils by themselves—among all possible permutations of “tribal autonomy” in practical terms<sup>30</sup>—and that is the fact that “they do not need informal networks like *xohai* [‘solicited help’] to fix the shortcomings of politicians and bureaucrats.” (Philip H., pers. commun.). Almost paradoxically, the current Assam state-linked status of Autonomous Councils without Autonomous Districts (like the Tiwa/Lalung, Rabha Hasong, Thengal Kachari, Mishing, Deori, etc.) makes them literally more autonomous because territory does not factor in to customary rule.

Now, state recognition at this level affords more than just autonomy and status. It affords access to state-sponsored media. In 2016, the Gobha *deoroja* (now recognized by the state and

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<sup>30</sup> Neither nationhood nor statehood are a practical possibility for Assam’s “tribal” groups in the political present

media as the “King of the Tiwas/Lalungs”) announced that he would no longer support the Congress Party, and shifted his allegiance to the BJP. He tried to downplay the political voice of his office in his spiel, but his statement—which circulated across news networks throughout the state—spoke loudly to those in Mayong who feel slightly threatened by the power of the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC), who have the Gobha Roja as their literal king. He has final say in matters of customary importance and is a strong voice for political decision-making. Add to this the fact that the current Gobha Roja is a young guy in his 20s who, in my meetings with him, is as savvy and cunning as my friend Philip. The Karbi *raij*, the *bor roja*, the Koch *raij* and many others have their eyes fixed on what the TAC will do next.

For one thing, the TAC has made it abundantly clear that it is their goal to turn Morigaon District into a Tiwa Autonomous District. Add to that the fact that the Gobha Roja still claims Mayong to be one of its subordinate, satellite kingdoms. This didn’t seem to be anything more than a stale and provincial argument until 2009 when an opportunity for all the *puwali* and *duar* kings opened up. In what might be called a “bronze sandal event,” the Tarun Gogoi Chief Ministership agreed to give many of the kings in the area an annual “royal allowance” (*Raj Bhatta*), between Rs. 3000 and 9000 (depending on population size of their kingdom), for managing their annual rituals and ceremonials.<sup>31</sup> Mayong was a part of this scheme and the current *bor roja* was given a small initial payment. It was a first sign of state recognition on the part of Mayong and it seemed as if a degree of autonomy loomed on the horizon. But, in what the current Mayong king described to me as a “very sad” situation in late 2013, he was no longer given any allowance in the years that followed: “Mayong is not part of the Gobha kingdom and I

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<sup>31</sup> This was part of Gogoi’s general strategy of appeasing ethnonationalists: “You have to give importance to cultural activities to keep them [separatists, ethnonationalists] busy.” <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/idea-exchange-assam-assembly-elections-2016-what-is-anti-national-if-i-go-by-centre-rule-whole-assam-would-turn-into-a-jail-cm-tarun-gogoi/>

do not have a seat at the Gobha roja's *darbar* at the Jon Beel Mela every year. Because of that, the government stopped giving me *raj bhatta* for the Pancha Devata festival. I am not *taibol*, so the government pays no attention. This is a very sad matter for Mayong, especially for the *taibol* people, the Karbi, in Mayong. They depend on me and I depend on them."

Mayong thus seems pinned between the state and tribes in the current situation. In a paradigmatic register, however, the situation is not so unlike the medieval period where Mayong was more or less a "liminal state," betwixt and between the greater kingdoms, ally and enemy to its fellow baby kingdoms, and ritually effervescent with an uncertain destiny. Cosmographically, Mayong maintains its "stranger kingdom" and "baby kingdom" status today—thus perhaps making it more *taibol* in concept and practice than any of the neighboring kingdoms who have ethnicized their sovereignty. With the tribalization of the *puwali* and *duar* kingdoms—Gobha becomes Tiwa, Dimoria becomes Amri Karbi, Rani becomes Bodo—Mayong is a *taibol* outlier in an increasingly tribalized region. Yet, even with these new players rearranging the political landscape, speculations on how to prevent the disintegration or destitution of the kingdom thrive, just as the absence of Mayong from the hegemonic historical records created an interpretive freedom and surplus for the local historical imagination.

### *Syntagmatic Surfeits*

A year later, however, the tune of the king changed. As I showed at the beginning of this section, the Mayong king now makes public statements to the effect that he is a "Karbi king." To be clear, he has neither converted the kingship or his personhood, nor is he rewriting history by claiming that his lineage was Karbi all along (in the key of the *ghor juwai* myth). He still holds strong to the Kachari/Koch stranger king narrative. But his strategy is now to claim, much like

the Roja of Nellie did in 2011, that he is the patron king of a particular tribe.<sup>32</sup> To reinvent the Mayongian kingship as *taibol* is, in many senses, completely in line with the ritual and paradigmatic history of the kingdom. Recall how the most recent transformation of oppositional contrasts for the Mayong kingdom looks now:

<b><u>KOCH KING</u></b>	<b><u>KARBI TRIBE</u></b>
Male Principle	Female Principle
Plains	Hills
Patron of Krishna (is Krishna)	Patrons of the Goddess
Passive	Active
Stable	Wandering

The king is Koch, a Vaishnavite patron of Krishna, stable and passive in the plains. The “indigenous people” are now unequivocally the Karbi in Burha Mayong, who are patrons of the goddess, stewards of the hills, and actively seeking alliances with the Plains Karbi movement elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> It is this “active” and “wandering” element of the Karbi people today that has, in turn, produced a surfeit that resists the king’s new cosmographic attempt at recreating Mayong as a kingdom *for* a tribe.

Consider the ongoing “Basudeb idol” controversy in Mayong. According to the current *bor bangthai*, his father (the previous *bor bangthai*) and the father of the current *bor roja* (i.e.,

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<sup>32</sup> The Nellie Roja is also Koch, yet because his “baby kingdom” encompasses the Tiwa people, he aligned himself under the Gobha *roja* as an affiliate king—one of the Gobha’s satellite *paso roja* (5 kings). On that point, one theory as to why the 5 and 7 *roja* circuits are so common in Central Assam, apart from the duodecimal reckoning that stands in for all countable things in the universe, is that they were modeled on the *Baro Bhuyan* (12 Chief) system that pre-dated the influx of all the *puwali* and *duar raijyo* (see Bhuyan 1949) as well as on the Ahom-type “galactic polity” (cf. Tambiah [1973] 2013). From there, if one or two of the larger *puwali raijyo*—who were as commonly at war with each other as they were allied—adopted this model, then it is possible that the system spread via a kind of “antagonistic acculturation” (Devereaux and Loeb 1943). In this hypothesis, each king would incorporate its own duodecimal galactic model, in its own particular ritual logics, in order to keep the schismogenetic playing field as symmetrical as possible.

<sup>33</sup> This structure leaves out all the other ethnic groups of the Mayong kingdom in a way that goes against Xarassa Chandra Singha’s original intent. Even if the Jugi-Nath, Koch, Bengali, and Oxomiya peoples have a place in the kingdom, the primary mythopoeic structure of the kingdom requires only these oppositions to have cosmic legitimacy. The incorporation of others is, more or less, a replication of Suinat Singha’s original capacity to draw in and domesticate others into the Mayongian fold.

the 39<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong, Ghanakanta Singha) had a falling out over the origins of the *bor roja*'s own tutelary *goxai*. A claim was made by the previous *bor bangthai* that the Basudeb idol was actually a gift from the Karbi people to the king. The statue was supposedly unearthed from the Mayong hills. The previous *bor roja* rejected this claim, sticking with the story that the current idol is the one Xarassa Chandra Singha brought back from Nawadeep at the turn of the seventeenth century. A schism unfolded whereby the Karbi people felt miffed that their gift was never acknowledged as a public bestowing of honor to the king (who would, in turn, patronize the cult of the Basudeb *goxai*) and the Mayong king felt that they were trying to rewrite history and disassociate the origins of the patron cult from the line of kings. There were larger political ideologies and alignments underwriting the schism at the time, but ones I need not go into here. The result, however, was part of an increasing socio-cosmic, political, and religious distance between the Karbi people and the Koch king. As one of my Karbi friends in Burha Mayong put it, “We [the Mayong king and the Karbi people] were once like brothers. These days, our relationship is not so good. We have our *bangthai* and the *baro bangthai* committee to handle our everyday problems—what more do we really need? We regular cultivators only have a relationship with the Mayong king 2 or 3 days out of the year. What benefit is there in that?”

The Mayong king, for his part, needs the Karbi people to retain his legitimacy in the present moment, on top of the fact that he considers it the sacred duty of his office. When I asked him about the Basudeb controversy in late 2014, he responded equivocally: “The original *murti* (“idol”) came from Nawadeep. This is true. But, that was also over four hundred years ago. How do we know that it was not lost, or stolen, or became broken—and then replaced by a gift from our Karbi brothers? My father was a staunch supporter of the Koch-Rajbongshi political cause, maybe he saw their argument as a threat....I try to mend relations and make our

contract/accounts (*theka-hisap*) good and honorable. We have to review them every year. For Mayong to survive, it has to remain good for the Karbi people.”

### **Mythopoeic Politics**

Each year when the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial unfolds, Mayongians find themselves doing what they have done since the turn of the seventeenth century: taking blessings from the king and his patron deities, bestowing him and his affiliate kings-as-gods with honors, reproducing the “contractual” dual order of sovereignty as balance of peace and war, and watching the king both triumph over the feminine principle of life while also being ritually availed of it as a source for accessing and distributing the forces of life itself. The (Plains) Karbi people in Burha Mayong feel a tension between their political desires for ST Status (and what it means for their future) and a deteriorating but seemingly necessary fealty to the Mayong *bor roja*. Just as the Mayong kingdom finds itself again operating as a “liminal state,” the Karbi people remain betwixt and between political possibilities, caught between more powerful polities with better fortunes (see above on the Amri Karbi controversy). Whatever rhymes with colonial backwater seems to be the present state of things. But if Mayong is an exception to the prevailing political order in the present, it is still the exception that proves the rule of mythic legitimacy. The mythopoeic function of history unfolds as a relation between paradigmatic analogies and a syntagmatic sequence that produces surfeits that do not quite align with the cosmographic order of things. And it is this poetic function that instills a sense of wonder and possibility in the present moment, demanding—just as the *bor roja* put it—an annual review of ritual contracts and accounts. And it compels the dynamic of Mayongian politics and history forward. Hardly “motionless in the cycle,” Mayongians cycle forward through the motions of myth.

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Yet, the “mythopoeic politics” of Mayong are not the only side of the “cosmographic situation” that compels Mayongians to ritually reckon (and reproduce) it via the shared account. There is a darker side, one connected to the idea that publicity and political life are actually deceptive screens for a more complicated universe of forces that both harness and sap life itself. In the following chapter we turn to what Mayongians refer to as the *so’rang* realm of life, where sorcery and secret accounting thrive and where acquiring the vital means for propagation turn on the elusive relationship to the mother goddess. As we saw above, the mythopoeic move to make the Karbi Tribe the king’s socio-political access point to the benefactions of the goddess is politically unstable. What we intend to show in the next chapter is that this instability runs deeper, indeed at levels of the cosmological order that exceed any state, tribe, or political figure.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Hanuman Marka**

#### **Sorcery, Forces of Life, and the *Maya* of Mayong**

*If the religious forces are the very principle of the forces of life, they are in themselves of such a nature that contact with them is a fearful thing for the ordinary man.*

*Above all, when they reach a certain level of intensity, they cannot be concentrated in a profane object without destroying it.*

– Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (1964: 98)

#### **Prelude: Secret Accounts at the Limit of Ethnography**

As outlined in the Introduction, secret accounts (*so'rang hisap*) in Mayong refer mainly to the cash ledgers that are packed away discreetly in people's homes. Most of these ledgers account for simple cash transactions of individuals and households and are rather minimalistic in detail. Rarely are names, dates, or anything besides amounts and items included in the bookkeeping, for if anyone were to view the transactional connections of the particular data therein, the ledgers would risk becoming objects or conduits for assault sorcery. When such particularistic details *are* included in secret accounts, the form and purpose of the account is entirely different.

For example, many Caste Hindu Mayongians<sup>1</sup> (but not the Karbi or Tiwa “tribes”) keep astrological life-charts (*kusti*) in their homes—also referred to colloquially as “life accounts” (*jibonor hisap*)—which narrate and predict an astrological calculation of one's entire life course. They detail when and if one will be married, how many children one will have, when and if certain accidents or fortunes will occur, and when one will die. They also contain a person's “real name,” which is protected by the shield name they use in ordinary life. Like single-entry

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<sup>1</sup> In Mayong, it is predominantly people who write the title Saikia, Hazarika, and Baruah who have *kusti*, although some Koch and Jugi Nath *jati* have them as well.

cash ledgers, these *kusti* are not to be looked at (especially by the person whose life they describe) and are rolled up and hidden away as sacred objects. Their content is supposed to be known only by the astrologer (*jyotixi*) who creates them during the time one undergoes a baptismal naming ceremony (*oxus; gononi*). The calculations required to compose a *kusti* require between 7 and 10 days to complete. The astrologer who does them is most often a consultant tied to one's particular *phoid* ("clan"), *got* ("lineage"), or *khel* ("kin residential sector"), and uses the *kusti* to help inform the decisions a person must make in her life. *Kusti* are anywhere between one and five meters long, depending on the eventfulness and calculated length of one's life.

One of my research assistants, Tirtha Saikia, wanted to show me his *kusti* for research purposes. It was a potentially dangerous offer, which I initially declined. But Tirtha insisted it would be useful for me so I agreed on the condition that he would only show me what it looked like and then put it away again. We took a motorcycle to his home in Ouguri Village (on the northern side of Mayong) and Tirtha snuck into his parents' room to take his *kusti* out of a small box kept in an armoire. Just as he brought it into the drawing room and unfolded it, his father Shri Prabin Saikia, entered the room and let out a gasp. Prabin Da began to scold Tirtha and told him to put the *kusti* back in its safe box and never look at it again (see Figure 2.1). Tirtha explained the situation to his father who calmed down, but remained quietly unnerved until it was rolled up about five minutes later and returned to safekeeping.

Prabin Da started to describe the means and methods astrologers use to create a *kusti*, using various astrological guide books, meditation, and details collected from a family's history. While he was doing so, Tirtha started to look the *kusti* over more carefully. To his utter surprise, he could not understand anything written therein except for a few dates and terms here and there. The *kusti* was written in a mix of Sanskrit and Oxomiya and filled with various *yantra chakra*

(Tantric diagrams) revealing the cosmic events that coincided with his birth and future life events. Tirtha belted out a laugh and shrugged at me, “All this worry over something that I cannot interpret and barely read! You now see the measures made to keep *kusti* secret!”



**Figure 2.1.** One of my research assistants, Tirtha Saikia, reviewing his *kusti* while his father, Sri Prabin Saikia (a noted Mayongian sorcerer [*bej*] and astrologist), chides him for doing so.

What unites household ledgers with *kusti* as “secret accounts” is three-fold. First, the information contained within them are both representations and objectifications of the forces of life itself—the particular data of prosperity or hazard, of fortune and misfortune, of surplus and scarcity. To borrow a term from da Col (2012a, 2012b), they are “cosmoeconomic” objects; they condense the forces of life into a medium for optimizing one’s life course. Second and related,

both are extremely vulnerable to the logic and practice of sorcery—as well as its counterpart, anti-sorcery, or what we might also call “dewitching” following Favret-Saada (2015), meaning the therapeutic practices of curing, healing, exorcism, and removing other kinds of harm inflicted by acts of sorcery. Accessing these documents means accessing the forces that comprise a person’s life. Thus a sorcerer could always use the particulate data within to perform a variety of manipulations—whether they understand the content or not—from the violently harmful to the diagnostic, prophylactic, and curative. Particulate handles, as we will show in Chapter 6, are all a sorcerer needs. Third, both have an implicit relationship with what I have been referring to as the *so’rang* realm: the *anomic*, discreet, or publicly disagreeable realm of life. This takes some unpacking for the distinction is not so tied into morality as the literal meaning of *so’rang* as “unlawful” might imply. *Kusti*, which are cosmographic documents *par excellence*, outline a future course of an individual’s life which, is not meant to be reckoned at the level of public benefit, or treated as a matter of public knowledge and manipulation. For example, if a *kusti* shows that a person will elope for marriage, or become rich, or anything of the sort that the king or his analogues have the power to audit, then to make them a thing-of-the-*raij* would evoke almost certain disorder. The *raij* would have to involve itself in astrological prescience, which would challenge its reliance upon the king, his analogues, and oracles to be the sanctioned mediators for public accounting (see below, and Chapters 3 and 5).

However, in the *so’rang* realm of secret accounts, a person’s account ledger and a person’s mind are considered to be analogous forms of “intention” (*mon*). Both risk the threat of manipulation by a sorcerer’s gaze and magically guided arrows (*ban*). The stakes are equally high: in one case it is the victim’s (or her family’s) livelihood, in the other the victim’s sanity (*xustomon*) and social survival. Effectively, the secrecy of secret accounts amounts to a way of

masking one's intentions, so even if secret accounts were somehow revealed, techniques of opacity, minimalism, and obfuscation built into their form would render them unusable by sorcerers and mitigate any potential threat to one's economic, social, and biocosmological well-being. But the danger remains and is doubled in that the effects of sorcery or anti-sorcery on an individual's intention spread contagiously. The larger sense here is that a social whole is contained in each individual part; manipulate a part and you affect the whole. The logic is similar to pollution logics in their commonsensical Hindu registers in that any act of sorcery may, via substance transfer, contagiously affect all members of a corporate body—a clan, a patrilineage, a household, a larger residential unit (*khel, suburi*), and sometimes a village. Secret accounts are thus more than a technology to protect one's individual well-being: they are a means for protecting "dividuals" (Marriott 1976; Strathern 1988) whose kinship is constituted by a mutual binding together of the forces of life itself.

Consider the following example to further illustrate the value of Mayongian secret accounts. One day I witnessed a village meeting (*raijmel*) in Burha Mayong that centered around an alternative proposal for "development" (*unnoyon*) in the village. An official from Assam's Forest Department arrived to train villagers in a new program that combined volunteer forest management, collective donations, and a matching grant to raise funds for infrastructural improvements in the village. Villagers in Burha Mayong are already caretakers of the forest, so this obligation did not seem intrusive or difficult. However, during the public meeting, the official began talking about the need to keep accounts carefully, transparently, and in detail—i.e., for every household to have a record of how much they make in a month and be able to show, relative to that, how much they could donate for the program. All hell broke loose during the *raijmel*. Villagers became quite angry; they considered the program to be a kind of invasive audit

and even a potential scam. Nevertheless, some big-men in the village forcefully argued for attempting the program anyway, no doubt because of the kind of political connections they could draw from it, but also because public accounts are a domain they often control (see Chapter 3).

After a couple of months of trying to collect the information the Forest Department needed, the program eventually petered out. No one had a problem with donating portions of their income to be put against a matching grant; after all, that money would be used to improve local services and build infrastructures that would benefit everyone. Indeed, the idea of pooling resources in a kind of redistributive fashion and acquiring a gift on top of that made total sense to the villagers in Burha Mayong (again, see Chapter 3). However, it was the *method* of accounting, the suspiciously invasive sense of audit, and most importantly, *the obligation of rendering the intentions of one's economic life (how much one earns, saves, and would want to donate) and rendering those intentions unequivocally clear for all to see*, that forced the program to fail. In so many words, the villagers were being asked to turn their secret accounts into shared ones, and in such a way that they were not being guided by elders in a controlled environment.

Left to their own devices, and without a public of elders to facilitate and selectively control the opening of secretly held accounts, the villagers of Burha Mayong decided they would rather forfeit this development scheme rather than risk unraveling a structure that protects their collective livelihood from invisible (or uncontrollable) threats. As one young member of the Karbi *raij* described it, “This scheme is bad. Who will prevent someone from having evil eye (*beya soku*) and doing dangerous strategic works (*beya kutniti kam korise*) if our family's expenses and earnings are open for everyone to see? There is no protection...it would only take one jealous man to destroy an entire family.” Some information is just too vulnerable to be left to

ideologies of transparency. The stakes are too high for they concern the forces that bind collective life together.

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By their very definition, secret accounts are inaccessible. Both phenomenologically and ethically they resist detailed ethnographic description. On one hand, I was able to view some secret accounts after gathering the trust of my informants—and from this I have been able to note some very general principles about their structure and form (here and in the Introduction). But, on the other hand, there is nothing more I can reveal about their content that would not violate that trust. By the very same logic, however, once information in a secret account is opened up to public scrutiny, it is no longer secret at all. Because the content of the shared account is often drawn from secret accounts that are made public, secret accounts proper are somewhat of a phenomenological impossibility (at least in the Wittgensteinian sense that there cannot be a private form of semiosis). Chapters 3-6 will explore this process in greater detail, yet for now it suffices to say that once secret accounts manifest or are mobilized for purposes beyond storage and household memory, they become something else entirely and are resituated for new *cosmographic* purposes.

The travails of political life with respect to states, tribes, and kings presented one side of the “cosmographic situation” for Mayongians in Chapter 1. This chapter presents a different but linked perspective on that situation, where sorcery and *so’rang* attempts to access and manipulate the forces of life pose a deceptive “shortcut to prosperity,” which undercuts the ritual function of kingship to do the same. Due to the inaccessible character of secret accounts, this chapter focuses more concretely on the features of this side of the cosmographic situation in Mayong. Yet, rather than describe and analyze the vast realm of sorcery practices in Mayong in

extensive detail, which would constitute a thesis in itself, I instead provide a condensed description of the cosmologies of deception by focusing on the myth of an “object”—a magical coin called the Hanuman *marka*—which has analogous features with the life of secret accounts and shares an operative logic in the *so’rang* realm of sorcery. Vicariously, an in-depth study of the Hanuman *marka* myth allows us to grasp the realm in which—and the processes through which—secret accounts are made and unmade, but without having to ethnographically divulge the vulnerable content of secret accounts to the very real detriment of Mayongians.

### **The Cursed Talisman**

So, we begin with a dream. It is a familiar dream, widespread in world mythology: somewhere there is an object so powerful that, if found and scrutinized to be genuine, it renders dreams into realities. Yet, and if indeed discovered at all, the object accomplishes its magical feat only at a heavy price or curse exacted. It is the dream of the cursed talisman, the Holy Grail, the Book of Thoth, certain swords and rings in Norse mythology (or the “one ring” in J. R. R. Tolkien’s mythopoeia), the Golden Fleece, and—if I might be allowed some interpretive license—certain species of free gifts, like the Hindu *dān* (see Raheja 1988; Parry 1986, 1994) or a lunch with Don Draper. In the final analysis, what unites these objects is their phenomenal impossibility; that is to say, their promise of *freely* obtaining power, wealth, immortality, purification, et cetera is ultimately undercut by the very same magical promise. Danger becomes imminent. Crushing responsibilities and obligations grow. Or, something inevitably goes wrong. Or, something is exacted. Or, something is corrupted. Or, a price or reciprocation is demanded—often in the form of sacrificing one’s own life, whether literally or metaphorically. Simply put, the dream and its objects are, by definition, impossible.

In Assam, one of these impossible objects has become a source of contemporary dream-making, interest, and intrigue. It is a magic coin, bearing the branded image of the monkey god Hanuman. The Hanuman *marka*,<sup>2</sup> as it is called, promises infinite prosperity by magnetizing money and rice to its bearer . . . and yet. By exploring the discursive features and pragmatic entailments of this “and yet” in Mayong, where stories of this coin circulate with an almost phatic quality, this chapter demonstrates that the dream of the Hanuman *marka*—i.e., its very impossibility—is an *impossibility of representing life itself*.

To wit, the Hanuman *marka*—like so many amulets and talismans, and also like Mayongian secret accounts—is framed in myth as an objectification of the forces of life. More specifically, it is an object that incites, condenses, and channels feminine life-giving power—*xokti* (*shakti*)—the force of all life forces, which worms its way throughout the cosmos and manifests in various energies, only observable in its effects.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as objectified in the Hanuman *marka* these forces are not meant to be mobilized toward ends of life *over death* in some sort of biopolitical sense. Rather, they are mobilized to make life *worth living*. As the myth has it, they shuttle and deliver what Aristotle defined as “external goods”—reproductive potential, longevity, wealth, health, etc.—without which true happiness, true flourishing, is impossible. In the terms of A. M. Hocart ([1952] 2004: 11), myths like the Hanuman *marka* matter to people because

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<sup>2</sup> *Marka* meaning “stamp” or “brand.”

<sup>3</sup> Compare, here, with William Mazzarella’s discussion on *mana* (forthcoming), with respect to the incitement and containment of collective energies in mass society. My choice to gloss *xokti* as the “force of all life forces” is, in some respects, a nod to the Durkheimians’ treatment of *mana*. Although I agree with Viveiros de Castro (1998: 79) that translating *xokti* (or other mana-type concepts) into the terms of social physics, i.e. “force” or “power,” is misleading and perhaps “an equally mysterious gloss,” I nevertheless consider the notion of a “superordinate force of life” here useful. On one hand, my gloss indexes the feminine theologies associated with the concept (especially as reproductive power), and on the other hand, it respects the idea that *xokti* both is and is not metaphysical (cf. Schrempf 1992). It is a force that commands other forces of life (health, wealth, well-being, strength, etc.), but it is neither transcendent nor immanent . . . simply all-pervasive. Moreover, the intellectual and “ontological” gymnastics of Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) are rather moot here for there is no reason to treat this force of all life forces in their conception of ontology. *Shakti* (*xokti*), in both great and little traditions (see Wadley 1975), is bigger than either nature or culture and needs no *bourgeois gentilhomme* to make it do work for anthropological self discovery.

they impart knowledge about life itself; and in mythical thought *life* means “not merely keeping alive, but living well, enjoying bodily vigour for the full span allotted to man.”

But it is not—or not merely—practical, conceptual, or allegorical knowledge about living well that the myth of the Hanuman *marka* imparts. In mythic thought more generally—and this in societies we might deem “modern” or otherwise—*life* is neither an abstract concept nor a transcendent cipher. Nor is it often subject to a classification discreet from non-life (rocks and cars, for example, share in *xokti*). Life in mythical thought is about *feeling* what it means to live well, *experiencing* a vital totality—a biocosmology, if you will—where “limits between different spheres are not insurmountable barriers,” where there “is no specific difference between the various forms of life,” and where “by a sudden metamorphosis everything can be turned into everything” (Cassirer [1944] 1972: 81).

Such a potential experience, a *participation*, matters deeply to Mayongians who struggle in the contemporary moment to coexist peacefully and collectively in the wake of ongoing ethno-nationalist violence, statist oppression, and precarious modes of political belonging; to craft a shared image of belonging together in the face of viral political segmentation; and to maintain a hold over diminishing forests, farmland, and fisheries that have sustained families for generations. Thus the dream to find and bear the Hanuman *marka*—and the retelling of its myth over and over again—is a timely one. It points to and enacts the potential of a better, more *moral*, future.

. . . And yet. Even though the Hanuman *marka* is supposed to represent and channel the forces of life, to “magnetize” wealth and health to its bearer by tapping into a cosmic totality, the coin resists ever manifesting as a genuine magical talisman. Moral aspirations confront sheer vitality. When a purported coin is found, it always appears as something else: a counterfeit

commodity, a sacrificial gift, or if framed as genuine, then it is undercut by a surfeit of forces immanent to its magic, especially the coin's propensity to disappear. Nevertheless, "belief" in the coin remains. There are thus three "sublime" curses of this talisman, three qualifications (or undercuttings) of the coin's power and authenticity: (1) its logical impossibility as a commodity, (2) its moral impossibility as a gift, and (3) its temporal/phenomenal deferral in an optative mood. Effectively, when the power of the coin appears, either the coin itself or its authenticity disappears...and yet, the wish is that both power and authenticity will someday appear together in the real and as-yet-undiscovered coin.

I will return to all of this in more ethnographic detail below, but for now it suffices to say that the Hanuman *marka* paradoxically both reveals and revels in its own impossibility, its own deceptive promise of prosperity. The concrete argument here is that this very impossibility of objectification has a lot to do with what the coin *attempts* to represent: *viz.* forces of life that cannot be represented or objectified without becoming something *other than* life itself (again, being . Said otherwise, the moment when life is objectified or represented as such—thus revealing the almost magical quality that everything is interrelated, and thus nothing being what it might normally seem to be—it isn't "life" anymore. It becomes something very different from life.<sup>4</sup> Guided by ethnographic theory along the way, I will demonstrate that this deceptive quality of "life itself" is an explicit feature of Mayongian cosmologies in the making...the very same cosmologies that keep secret accounts secret or draw them out into the shared account.

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<sup>4</sup> Here we might find an analogy in Jacques Lacan's (1991: 228–29) discussion of desire (*le désir*): "That the subject should come to recognize and to name his/her desire, that is the efficacious action of analysis. But it is not a question of recognizing something which would be entirely given. In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world." For Lacan, desire is purely unconscious, but in representing it—i.e., necessarily representing it in discourse, in a talking cure—desire turns into something else. Something new is created in the reifying act. It is no longer unconscious desire as such, but something else, something displaced...a fetish, as it were. Similarly, for Freud, just such an ontological movement can be grasped in the displacements that occur between a dream's latent and manifest content, or in the displacements that occur in various neuroses.

The impossibility of acquiring quick and dirty access to the forces of life that sustain the whole cosmos reflects a set of shared presuppositions about the not-quite-shared order of the universe in Mayong—a totality in the making—which shapes the pragmatic and semiotic efficacy of the Hanuman *marka* as a *living*, rather than only life-giving, myth. This, in turn, suggests that we might need to give pause to anthropological theories that either seek out “life itself” as a stable analytic, or find its place in myth and cosmologies to be conceptually transparent, immediate, unproblematic....or even “ontological.” For Mayongians, the deceptive character of their cosmology-in-the-making finds its operative expression most clearly in the realm of sorcery, through which we must now take a long detour in order to ground what makes both the Hanuman *marka* and secret accounts problematic sites for objectifying the forces of life.

### **Mayongian Sorcery**

Across Northeast India—and indeed, across much of the sub-continent—rumors circulate of Mayong being a center of dangerous black magic, inhabited by sorcerers (*bej*; also known as *ojha* or *kobiraj*)<sup>5</sup> who can heal, inflict harm, or manipulate one’s intentions from a distance. In Assam, it is not uncommon to hear Mayong referred to as *jadur dex* (“country of magic”)<sup>6</sup> or *bhoyonkor dex* (“country of fear/danger”), a place where anyone could be either a victim or practitioner of sorcery. It is the site of some of Assam’s most recognized apocrypha: in Mayong

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<sup>5</sup> The term *bej* (or sometimes when referring to a female practitioner, *bejini*), is often translated as “folk medicine doctor,” “witch doctor,” or “quack” in Assamese dictionaries. Yet, I choose to translate the term as “sorcerer” in that Mayongian *bej* refer to their practices (*bejali*) in more generic terms of “manipulation” (*niontron*) rather than just “healing.”

<sup>6</sup> “Magic” is, at the end of the day, a rather unfortunate translation of *jadu*, *tantra-mantra* (cf. Burchett 2008), *bejali*, *indrajalaal*, *thogbaji*, and other terms that differentiate among sorcery, religious practice, illusion, deception, etc. in Assamese as well as in many other South Asian languages. Although a perlocutionary warning may fall upon deaf ears due to existing translation repertoires, it should be mentioned that the term “magic” collapses salient, lived distinctions into an almost “*mana*-like” signifier (in Lévi-Strauss’ terms), i.e., its significance “floats” and ultimately specifies very little as to what we are looking at (my thanks to Giovanni da Col for this point). Although, this doesn’t necessarily mean that “magic” as a concept is always anti-ethnographic (see, e.g., Jones 2011).

chairs stick to one's behind, chilis dance off of plates, cooked meat comes alive in one's stomach, fish purchased in the market decrease in weight by kilos upon cooking them, etc. Indeed, the moment I mentioned to anyone in Assam that I was conducting research in Mayong, the same set of fearful gasps followed: "Magic! Sorcery! Witchcraft! Why have you not been turned into a sheep, yet? By the way, I have a problem, do you now know enough charms (or the rights ones) to fix it?"

Mayong is infamously occult, but its infamy is a recent historical invention. There are virtually no colonial era records that link "Desh Myung" to anything occult—or even to anything Tantric for that matter. As described in Chapter 1, Mayong was more or less off the imperial map. Local folklorists informed me that the fame of Mayong as a center of black magic is most likely a twentieth-century invention, owing in part to the publication of Benudhar Rajkhowa's *Assamese Demonology* (1905), which catalogues various folktales concerning malevolent ghosts, exorcisms, and sorcery throughout the region.<sup>7</sup> Rajkhowa [(1905) 1973: 145–46], whose entire text lacks citation or attribution, had this to say about Mayong:

Mayang [sic] is a *mauza* lying in the district of Nowgong. It has been noted for witchcraft for years. The people keep *daini* ["witches" or female spirit servants] and other spirits in their houses. They send them to any man whom they want to injure. They bring good things from other houses by sending a *daini*. This emissary is offered a *pooja* [sic], and is sent out on her mission with these words: "Back when[ce] I bid you. Away with my enemy unless he calls on me and satisfies my demand." The people have places reserved in the dark secluded parts of their houses for *pooja* to the ghosts. I note below some of the preternatural doings of the Mayang people.

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<sup>7</sup> It is also probable that the infamy of Mayong was a further extension of existing colonial stereotypes related to the sacred "feminine" geography of Kamarupa (so-called "Ancient Assam") in Tantric Sanskrit texts (or rather texts that were "ordered as 'Tantras' in the colonial register" [Kar 2004: 56]). According to Bodhisattva Kar (pers. commun.; see also "Kamakhya's Sheep: Space, Sexuality and the Colonial Career of a Stereotype" in his PhD Dissertation, *Framing Assam* [2007]), the publication of various "Tantras" at the turn of the twentieth century brought Assam into the popular imagination as both the referential site and origin of these texts. Assam has long been the object of Orientalist scandal whereby stereotypes of feminine sexual license and violence became connected with images of magic and sorcery, which then became connected to amateur ethnology that made the "tribal" world of Assam (and Northeast India) a place where women rule, Muslims fear to tread, and masculine agency is hopelessly vulnerable to sexual manipulation and capture (cf. Hazarika 2011: Chapter 1 for a reading of the very same myths surrounding Mayong's history).

- (a) The half-burnt wooden pegs on which the cooking pot is rested take root, and the rice is never done although the fire is full-fed.
- (b) A man's seat [*pira*] sticks to him, and does not drop off until the mystic recites counter-incantations.
- (c) A tree stands although cut through, and falls only when the enemy whom the mystic wishes to injure come up to it.
- (d) A cooked pigeon when eaten becomes alive inside the stomach, and flapping its wings incessantly kills the man.
- (e) When a man eats rice and milk this is never digested but takes root in the stomach. He dies within six months.
- (f) A rib of a plantain leaf is turned into a snake.
- (g) The leaves of the *saura* tree are turned into *khaliha* and *kawai* fishes.

The mystic keeps a number of ghosts. These are constantly coming in and going out on their errands by turns. The usual method of destruction by a *daini* is that the victim is subjected to an acute form of dysentery. The disease grows severer [sic] every day, and the man ultimately dies.

Rajkhowa's book may have had an impact the English-speaking middle class in Assam, but Rajkhowa also says that Mayong was "noted for witchcraft for years." Whence this rumor of bewitchment and infamy is, perhaps, a question better left for historians of folklore.<sup>8</sup> Point is, in the present moment, Assamese cinema,<sup>9</sup> marketing strategists and entrepreneurs (see Figure 2.2), news media outlets, and ordinary rumors have only further solidified Mayong's infamy by

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<sup>8</sup> The Estonian folklorist, Ülo Valk, has already made inroads into researching the history, heritage, and contemporary efficacy of Mayongian sorcery (*bejali*, *tantra-mantra*). Much of his findings are currently unpublished, but involve the collaboration of folklorists across Northeast India, including Mayong historian Lokendra Hazarika and Mayongian folklorist Professor Utpal Nath, both of whom are responsible for much of the current publicity and tourist initiatives surrounding Mayong's heritage of *tantra-mantra*. Professor Nath, who teaches economics at Mayong Anchalik College, has also published many one-act plays regarding Mayongian sorcery, which have been performed in Guwahati and other regional cities.

<sup>9</sup> A low-budget film, *Mayangor Bej* ("A Sorcerer of Mayong"), is a particularly clear example of contemporary myth-making about Mayong. It was first released in 2008 to poor reception (being produced, in part, by Mayongian big men), but was then re-released in 2016 with better production and a hit song, "Mayongore Bej," performed by Assamese pop singer Zubeen Garg (see Chapter 5). The film uses bucolic imagery coupled with "tribal" style clothes and various Shakta-Tantra style iconography to play up the exoticism of Mayong (see the music video for Zubeen's song here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTo5ICR3VW8>). Documentary films, unfortunately, play out similar stereotypes. See, for example, famed Assamese director Utpal Borpujari's award-winning 2013 documentary, *Mayong: Myth and Reality* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-fHPRtOLOI>), which—while otherwise a rather excellent documentary—nevertheless frames Mayong within a narrative of exotic and esoteric traditions existing in the here and now. See also the recent 2016 Documentary film *Mayong* from Guwahati's B.R.A.N.D. Productions (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKdMLHLve90>).

reproducing (and popularizing) Orientalizing myths of Assam as an ancient site of Tantric “magic”— which has turned thousands of foreign men into sheep, goats, etc.—and then using deictic work to iconize Mayong as *the* place (existing *here* and *now*) where a Circe-esque style of seductive magic, mysticism, and assault sorcery is real, powerful, and accessible.

Mayongians both do and do not embrace this rumor of infamy. On one hand, Tantric Hindu and Buddhist cults in the region—who seem to have inhabited the area from the ninth to fifteenth centuries CE (see Hazarika 2011; Deka 2009)—had left their material traces in the form of an undecipherable script carved in a granite rock face (see Figure 2.3), various other rock carvings including highly sexualized religious iconography of Hara-Gauri (Shiva-Parvati) and guardian icons of Gonesh, as well as seven large swords—unearthed from the ground near Kesakhaiti Deoxal Than in Burha Mayong—that index a period of human sacrifice (for Mayongians at least).



**Figure 2.2.** “The Restaurant With Mystic Food Myth...” The signboard above Mayong Restaurant in Guwahati (Zoo Tiniali neighborhood).



**Figure 2.3.** The *Xila Lipi* (“Rock Script”) in Burha Mayong, which has been declared a protected monument by the Archaeological Society of India. Dated somewhere between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the script (which is in Devanagari) has almost completely faded. Only one word, “Rama,” has been deciphered. Deka (2009: 17) argues that it was most likely an edict patronized by the Koch king at the time (prior to the founding of Mayong as a *Powali Raijyo* [“Baby Kingdom”]). Though many Mayongians also believe it to be an “ancient mantra” (*prosin manro*) because of the large “Om” symbol carved on an adjacent rockface. For people in Burha Mayong, the place is a sacred site (*than*) used for the worship of Xibo (Shiva).

The archaeological complex of Mayong points to an era of esoteric worship, but it also offers a co-textual significance for another aspect of Mayongian material culture: hundreds of well-preserved manuscripts (*xasipat*, written in Brajawali/Braj and Kaithili/Maithili scripts, and dated from the sixteenth century onwards) that include mantras that give people the power to fly,

change into a tiger for hunting, kill a person invisibly from a distance, cure a specific illness (like snake-bites or cholera), et cetera. Many of these manuscripts are found in the local Mayong museum (see Figure 2.4) but others are stored in homes all across the area. The latter are most often wielded by local sorcerers as a sign of power, or worshipped/given honor as objects of religious devotion, instead of the mantras therein actually being read or used in the arts of sorcery (see Figures 2.5 and 2.6). In any event, such co-textual historical traces give some credibility to the idea that Mayong might really be—or at least most certainly was—an especially powerful place filled with esoteric sorcery (or at least “Tantric” practices) some time ago.



**Figure 2.4.** *Xasipat* (aloe-bark, *agularia agallocha*, manuscripts) collected in the Mayong Museum by Professor Utpal Nath. The manuscripts collected here do not only contain specific mantras, but mythical stories of the origins of the *mantra* and why it was created/used in a particular (divine) context (see Kalita 1992: Chapter 4).

And many villagers capitalize upon this co-textual presence. First, it is a potential source for tourist revenue. Here, in the key of “ethnicity inc.” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), Mayongians often truck in their own hypostatized exoticism by encouraging tourists: “Come see the magic of Mayong!” “Assam’s Voodoo Village!” Indeed, some local sorcerers—with the help of translators—often have a performance (*bhelikibaji*) prepared for the rare wandering tourist as a display of their prowess (which is often followed by a “requested” donation). Yet economic opportunism is not the only motive. Many also see mass publicity and tourist income as a means to “preserve” a heritage, and potentially unearth a murky collective history that seems to be on the decline...if not lost altogether.

This is because, on the other hand, contemporary knowledge and practices of sorcery aren’t as comfortably certain. By the fifteenth century, the myriad rites and cults commonly, if mistakenly, known as “Tantrism” were overthrown by the *bhakti* (devotion-centric) tenets of Assamese Vaishnavism (see Chapter 1 for discussions of the related political transformations).<sup>10</sup> What is currently identifiable and observable as “sorcery” (*bejali*, *tantra-mantra*) in Mayong concerns only a handful of named sorcerers (*bej*, *bejini*) who use a mixture of astrology, ritual forms, and mantras to heal jaundice, fevers, and snake bites, or find missing items, or—and this is intensely debated—bind others’ intentions and cause harm through the delivery of magic arrows (*ban*).<sup>11</sup> Yet such forms of “mixed sorcery” are very common throughout contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> Also known as *Ek Xoron Nam Dhormo* (or *Ekasarana Nam Dharma*, “The Shelter in the Name of One Dharma”), founded by Srimanta Shankardev (Srimonto Xongkardeu) in the fifteenth century. According to D. K. Kalita (1992: 276), Shankardev’s Vaishnavite religion took hold in Mayong around 1564 CE with the establishment of several *xottra* (*sattra*, “Vaishnavite monasteries”) in the area. The date mentioned conforms to the years following the founding of the Mayong kingdom by Suinat Singha and the taking of *xoron* (shelter) by his clan, thus “becoming Hindu” (or “becoming Koch”).

<sup>11</sup> Local forms of oracular spirit possession (*ai-jokhoni*, *deodhai*), however, are not considered to be part of the same “system”—Mayongians use this English term—as sorcery, properly understood.

Assam (see Goswami 1994; Hazarika 2011)—perhaps even more so in regional cities like Guwahati and Jorhat than in a village cluster like Mayong. I will return to this point below.



**Figures 2.5 and 2.6.** Sri Sachindra Nath, a reputed *bej* from Roja Mayong who is over 110 years old, offers devotion, *xonman* (honor), and *guru mononi* (guru payment/gift) to his *xasipat* book of *tantra-mantra*. Shri Nath informed me that he can read the texts (written in Brajawali), but his grandson mentioned to me that he doesn't really "read" the texts, but "understands their meaning (*artho*) because he was blessed by gifts of insight from God."

As far as Mayongian *bej* have it, their art (*bejalir kola*) is a noble tradition that extends back centuries and is unequivocally *not* magic (*jadu*). Some of the most famous (and vocal) named sorcerers living today—like Sri Tilak Hazarika, Sri Akanchandra Nath, Sri Gonesh Oja Timung, and others—view what they do as mix between art, religion, and science. Sri Tilak Hazarika described his religio-scientific method to me in a teaching/interview session as follows:

Through meditation and religious devotion, one can access the powers/forces of the universe that we cannot see...they concentrate and spiral down through all things into the *bej*, who if performing the proper rituals and keeping himself free of pollution and sin, can wield that power for other purposes. Actually, for any purpose because *xokti* allows the *bej* to improvise and use creative thoughts to change reality. Reading the mantras on the ancient (*otij*) manuscripts is not enough. This is just one part of a *bej*'s developed expertise (*pargotali*). Most importantly, one must know how to unlock the network of *xokti*. . . . If the *bej* is good, then he is only a medium for *xokti* (*teo xoktir modhyom okol*); he is not the real source (*xosa utxo*). There is a scientific aspect to this...to call it wild medicine (*jungli oxud*), *bejali*, magic or whatever (*jadu beleg*) is incorrect. It is universal science and religion only (*Eitú sorisorito bigyan aru dhormo okol*).

Shri Hazarika is a retired high school teacher and in our conversations he would often use a dry-erase board to graphically depict what happens when a *bej* prepares himself with various techniques for healing (or harming). He once depicted the “spiraling down” (mentioned above) alongside an image of a *bej* undergoing *dhyan/xadhona* (“meditation”) with a radio tower affixed on his head (see Figure 2.7) to doubly emphasize the “scientific” nature of what is otherwise known as *bejali* or *tantra-mantra*.

We might compare Shri Hazarika’s exegesis with an observation made by D. K. Kalita about Mayongian *bej* in the late 1980s. Kalita, a folklorist who completed his PhD at Gauhati University in 1992, might be described as Mayong’s first ethnographer. In his dissertation, he recorded how Mayongian *bej* actually described their own practices (over 30 years ago):

[M]ost of *bejes* [sic] did not like their art to be referred to as *bejali*. There are two reasons for this. One reason is that they are, at least some of them are, very humble about their art. They believe that what they practise is very nominal part of the whole art. They seek the help of various gods and goddesses. The blessings of the gods and goddesses work

upon the clients. The *bej* himself is only a medium. This category of *bejs* [sic] practise the art mostly as folk medicine and they extensively use herbal medicine. They do not make any claims of capability of performing *jadu*. The other reason is that they attach some amount of notoriety with the term *bejali*. The *bejes* [sic] are capable of black magic, they are involved in cases of elopements, termination of illegitimate pregnancies and so on and so forth. These are the acts in which all the *bejes* [sic] do not want to poke their noses into. The term *bejali* includes all these and many more. Therefore the folk medicineman does not want his art to be termed as *bejali*. (Kalita 1992: 289)

Kalita (*ibid.*: 289, 302–3) continues by defending the term “art” and pointing out examples of the improvised character of *bejali*:

The *bej* in general is very serious about his art. I prefer to call it an art and not a profession because none of the *bejes* [sic] in Mayong area were seen making a living out of their art. They were mostly farmers and were engaged in agriculture in their own lands. None of the *bejes* [sic] I interviewed were landless. Of course all of them were not well off. Some of the aged *bejes* [sic] were not actively participating in agriculture because of their age. They looked after the work done by their sons or younger brothers or the paid workers. Most of the *bejes* [sic] have great confidence on their own art. They have been believing in their art ardently. They do not regard it to be hocus-pocus. . . .

Once, Kirtikumar Saikia fell ill. He had pain in his whole body. He could not even get up from his bed. He practised some amount of *bejali* at that time, though he has given up most of it now. He could not manage to call a *bej* for his treatment for one reason or the other. Nor could he collect the *bihlongoni* plant and flog himself. So he asked a boy in the neighbourhood to collect some *bihlongoni* plants and flog him. He muttered the *sarbadhak mantra* while the boy flogged him with the plants. He told me that he got relief from the pain after he finished the *mantra*.

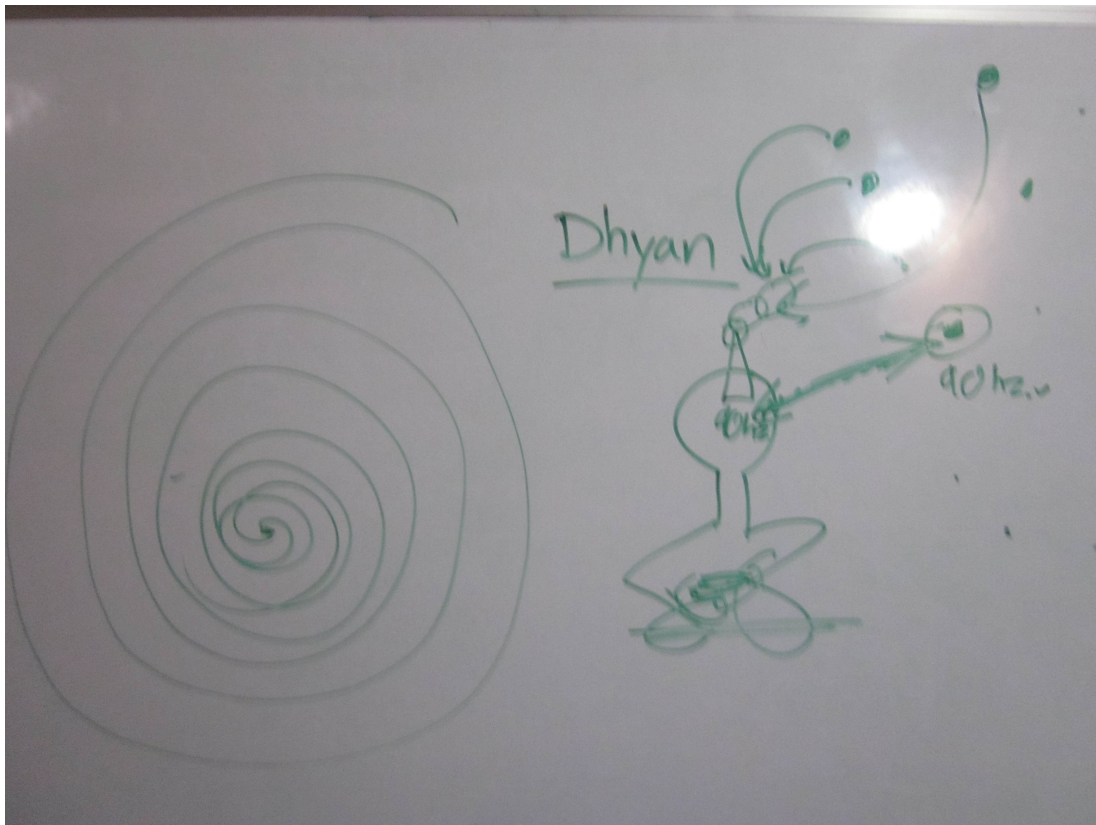
Now, this is not a regular practice. Normally, the one who recites the *mantra*, does the flogging also. But my informant improvised upon the system and acquired the benefit.

Again my informant Ratiya Deka a reputed *bej* was going to the market eight miles away from his home on foot, as there were no other means in those days. He was carrying along with him some betel nuts for sale. On the way he met Balai Mandal’s son who wanted to take him to their house to cure a case of snake bite. A boy was bitten by a snake two days earlier. A non-Assamese *bej* had already taken three hundred rupees as fees but had not been able to cure the boy. Now, Ratiya Deka could not take any remuneration for curing snakebite though his non-Assamese counterpart allegedly took it. He could neither-refuse to go to treat the patient nor could he afford to refrain from going to the market to sell his betel nuts. He could not even slap the boy as a cure of snake bite as this method is applicable only immediately after snake bite. It was not applicable after two days of snake bite, under these circumstances he took a novel method. He charmed a *gamosa* (an Assamese towel) and gave it to the boy and told him: “If you really believe in the power of magic go and cover the afflicted part with this *gamosa*. The patient will feel

unbearable burning sensation in the wound as soon as you lay this *gamosa* on it. But you will have to see that the *gamosa* is not removed till tomorrow under any circumstance.” Balai Mandal’s son walked back five kilometres to his home and applied the remedy. The boy was cured in this way.

This is not a traditional antidote for snake bite but a creation of the *bej*. He has great confidence on his power of magic. On the other hand the clients have great faith in magic which results in the offering and accepting of such remedies also.

The sense that *bej*, *bejali* and the use of *tantra-mantra* is an expert-driven and creative/improvisational medium for channeling forces in a larger universe of “religious” and “scientific” significance is a common theme in Mayongian metapragmatic discourse. The totality is almost always underscored as more significant than the craft itself. However, the second reason Kalita describes above—that black magic (harmful *bejali* and *ku mantra*) is not a publicly avowed practice—resonates with the current situation in Mayong in two different ways.



**Figure 2.7.** A “spiraling down” of the forces of life into a *bej*, who in meditation (*dhyana*) receives these forces much like a radio tower “transponds,” or picks up radio waves. Drawing by Shri Tilak Hazarika; annotations by author.

First, there is a general fear about “revealing too much” about various forms of manipulative or “assault-style” sorcery because one can easily get “caught” in cycles of revenge and manipulation (more on this below). The second, which is linked to the first, is that there is often a disavowal about Mayongian infamy from the perspective of a *bej*. Rumors of the place being a den of “black magic” are rejected on the grounds that it continues to stigmatize Mayong as a place with a “bad name” (*bodnam*) and no moral center. Mayongian *bej* affirm that ethics is central to their craft. Shri Gonesh Oja Timung explained to me during an interview once that, “I will only use *ku mantra* if the problem is so bad that even the police will not do anything about it. But I never use mantras to kill, only to stop bad people from doing bad things...and never because of my own wishes, but only if a client with suffering is in need of help.” This statement echoes a passage from Kalita (1992: 291–92), which lists the “directions” that elder *bej* give to their novices during initiation:

- Do not harm others without a cause or for your personal rivalry.
- Do not practice the art for money.
- Do not accept remuneration for curing snake bite.
- Treat snake bite cases with top priority.
- Do not disclose the secrets of the art unless you teach someone.

Yet, given time and intimacy, many other Mayongians speak of the world of harmful sorcery in terms of “the truth” that lurks behind a deceptive screen of politesse and traditional medicine. There is a wealth of accusations against *bej* today that they are using their art for economic gain (*tokbaji*) or actively harming others because of deals made with clients or because of their own rivals or jealousy. This leads some Mayongians to accuse *bej* of engaging in acts of immoral deception (*thogbaji*). But, for Mayongians, this very quality of deception also rings with the “truth” of their place, which is filled with ambiguous cosmic powers. It may be the case that

the *bej* are simply participating in the cosmologies of Mayong itself, being caught in forces of deception beyond any immoral motive.

### *Cosmologies of Deception*

Per ordinary Mayongian discourse, if sorcery is somehow more unique or powerful in Mayong than elsewhere, then it has less to do with specific traditions or knowledge and more to do with the sacred cosmography of Mayong. Practically all Mayongians are ever-ready to proclaim proudly that the goddess of illusion and deception, Mahamaya (or just Maya), “lives in Mayong.” The hills are *her* hills, the waterways are *her* waterways, and the forests are *her* forests. She is of Mayong and Mayong of her. Per Mayongians, guests in their goddess’ home as it were, Maya, nature (*prokriti*), and the force of all life forces (*xokti*) are more or less the same thing, except that the permanent presence of Maya here suggests that *life itself*—and the means to access its fructifying forces of health, wealth, longevity, and reproductivity—may not always appear as such (if at all). To have access to those forces means propitiating the goddess with gifts of blood sacrifices when she takes the form of Kesakhaiti or Kamakhaya, or appealing to her indirectly as Bhagabati Ai through Krishna/Narayan (within whom she also resides) in Vaishnavite rituals (more on this later). Yet, the permanence of Maya in Mayong also involves various levels of *disavowal* and *ambiguation* about “what is really going on.”

Consider the following. In the 1973 edition of *Assamese Demonology*, editor Praphulladatta Goswami added a footnote to Benudhar Rajkhowa’s comments about men getting stuck on their seats (see above): “Just after the war, a Bengali quack made slight of Mayang [sic] magic. As he got up to leave the *pira* on which he had sat came up with him. The shock was so great that he fell ill and died in hospital at Gauhati. Mayang [sic] people, however, do not admit that they have any magic” (Rajkhowa [1905] 1973: 146).

Here, with a little help from Freud, we can begin to make sense of two features of Mayongian cosmologies: (1) the disavowal of magic/harmful sorcery in the face of negative rumors about the area, and (2) the historical pattern of uxirolocal residence (*ghor juwai*, literally “house husband”) in Mayong mentioned in Chapter 1, which stands in stark contrast to avowed ideologies of virilocal residence. Let’s start with the second. Sorcery myths, like the one of the *pira* (“stool seat”) sticking to one’s behind as well as ones of men being turned into animals, have a kernel of mythopoeic sense in the realm of kinship even if their historical origins are most likely the result of Orientalist myth making (see again, Kar 2004). Many of Mayong’s sorcerers—just like the line of kings (see Chapters 1 and 4)—trace their lineages to strangers who came to Mayong to marry and live. They became Mayongian via *ghor juwai*, though they rarely speak about it. *Ghor juwai* is disdained in Mayong and other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley as being emasculating and “clan destroying.” “One gets stuck in a low position in *ghor juwai*,” my informant Saritra said to me once quite matter of factly. He continued, “You find it everywhere in Mayong, but know one talks about it.” Despite a public disavowal, *ghor juwai* persists in practice to a strong degree in Mayong, symbolically “trapping” would-be husbands on household stools. Even Lokendra Hazarika (2011: 7) remarks that one cannot ignore the persistent trend in Mayongian history of *ghor juwai*.<sup>12</sup>

But what connects the disavowal of uxorilocality to the disavowal of black magic (or even magic in general) has to do with the deeper structure of alterity that marks sorcerers in Mayong as never fully Mayongian. For example, novices and initiates are almost always brought in from neighboring areas. For example, Gonesh Oja Timung’s novice *bej* is a young Bengali

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<sup>12</sup> Hazarika theorizes that this persistence has something to do with tribal “matriarchal” authority (he calls it *Hori Kuwari*), which he claims is dominant in neighboring tribes (Khasi, Garo, Dimasa, etc.) and is a “survival” of an ancient tradition in Mayong. However, Hazarika is mixing apples and oranges in that the Khasi and Garo people are not matriarchal, but matrilineal. The Dimasa (Kachari) are actually ambilineal (see Chapter 1).

man from Jhargaon who now lives with Shri Timung in Burha Mayong. Many other *bej* train young men outside of their clans; others train former clients who live outside of Mayong. Add to this a peculiar commonality among almost all Mayongian *bej*: they learned their art *elsewhere*.

While collecting a household survey of his residence, Shri Timung explained to me that not only was his marriage *ghor juwai* (he came to Mayong from Barpeta), but he learned the art of *bejali* from a Dimasa master in Dimapur. The late Shri Lokhi Bej, named in Kalita's (1992) dissertation as Lakhiram Bangthai (see Figure 2.8), also the previous *deka bangthai* ("junior chief"), was one of the most feared Mayongian *bej*. It is said he knew mantras that allowed him to fly and bi-locate (being physically in two places at once). His son, Rupeshor Timung (the current *deka bangthai*), never learned any of his father's techniques (except for a few methods to heal pain, jaundice, and minor illnesses). This, he said, was for a specific reason:

Father never taught me much because he threw his *xasipat* [mantra manuscripts] in the river. A lot of *bej* do that. He only knew them by memory, and he himself learned *bejali* in Karbi Anglong from a powerful *bej* who lived in Diphu. . . . I told him once that I wanted him to teach me what he kept only in his mind, but my father did not want to risk bringing harm to his family. He tried to find a student elsewhere [*Mayongor bahirot*] who he could trust, but he died before that happened. . . . So now all his knowledge is dead too.

In effect, what we have here is a deeper pattern in Mayong with respect to accessing the forces of life. Just as kingship is tied up in a cosmographic situation of repressed alterity, so is sorcery. Yet both also reveal a pattern where even if the forces of life—which are undeniably feminine—reside locally (or at least condense locally), it takes outsider knowledge, power, and skill to harness it...and avoid risks of patrilineal contagion. Mayongians seem to be aware of this pattern, as well as its disavowals, on some level. To the point, here is Saritra again: "Maya makes everything work upside-down in Mayong. People here say one thing, yet do another. Sean da, you will never get true answers from someone unless you stay here for a long time...and then

you will be *ghor juwai* and you will understand. Mayong is a place where outsiders and foreign things stick because of the power of Ai [Mother (= Maya)].”



**Figure 2.8.** Late Sri Lokhi Bej (Lakhriam “Bangthai” Timung), who had the power to fly and bi-locate.

Photograph from Kalita (1992: 326).

It is hardly a diversion to mention depth psychology here. For one might say that the search for shared prosperity in Mayong must always confront the cosmologies of “deception” (*thog*) in both conscious and unconscious ways. In Mayong, *thog* has a dual meaning of both “trick” and “phenomenal form” or “appearance.” One deals with variations of *thog*—socially,

economically, morally, religiously—on a daily basis: from scams in the bazaar to the uncertainty of one’s own and another’s intentions, from unexpected and devastating floods to the secrecies of sorcery and sacrifice. In effect, there is a general sense that to deceive or to be deceived is to *participate* in *maya* as a feature of reality, of nature or culture, of ordinary life. While Western philosophical, ethical, or ideological conceits about deception tend to stand in contradistinction to regimes of “truth” and function *instrumentally*—i.e., through misdirection and/or falsification for either negative or positive ends, a trope that goes back as far as Plato’s “noble lie” and is as familiar to us as the common placebo or the street magician—*thog* tends toward being morally neutral and *elicitory*.<sup>13</sup> It draws people into the cosmological order of things—whether discursively or physically—and provides a template for how to act in concurrence with that order.

As such, if the existence of powerful sorcery—and its relationship to shared prosperity—is uncertain, ambiguous, or even disavowed, then it is in no small part because Maya deceives. But it also has other entailments, historical ones to be precise. Sorcery, to borrow a term from Viveiros de Castro (2001), might be described as a kind of “socio-cosmological operator” in contemporary Mayong. It allows Mayongians to draw distinctions between “us” and “them” and to provide a reference point for what we might call “moral economies of prosperity.” This is largely because, today, the clients of named Mayongian sorcerers are rarely Mayongians at all, but (largely wealthy) people from all across Northern India who show up with problems that cannot be fixed through conventional means. Sorcery is thus something of an export service, where its potential benefits are channeled elsewhere...and this for prices that Mayongians are rather suspicious of.

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<sup>13</sup> On elicitory images, see especially Strathern (1988, 1999). Note, too, that the etymology of the term is suggestive here: *elicit-*, from the Latin verb *elicere* (“to draw out with trickery or magic”).

Regarding prices, payment for sorcery services with non-local clients is almost always implied, although the act of reckoning the payment shifts ambiguously between a commodity and a gift. On one hand, it explicitly *tends* toward a gift, specifically a “guru gift” (*guru munoni; guru dan*). But here the analogy is closer to one of patronage rather than the classically Indic “guru-disciple” relationship, since it is not technical or philosophical knowledge that is transmitted, but access to a clientelist network seeking quick fixes by preternatural means. Mayongian named sorcerers keep lengthy, detailed ledgers of all their clients, marking their names, addresses, phone numbers, and amounts donated for their services. Some *bej* in Mayong actually refer to these books—not quite “shared accounts,” but nevertheless within the same repertoire—as their “*network puthi*” (network book). Like a thick rolodex sitting on a desk, they are meant to be seen and reviewed by clients, thereby illuminating the network and fame of a particular sorcerer—a legitimate representation of power and efficacy, but with the implication for other Mayongians that this power is channeled externally to people outside of Mayong.

By the same token, since sorcery transactions are publicly accounted for in terms of gifting, then payment for services rendered does not really settle a debt. It acts instead as a gratuitous incitement for further consultations, a deepening of a relationship between a patient/client and his sorcerer/patron. As Shri Prabin Saikia, a highly reputed Mayongian *bej*, emphasized to me repeatedly: “a desire for personal gain corrupts the effect of *bejali*—we must keep our patients in our hearts at all times, never allowing them to suffer more even if they cannot give anything in return.” A *bej* cannot “demand” payment, but he must graciously “accept” whatever is given and attempt to give more help than is asked by a client. The terms of agreement are always stated explicitly up front: a sorcerer only can accept payment/donation

when given to him *freely* without asking for it, and giving payment/donation is expected only if the *bejali* is effective.

The thing is, there is always an effect to sorcery, however minor.

Suppose someone comes to Mayong to consult a *bej*; his family is concerned that he has been bewitched and needs to be cured. What ends up happening oftentimes is that an open-ended patronage cycle ensues, one in which reciprocity is never balanced, and “payment” becomes a means for keeping a relationship *open* and *in play*, rather than closed or finalized. It becomes something like habitual therapy. The progression, which I call “the sorcery cycle,” looks something like the following:

- (1) X is acting “unnatural” in eyes of his family; a family member thinks it may be because of alien intention or theft of intention; thus X might be a victim of assault sorcery so X is encouraged to visit a sorcerer and goes to Mayong to find a reputed and powerful *bej*.
- (2) Sorcerer performs divination and confirms alien intention or external manipulation.
- (3) Successful restoration of original intention (*ban* [“magical arrow”] removed) is made; unsolicited gift/donation given to sorcerer (usually Rs. 10 + Rs. 1 per customary/sacred gratuity).
- (4) Diagnosis of source of alien intention (naming the perpetrator—but not the “other” sorcerer working on behalf of the perpetrator); usually done as a complimentary gesture to the client.
- (5) Cure for protection against specific perpetrator provided. Client asked to return in 2+ weeks, or whenever is possible after that.
- (6) Client returns, acknowledges discovery of enmity or jealousy with named perpetrator, offers a gift (amount is usually much higher than in #3); sorcerer proposes to return favor

of gracious “over-payment” by suggesting problems may not be entirely fixed or might have been passed on to a family member or consociate; provides a free consultation.

(7) Return to #2.

Villagers in Mayong are well-prepared to speak of how they have avoided getting caught in this kind of sorcery cycle. As one of my informants put it:

It can get very expensive to go to *bej*. One becomes addicted. There are always problems to fix. Outsiders and rich people can do it because they have no worries. In fact, they often learn the magic and it costs a lot to do so. But, at some point, we [Mayongians] wised up (*ami salu hoi gol*). Life goes bad quickly if you reveal too much [about a need for sorcery] to your family and neighbors. The problem is when we need to know, to find someone who can heal us properly, that same person can always harm us or our family if another person wants it done. If you give life over to a sorcerer, then bad things may follow the good.

Accordingly, to avoid entry into the sorcery cycle, many Mayongians do not publicly and discursively profess their “belief” in sorcery. But, given time, they do say it is *real*, dangerous, obfuscating, deceptive, and frustrating (cf. Bubandt 2014). To borrow an observation from Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977 [1980]) on Bocagite witchcraft, silence affords immunity and economic incentive.

In the same logic, however, since named sorcerers claim to have the ability to access the forces of life itself, sorcery remains an appealing enterprise for all Mayongians—especially when the kingship seems less capable of fulfilling that duty. On one hand, sorcery provides a potentially easy access to forces of life. Expensive and morally tenuous blood sacrifices are not necessary if one knows a good sorcerer. Sorcery is quick and dirty: give a small donation to a sorcerer and he will heal your sickness or find your lost wallet. It seems as simple as that. On the other hand, as seen above, participating in sorcery logics is hardly ever a one-off phenomenon. One risks being caught up in a cycle of dependency that may end up more expensive and more

morally tenuous than just conducting a sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> It might also alienate one from kith and kin, or alienate families from other families, almost paradoxically transforming fellow Mayongians into a “them” rather than an “us.” After all, the patronage network extends outward, not inward—and this has led many Mayongians to think of sorcery as a “get rich quick” scam on the part of local *bej*.

But there is more evidence for alienation between kith and kin on the part of Mayongian sorcery. Many villagers have seen the effect of sorcery cycles that teeter closer to invisible warfare. Stories circulate of two households in the Kolabari hamlet of Burha Mayong which effectively “destroyed” each other shooting invisible arrows (*ban*) into each other’s compounds. Both families now live in absolute penury with perpetual debt and failing crops; sicknesses are common and marriages are scarce. All this, it is said, was a result of a 30-year-old argument over a plot of land. But the fact that these two households are part of the same *khel* (residential unit) means that they doubly destroyed each other through the contagion of sorcery. Harm a neighbor, even if affinal kin, and you will inevitably attract revenge or literally harm yourself.

This fear often leads to a quick and swift resolution of minor disagreements on the part of the *raijmel*—the public meetings that create the Mayongian shared account (see Chapter 3). D. K. Kalita describes an event described to him by an informant, Bhuban Deka (now a village elder in Nambari hamlet in Burha Mayong) that showcases how, less than 50 years ago, potential cases of assault sorcery that name a culprit were squashed quickly and fiercely by a concerned public:

A man named Sing Mikir practised witchcraft. But the villagers of Burha Mayong did not know of it. A certain boy named Jogen stayed with Singh Mikir and did the household chores for Sing Mikir. Jogen once suffered from paralysis of one of his legs and started

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<sup>14</sup> Sorcery thus haunts the technical and ritual labor of sacrifice. Consider, in his remarks on magic as an “ideal technology,” Alfred Gell (1992: 59): “Magic is the baseline against which the concept of work as cost actually takes shape. Actual kula canoes (which have to be sailed, hazardously, laboriously, and slowly, between islands in the Kula ring) are evaluated against the standard set by the mystical flying canoes, which achieves the same results instantly, effortlessly, and without any of the normal hazards...magic haunts technical activity like a shadow.”

having fever intermittently. One day, in a drinking brawl Sing Mikir threatened someone that he will cause the same harm with the help of magic, which he had caused to Jogen. The man was terrified at this disclosure and revealed it to the other villagers. The villager caught hold of Sing Mikir whereupon he agreed to cure Jogen. Jogen was then cured. But after three years he had a dispute with Sing Mikir over land, [and] Jogen suffered from fever after the quarrel. This time the villagers, including the informant, caught hold of Sing Mikir and tied him to the post of the verandah of the informant's house and gave him a good thrashing. After that they drove him away from the village. This incident, according to the informant, took place around 1971.

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In sum, if sorcery is a potential source for accessing prosperity and the forces of life in Mayongian cosmologies, then it also constantly undercuts itself through disavowal, fear, confusion, alienation, and deception. It recedes from public discourse, from public recognition, from a moral center that can benefit everyone. And yet, with Mother Maya permanently in the background, the deception, contagion, disavowal, and socio-economic alienation emergent in sorcery practices and logics creates an image of totality, at least with respect to sorcery, that always seems to be on the verge of being coherent and natural. And if the take away point for Mayongians is anything, it is that messing with the forces of life through quick and easy objectifications is a risky business.

### **The Coin of the Realm**

With such an image of a totality—unfinished, undercut, flooded with the possibility of deception, multi-perspectival, alienating, and yet on the verge of coherence—the myth of the Hanuman *marka* simply makes sense. It could be a real source of infinite wealth and health, but it could also be a trick, a deception, and a potential destructive object. It promises prosperity, but only by individuating its bearer from the kind of collective prosperity that sacrifices and ritual order more effectively entail. The *marka* is very much the “coin of the realm”—and yet, in the same breath, it can never link its bearer to the common good.

Serious talk of the Hanuman *marka* in Mayong is somewhat of a rare occurrence. Only a very small fraction of villagers (all male) in the kingdom speak of the coin and its power with unprompted reverence and credulity. And among this minority, only about half actually spend time searching for the coin, usually guided by a rumor or dream to go to a specific place and look around, dig, scavenge, et cetera. However, phatic communication around the stories of the Hanuman *marka* is ubiquitous. At tea stalls and cigarette stands, stories about the coin pop up almost as frequently and unceremoniously as talk about the weather. The myth—in its elaboration, qualification, and undercutting—thrives in phatic forms of interaction. Consider the following tea stall conversation I recorded between two of my friends in Roja Mayong:

RB: *Buziso, marka tú dekha pa lu. Dui din agot, Gobhardan bojarot asile.* (Listen, I saw the *marka* in the Gobhardan bazaar two days ago.)

DK: *Kela, eko dekha nai.* (Fucker, you didn't see anything.)

RB: *Xosa ke, kela, dekha paisilu...eikhon shopot marka tú dhan solan korile eifale heifale.* (Seriously, fucker, I saw it...in a shop, the *marka* was moving rice this way and that.)

DK: *Na hoi be, kisuman tuk kelengkari korile .* (No, dude, you were scammed by someone.)

Although information may be given or drawn out in this kind of communicative interaction, the mood here is one of “timepass” (see Jeffrey 2010), a colloquial kind of phatic communion popular across India. On one hand, this keeps the channel of communication, and thus the myth, functioning. On the other hand, it lays the interactional ground for elicitory discourse beyond the phatic (toward more emotive, conative, and poetic functions in Jakobson's terms), thereby

inciting believers and skeptics alike to lay out the reasons why the genuine coin has yet to be discovered and used.

*Belief and Skepticism: Two Sides of the Same Coin*

First, to say a few words about the sociology of belief and skepticism in Mayong, it is crucial to note that those who most enthusiastically search for the Hanuman *marka* are men who work as forest officers, low-level bureaucrats, teachers, or petty traders. This is a small percentage of the population (no more than 20%). Mayongians are, largely and conversely, wet-rice cultivators. Some sell and grow other crops during off-seasons, others seek income through so-called “informal” channels, but wet-rice cultivation remains the center of both economic and ritual life. Having a labor cycle of seasonal cultivation also allows for time to invest in other social projects—the garnering of status, for example (i.e., becoming a village patron or “big man” [*dangor manuh*]), which is a particularly labor- and capital-intensive life project for village men. However, such a possibility of rising in status within the socio-political hierarchy is beyond the time and capital available to those whose occupations demand year-round activity—i.e., those who work for the state or are petty merchants. The promise of the Hanuman *marka* thus appeals to these men as a quick way to climb the social ladder. Still, no one would ever admit to me that motivations for believing in the Hanuman *marka* were based on a desire to rise in socio-economic status, but rather as ways to access forces of life (pure prosperity) by having controlled access to *xokti*.

I spoke with these enthusiasts in casual conversations and interviews several times, but they were the least forthcoming about specifics concerning the Hanuman *marka*'s history and material qualities. They would instead emphasize three elements: (1) that it exists in Mayong; (2) what its powers are; and (3) how to test its powers.

Among enthusiasts, almost everyone claims to have seen the coin at least once. Sometimes individuals caught a glimpse of it in the hands of a noted sorcerer, but most describe a moment when the “actual” coin was on display at the local museum, built in 2008 at the edge of Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary. Word had it that an unknown person in Mayong brought a bag of old coins to the museum to be put on display for a local festival. There, sitting in the case among tokens and coinage from the colonial era, was the Hanuman *marka*. But when the festival was over, the coins were removed and in its place was a news article clipping and photo of the coin (see Figure 2.9). None of my informants were really sure who brought the coin (and neither was the caretaker of the museum), but speculation as to its current place spins on one of the *marka*’s immanent powers: the ability to appear and disappear, moving from place to place in Mayong at random. A propensity to be an animated object with a kind of subjectivity of its own is coupled with its second, most commonly agreed upon, power: the coin’s ability to “attract” prosperity infinitely, especially in the form of money or rice.<sup>15</sup>

Believers were also keen to point out that the coin’s authenticity can only be verified by its magical effects (*bhelikibaji*). If you put the coin in a cup of milk, it is said to “drink it up” (a sign of divinity). If a sorcerer conducts the proper rituals and recites the proper mantras over the coin, then “abnormal” (*oswabhabhik*) events happen: forwards goes backwards, storms start and stop with odd timing, etc. Most importantly, they would reiterate that the Hanuman *marka* was worthless without eliciting the skill and knowledge that only Mayong’s sorcerers possess. The forces of life that the *marka* provides access to cannot be objectified, condensed, or channeled by

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<sup>15</sup> The relationship between rice and money is a complex one—their identity and fungibility is meaningful in some contexts and not in others, although it is important to note here that rice plays a central role in most rituals of prosperity across ethnic communities in Mayong, and is often referred to as *Lokxi* (Lakshmi), the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The relationship between “health” and “wealth” here is one of metonymy, if not pure identity.

just anyone—they have to be mediated twice, as it were: once through the coin and once through the techniques of an adept.



**Figure 2.9.** A newspaper clipping and photo of the elusive Hanuman *marka* of Mayong.

Accordingly, named sorcerers know a great deal about the *marka*'s history and makeup: the metals it was made of (unadulterated copper mixed with unnamed metals only found in asteroids and comet fragments), the astrological coincidences of its creation (always something to do with a predominance of Saturn [*Xoni*]), the techniques and mantras they can use to unlock its power, where the most appropriate places would be to do so, and so forth. Most interviews on this topic with sorcerers would end with a blanket statement about the need to keep the (very dangerous) mantras secret from anyone who wasn't an initiate to their practice. Indeed,

Mayong's named sorcerers saw themselves as protectors of the power of the Hanuman *marka*— but emphasized to me over and over again that they were not at all interested in looking for the coin and had never encountered the genuine article.

Inquiring further, among the “believers,” I began to notice a pattern. Almost all accounts of someone actually encountering the Hanuman *marka* from memory turned out to be encounters with fakes that were purchased in local bazaars (more on this below). Or, if the coin's authenticity was probable, then it vanished, or was stolen, or wasn't exactly “seen” at all. Consider the following “timepass” conversation (translated from the small talk that followed a formal interview) with my friend Saritra Biswas, a Bengali cultivator living in Burha Mayong.

SB: I saw the real Hanuman *marka* when I was little. An old woman from my village [Hati Bhengi] had it....She came to my house one night showing everyone that she had the Hanuman *marka*...I saw it....She put the coin in a glass of milk and the coin drank it. The woman was old, but she was very strong and happy. When she woke up the next morning, the coin was gone. She went crazy and spent the rest of her life poor/suffering.

SD: How do you know that coin was not fake (*misa*)?

SB: No it wasn't fake. The coin drank the milk. I saw it. She was healthy and strong and then she became sick and crazy when the coin was gone. No other explanation. It was abnormal (*oswabhabik*)....

SD: So what do you think happened to the coin?

SB: Maybe someone stole it and then cursed her. Or, maybe, she went mad from losing it. I don't know what happened...it just disappeared. But the coin was real. She believed. I believe. I told you before: with presence of mind it's paddy, with no presence of mind it's chaff (*manile dhan, namanile potan*).

SD: But you also said you saw someone selling a Hanuman *marka* in a bazaar once. And you said that you knew that one was fake.

SB: All those coins [in the bazaar] are fake. No one buys them because no one would sell a real [Hanuman *marka*]. [The merchants] do bad works; [it's] all for business. They come from other places and sell these things to get rich and then leave. But no one here buys them...Why would someone sell a coin that makes its own money?

All this, of course, poses an interesting question. If believers only ever encounter putative fakes—or if the genuine coin always disappears or is stolen or whatever—then why does belief in the existence and power of the Hanuman *marka* hold strong? Why, in other words, does the myth of the magic coin continue if all experience undermines its possibility? Does the encounter with “fakes” simply imply the existence of the real coin elsewhere? Or, are we caught in the “exposure” paradox, illuminated so beautifully by psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni ([1964] 2003), that speaking subjects can gracefully provide a disavowal, moving in and out of credulous naïveté, all with the ease of uttering, “I know very well, but all the same...”?

Perhaps...but most villagers are, in fact, highly skeptical that such a talisman even exists. And for them, the myth of the Hanuman *marka* is a little too rococo, if not a sign of obsessive personalities who would do anything—and perhaps shirk any responsibility—to become wealthy and prosperous. Here is another colloquially phatic conversation about the Hanuman *marka* that occurred in the wake of an interview, but this time with a skeptic:<sup>16</sup>

ND: My father’s brother, he just thinks if he finds the Hanuman *marka* all his problems will be solved. So he wastes his time buying fake coins, looking in the jungles for the coin when he has dreams, paying all these *bej* to make [the coin] work. He prays to Hanuman asking him to give him the coin. And in the end, his family suffers.

SD: Oh yeah?

ND: Yeah.

SD: And how is he and his family doing now?

ND: Bad. See he does this only for himself. Magic (*jadu*) is a thing of the self (*nijor bostu*). Not a thing of society (*raijor bostu*). He thinks he can become rich and take care of his family if he finds the real coin, but in the process he does not work and his family does not eat. No rice. No water. No light. But, if he worked for his family and society then he would benefit too. He is a part of society.

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<sup>16</sup> Name removed to protect anonymity.

SD: Yeah, but I think he believes (*manise*) that he will find it and it will work.

ND: Eh! He should just stop searching. The problem will go away on its own. *Manile dhan, namanile potan*.

Both Saritra and my skeptic informant cite the same proverb: *manile dhan, namanile potan* (“if you search it is rice, if you do not search it is chaff”).<sup>17</sup> This proverb is a rather beautiful—and conditional—“fall-back” exegesis for believers and skeptics alike when confronted with the question of whether or not *bejali* or *tantra-mantra* is a real and important phenomenon in their lives. The logic goes something like this: if one mentally focuses and searches for something then ultimately *something* will be found. Walk up to any pile of chaff laying on a mat in a paddy field, search through it, and eventually one will come across a few grains of rice. But, without that mental labor—without the active stance of looking through a pile of harvest detritus to see if there is paddy or only husk—there is no reason to even bother with the matter. We might consider this yet another way of both believing and not believing at the same time (cf. Mannoni [1964] 2003: 82), but more importantly one that is anchored in pragmatics rather than cognitive states. As such, “belief”—as we might conceive it, in terms of assertions, propositions, or suppositions—in the Hanuman *marka*’s existence and efficacy isn’t really what is at stake at all,<sup>18</sup> but rather if one participates in its logic or not: *manile dhan, namanile potan*.<sup>19</sup> The cosmologic here is crucially and paradoxically performative (Graeber

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<sup>17</sup> *Manile* is from the verb, *mani sol* (to believe, to adhere, to follow). However, “belief” in and of itself (and perhaps in the Protestant Christian influenced version of the verb in ordinary English) is not an adequate translation here since the act of distinguishing between rice and chaff entails a mode of actively searching for what is hidden from sight. It does not involve propositional statements, asserting or supposing—nor any kind of “faith” per se. It involves an active engagement, a decision to look among the dusty husks for something. And as it is with the technique of winnowing, finding loose grains of rice among chaff is almost an inevitability.

<sup>18</sup> Mauss and Hubert ([1902] 2001: 113), however, settled on an unfortunate axiom: “magic, by definition, is believed . . . either you believe in it all, or you do not.”

<sup>19</sup> To me, this seems to be a graceful and rather simple solution to Moore’s Paradox, i.e. that one can assert that it is raining while also saying “I do not believe it is raining.” To assert a reality of something doesn’t demand that someone mentally participate or labor upon it. In Mayong, to say one doesn’t believe (*na manise*) does not mean that

2012): every skepticism of magic's performative power turns on the pragmatic element that there may always be something lying behind the performance; a grain of rice, say, that you just haven't looked hard enough to see.

*Qualification via "Participatory Deception"*

The undercutting and qualification of the myth of the Hanuman *marka* as a "magical" source of prosperity turns, accordingly, on forms of *participatory deception*: something less explicitly rooted in Mayong's "*maya* cosmologies" and more in the pragmatic features of the coin itself. There are four forms of participatory deception to consider here.

(1) Scam artists may deceive those who wish to purchase a purported Hanuman *marka* among piles of magic coins in a bazaar by using tricks of the eye (rice-pulling, magnetism, and other signs of authenticity), which might intend to showcase authenticity but nevertheless reveal the coin's inept magic. Moreover, this turns the *marka* into a commodity, which is a logical impossibility since no person actually searching for the Hanuman *marka* would confuse a gift from Hanuman with a random coin for sale in a bazaar.

(2) Sorcerers may deceive the bearer of the coin. The coin's power can only be "unlocked" (*mukoli kore*) if a sorcerer is solicited to use the appropriate rituals, mantras, and religious sacrifices needed to bring forth the power of the coin. If fortune would have it that a villager found the Hanuman *marka*, which expresses the Maussian dream of acquiring something-for-nothing, he would still need to navigate the magico-religious hierarchy, full of its own tricks and swindles and powers. What might be found in a moment of gratuitous fortune (a

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one disavows the existence of something; it rather means that one doesn't devote any attention to it, one does not *participate* in its reality. (Perhaps this exemplifies another theoretical value to Levy-Bruhl's notion of "participation," at least insofar as *mentalité* needs an "active" dimension in order for a Naga to be a leopard, for example.)

gift from Hanuman), could quickly be lost, stolen, or corrupted by a mere breath of a sorcerer, who in turn draws people into his own, potentially perilous, gift economy (see above).<sup>20</sup> Or, if a sorcerer were to be trusted, one would probably have to make a deal with him on sharing the wealth and yet still risk duplicity or theft, being subordinated to another who has powers beyond one's own reach.

(3) The bearer of the coin may deceive himself. In that skepticism is legion, one could easily subsume to the logic (or social pressure) of coming to the conclusion that Mayongian “magic” cannot create money, or really any substance at all—it can only manipulate the phenomenal appearances of the world. As one of my informants, Mayong Anachalik College Principal Phanibhushan Nath, put it in a graceful bit of logic: “If our sorcerers really knew how to use magic to *make* money, then wouldn't Mayong be the wealthiest place in the world?” Such a position lends itself toward a skeptical disposition. And yet, the rewards of the *marka*—the promise of prosperity, of channeling and directing the forces of life—are considered to be a gift from Hanuman himself. Such a gift requires ritual reciprocity, and, more stressfully, a reciprocal giving to the society as well...more on this below as well. A very heavy social weight bears down upon any villager who may be suspected of being wealthy. As with most “big man” societies, a certain amount of material poverty is expected of those who perform or display a high status of being patrons (see Chapter 3). In Mayong, material wealth is illocutionary, and any assumed possession or flagrant display of wealth morally demands its collective redistribution. Otherwise, one risks ostracism or even exile (*eghoriya*, *alog kora*). Deception, here, is in thinking that one can be individuated and disconnected from the whole, and yet still remain part of the whole.

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<sup>20</sup> Breath, here, is not metaphoric. Mayongians often refer to sorcerers' use of mantras with a sustained, voiceless bilabial fricative sound, reminiscent of gentle blowing with whispered breath.

(4) The coin may deceive the bearer by its own magic. The stories of coins simply “disappearing” (*nohowa; horoluki*) makes the search for the genuine article a lot like trying to catch a rather cunning fish. To borrow a felicitous reflection on magic from Michael Taussig (1998: 285), “The more you try to pin this fish down, the more it wiggles.” This form of deception keeps the myth of the *marka* in play, deferring its genuine discovery for another day, another time.

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So what is this qualification via deception all about? As David Graeber’s (2011, 2012, 2015) work on magic has demonstrated, the almost limitless disavowal and qualification (and thus always potential fraud) of magical power may be key to the social efficacy of magic itself (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963). But whereas Graeber finds this to be an insight into how social power functions, I would like to suggest that these moments of undercutting and qualification may, in fact, say something more generally about the unfinished temporality of cosmologies.<sup>21</sup> Cosmologies tend to have multiple directionalities in moments of crisis—much like we see in contemporary Mayong, where grounds for a social, ecological, political, ritual, or economic unity are tenuous, at risk, and very much in the making. What their future orientations are is uncertain at best. Cosmology isn’t disorienting in Mayong merely because Maya makes it ontologically so: it is disorienting because there seems to be easier means for accessing the forces of life than previously perceived. But in these new objectifications of the forces of life, what life itself is turns out to become something very different than an experience of a totality and its flourishing prosperity. Moving forward, I now want to illuminate precisely what happens

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ernesto de Martino’s ([1959] 2015: 85–95) discussion of the relationship between “crises of presence,” magical reintegration, and the veiling effect of “being in history as if one were not.”

(or would happen) when Mayongians attempt to access forces of life through objectified forms of the Hanuman *marka*.

### **A Sublime Object**

In the mythic frame, to reiterate, the Hanuman *marka* is supposed to objectify the forces of life itself. In practice, however, each encounter with a *potentially genuine* coin is indeed an objectification, but always of something other than what was originally promised: a condensation and channeling of the forces of life itself toward ends of accessing infinite prosperity. The Hanuman *marka* is thus a living percept, but ultimately a *sublime* object. By “sublime,” I mean—following John Kelly (2002: 262)—“something that has to be evoked, not described, because sublime subjects are beyond actual delimitation, ‘things’ such as God or terror, nature, justice or love.” To that list, I would add “life itself,” for, being an immanent vitality (in the Hocartian sense), it is always compromised or contradicted by its objectification. When the *marka* appears as an object, then, it always appears as something else. Let’s look at two “objectified” forms of the Hanuman *marka*, and thus of life itself.

#### *Counterfeit Commodities*

Let’s first consider the counterfeit versions of the Hanuman *marka* and their connection to the commodity form. As Saritra pointed out, many of the tokens of the Hanuman *marka* that are sold in bazaars in the Mayong area are obvious fakes. Logically, for him and many others, such coins could never be the genuine article.

Here, the myth of the Hanuman *marka* has resonance beyond Mayong. One finds similar coins, often called “temple tokens,” for sale all across India. It is a market where commerce in sacred objects meets commerce in numismatic collectables. Indian market websites like OLX,

Quikr, and Ebay have sellers from places across the sub-continent selling “Hanuman coins”—usually stamped with the date 1818—at prices listed so high that not even millionaires would be able to afford them (see Figures 2.10 and 2.11). A website devoted to so-called “rice-pullers” (metallic objects which belong to the same repertoire as the Hanuman *marka*) is a particularly lively marketplace for these coins ([www.rice-puller.com](http://www.rice-puller.com)). YouTube is also filled with videos of such coins, often showcasing their “magical” abilities to make watches stop, attract grains of rice, and so forth—all perlocutionary signs of the coin’s purported authenticity.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 2.10.** An image of a Hanuman coin up for sale in March 2012 on [bubhuneswar.olx.in](http://bubhuneswar.olx.in) (accessed March 21, 2012). The sale description of the coin is as follows: “Original Half Anna 1818 Hanuman Coin—A original coin powered with many miraculous powers like an electric blub gets fuse when coin is taken near to it dynamo and self starts battery gets discharged and it has a pulling power of four inches. Also 75-80 degree floating power. PRICE EXPECTED 30 CRORES; SERIOUS BUYERS CONTACT AT ———.” Photograph origin unknown.

<sup>22</sup> See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8F5dP0qh19M>; and for a rather literal statement that rice-pulling = life-pulling, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hNIS6nHeuA>.



**Figure 2.11.** Images of a Hanuman coin for sale in March 2012 on [dimapur.olx.in](http://dimapur.olx.in) (accessed March 21, 2012). The sale description of the coin is as follows: “Hanuman coin 1818 with genuine power. Price 50 crores [Approx. \$7,000,000 USD].” Photograph origin unknown.

Perhaps the coins that show up in bazaars in and around Mayong are part of this larger market, but what makes the bazaar coins “obvious fakes” for Mayongians has to do with moral economy. Itinerant bazaar merchants come today and go tomorrow. They have zero authority and their relation with clients is incredibly lax; they might dazzle potential buyers with illusionist tricks (rice-pulling, magnetism, etc.)—which most Mayongians have seen dozens of times—but these merchants are neither sorcerers nor bearers of legitimate authority in Mayong. Indeed, laxity in the magical presentation is a symptom of illegitimacy and untrustworthiness; the “fakeness” of the coin shines through the fact that the magical effects simply aren’t magical enough to convince anyone. As a local “believer” put it to me: “We’ve all seen this show before

and we have been scammed (*amak kelengkari kori disil*) many times. None of these coins ever drink milk, so how could they come from God?”

More concretely, the coins for sale in bazaars are presented as commodities for exchange rather than as gifts or boons of good fortune. To reiterate Saritra’s point: “Why would someone sell a coin that makes its own money?” Not only is Saritra’s question another fine point on the obvious fakery of the “Hanuman *markas*” sold in bazaars, but it suggests that commodity logics themselves are not necessarily a good source for long-term prosperity—for a cosmologic of *shared prosperity*. As with the examples from the internet shown above, bazaar coins give away their counterfeit nature because they are *fungible*—and this in prices no one could afford unless they had a *real Hanuman marka*! The absurdly high price is an index, of course, that the Hanuman *marka* is something beyond exchange. Of course, merchants will almost inevitably perform the “gracious swindle” and offer to sell someone a coin for a very cheap price (say, Rs. 5000 instead of Rs. 5,000,000), but the fungibility paradox still holds. They are alienating something that is unalienable (except if the coin were to alienate the bearer by disappearing itself)—something that, if it were the real thing, would channel the forces of life itself.

Some of my informants explained the surplus of Hanuman coins in the bazaars as an effect of living in “*Jadu Mayong*.” As one of my friends explained to me after we witnessed a showy spectacle around these coins in Mayong bazaar,

the only people who would use their own money to buy this fake magic money are sorcerers who are deceitful...who else has a use (for it)? Where do these coins come from? Merchants say, “From God.” But these are not religious men I think. If they were, then why would they sell a gift from God? These merchants think the people of Mayong are superstitious, but we know the difference between real *jadu* and *bhelikibaji* (showy effects).

Effectively, such coins do not objectify, condense, and channel the forces of life that connect part and whole at all. Rather, they *channel* or *exchange* parts for more parts. In doing so, they suggest

to Mayongians that an experience of the whole may not be possible through commodity exchange.

### *Sacrificial Gifts*

Another possibility is that the Hanuman *marka* might manifest not as a commodity, but rather as a divine gift from Hanuman. And this is not just any gift, but a sacrificial one whereby the bearer must sacrifice a lot for the power of the coin to unfold (potential social ostracism, entry into the sorcery cycle and its gift economy, etc.) and also reciprocate dutifully and devotionally to Hanuman himself.

If the circulation of counterfeit coins is understood as kind of deception where there is a lack of authority and is built on a relation of social laxity and commodity exchange, then a typical sacrifice in Mayong might be seen as the complete opposite. In sacrificial rites, priestly authority and long-term gift-giving logics dominate the exchange, where the effect is framed as an actual experience of a totality and a condensation and channeling of the forces of life.

Since no one yet has encountered a genuine Hanuman *marka*, as far as I know, I have no ethnographic examples of an objectification of the coin in terms of a sacrificial gift. But what I do have are abductive and analogic versions of this possibility. Here, I turn to an ethnographic documentation of a normal household sacrifice in Burha Mayong. What makes it apropos for our discussion of the Hanuman *marka* is that the priests intentionally deceive the mother goddess in these sacrificial rites by substituting rupee coins for sacrificial doves in the moment of her propitiation. This affords us a view as to what the social and moral demands of sacrifice are and why the Hanuman *marka* would be an impossibility in those terms if it would ever appear as an actual divine gift.

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On a crisp winter morning in late 2012, a small *ghor bolidan* (household sacrifice) was held in Burha Mayong at the Bhagawati *than*. The family I lived next to had given birth to fraternal twins (a boy nicknamed *Dhunu* and a girl nicknamed *Monu*) about one year prior. The son was born second and had been having severe health problems. His sickness, I should note, had an explanation: The twins' spirit (*atma*) was split—they were both considered to be the reincarnation of their paternal grandfather, who's *atma* had disproportionately manifested. Most of the grandfather's *atma* went into the elder twin sister, and the small remainder went into the younger twin brother. The sickly boy was eventually diagnosed with asthma around the age of two years, but about a month or so after his first birthday, the family decided to sponsor a sacrifice to the mother goddess in order to “fill [his] body with more force of life” (*Bhagawati e Dhunur ga't aru xokti xumai dibo*).

During the preparations of the rite, I took the opportunity to ask the attending priests why two one-rupee coins are often added to the pile of offerings in household sacrifices (see Figure 2.12). The first time, I was ignored entirely. Assuming they did not understand my question, I asked again and clarified my question: “What value (*mulyo*) do coins have in this sacrifice?” Once again, I was ignored. The third time I asked, one of the officiating priests became very annoyed and whispered to me, “*Eitú paro, eitú bolidan, nixobdo thakok sun*” (“These are rock doves; this is a sacrifice; be silent”) (see Figure 2.13). Embarrassed, I apologized, slinked away, and continued to observe the ritual. In this particular *ghor bolidan*, I was able to notice something that eluded me in similar rites I had observed before: Toward the end of the rite, the elder priest kept muttering “*Kha! Kha!*” (“Eat! Eat!”). And once the ritual exchange was over, the child had been blessed, and the *prasad* distributed, he lifted up the banana leaf that held the

two coins/doves and said: “*Paro gol, Ai kha le*” (The rock doves are gone, the mother has eaten.”). The coins had disappeared (see Figure 2.14).



**Figure 2.12.** Two Plains Karbi *deuri* (priests) prepare the *ghor bolidan*. Note the two coins rubbed with *xindur* (vermillion powder) and warmed *mitha tel* (mustard oil). The effect is a double-dealing: consecration of the sacrificial offering (the smearing of *xindur*) and creating the appearance of blood.

Whenever a crisis or even a minor misfortune happens in a household (especially in the Plains Karbi dominated area of Burha Mayong), and if a local sorcerer proves unable to solve it, villagers hold a sacrifice like this to feed the mother goddess: in this case, the form Maya/Xokti takes is named Kesakhaiti (“eater of the raw flesh”). Trouble is, as I have mentioned already, blood sacrifices are no longer an easy matter to conduct in Mayong. Fearful memories of human

sacrifice dating back a century or so, along with the popularity of anti-sacrificial Vaishnavism, makes blood sacrifice a rare event in Mayong.



**Figure 2.13.** Two *paro* (rock doves) covered in blood, or, two one-rupee coins covered in a mixture of *xindur* (vermillion pigment) and *mitha tel* (mustard oil) .

Accordingly, it seems as if Mayongians have come up with a convenient solution for small household sacrifices like this one: just use one-rupee coins instead of the ritually proper rock doves, and then name the coins “doves” as such. For anthropologists, this kind of substitution is all too familiar. Among other cases, we might recall Evans-Pritchard’s famous discussion in *Nuer Religion* (1956) where a cucumber is not only substituted for an ox in a sacrifice, but is named an “ox” as such. With all of the heady anthropological speculation

(symbolic, totemistic, psychoanalytic, etc.) as to why the Nuer might call a “cucumber” an “ox” during a sacrificial rite, no one to my knowledge has considered that the Nuer might, in fact, be trying to trick their earth or sky spirits.



**Figure 2.14.** *Paro gol, Ai kha le.* (“The doves are gone; Mother has eaten.”)

And why wouldn’t they? Instrumentally speaking, as many reasons as there are to sacrifice an ox (contrition for a feud, propitiation to sky and earth spirits, feasting and hospitality,

etc.), there are just as many reasons why it would be preferable to sacrifice something else in place of an ox. Oxen are expensive and the sacrifice of an ox is a serious matter when it comes to meat distribution; indeed, deference to certain kin among the Nuer make every ox sacrifice an ordeal, to say the least. Moreover, for the Nuer, oxen are analogues of people—they have names, histories, and kinship mutualities. The Nuer ox sacrifice is always more or less a sacrifice of an extension of one’s self. So if an atonement, and therefore a piacular sacrifice, is needed, a cucumber—a cheaper and less obvious socio-cosmological operator—will do just fine. The Nuer can simply call it an ox and hope that the nominalization will be enough to trick the spirits.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps...

But sacrificial substitution in Burha Mayong is actually the converse of that in Nuerland. For the Nuer, God (*Kwoth*) does not “partake of the essence of the flesh” and instead “what goes to him is the life.” (1956: 274). Conversely, in Burha Mayong, the goddess not only partakes in and craves flesh, but *accepts* the flesh as a kind of contract whereby in taking flesh she can reciprocate with a gift of life. Life goes through her in the flesh, and is then channeled back to the sacrificers (cf. Hubert and Mauss 1964). We could think of the coins as symbols, a vicarious way of killing without offending a competing (and morally dominant) ideology of anti-sacrifice, thus allowing “the sacrificer to have his cake and eat it, too” (Willerslev 2013: 145). But the key point is that the coins *disappear*. The ritual and illocutionary speech act, “the doves are gone, the mother has eaten,” does exactly what it says: the coins are gone because the mother has accepted the sacrifice.

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<sup>23</sup> Whether the Nuer’s earth or sky spirits are in a position to be bluffed by trickery is another question entirely. *Pace* Edmund Leach (1954: 14) on his position that it is nonsensical to ask a Kachin whether nats have legs (since myth and ritual are only, or at best, analyzable as reflections of social structure), here it would be of great ethnographic value to know whether or not Nuer spirits have some kind of sensory apparatus to tell the difference between a cucumber and an ox.

But does the mother goddess know she is getting coins instead of doves? Is she really being deceived? What seems to ultimately matter is that, in the ritual, one cannot elaborate on such matters or else they risk a potential failure or misfire of the ritual itself. And when the stakes are high—like the health of a beloved child—why take the risk? The key is that a reciprocal exchange is completed; if it indeed involves deception along the way then as long as the subterfuge holds, then what does it matter? After all, for Mahamaya, things are always never what they appear to be anyway.

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Such is a characteristic sacrifice in Burha Mayong, and it raises the question as to whether a hypothetical appearance of the genuine Hanuman *marka* would be possible in this form or not. Suppose the coin were to be found—a gracious gift from Hanuman. First things first, a trustworthy sorcerer needs to be located, since only sorcerers know the rites and mantras to unlock the coin’s power. Now one potentially enters the sorcery cycle, or if not, then one is nevertheless now implicated with a sorcerer. Suppose this wasn’t a problem and the sorcerer could be trusted 100% and the coin is successfully unlocked. The flow of prosperity now being directed to the bearer draws forth two demands. First, the demands of the goddess whose life forces are being channeled through the “vehicle” of the Hanuman *marka* (to borrow a term from Mauss). This requires ritual reciprocity, some return gift in the form of a sacrifice. But here comes the moral rub: does one risk deceiving the goddess with a sacrificial substitution or not? But either way, the bearer would have to give a sacrifice in order for the forces of life to continue accruing.

Here, however, we are only in the realm of risk and not impossibility. True impossibility would come in another social and moral guise: that of public censure. Infinite prosperity

channeled to a bearer would raise the suspicions of fellow Mayongians who would demand public redistribution for the ends of *shared prosperity*. Such is the dream of current cosmologies in the making. Perhaps this is taking hypothesis too far, but it seems to me that if the moral economies behind sorcery logics and practices arouse similar concerns and demands, then the Hanuman *marka* would too. In effect, what the authentic Hanuman *marka* (as gift) would objectify is something too individuated—a *nijor bostu*, not a *raijor bostu* (see above)—and, in that, a very experience of the “whole” that the myth promises would be sacrificed. One would, ironically, become alienated from life itself.

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So far, I have outlined two “sublime” curses of the Hanuman *marka*:

Hanuman *marka* = commodity → counterfeit

Hanuman *marka* = gift → sacrifice

Both manifestations are fraught with so many qualifications and undercuttings, both logical and moral, that whenever the potential *marka* appears, its authenticity disappears. However, I have not elaborated on the other phenomenal objectification of the Hanuman *marka*—i.e., sometimes if the genuine coin is encountered, it *literally* disappears. The rupee coins in the household sacrifice described above also disappeared, but the pragmatic (Batesonian) frame here is one of “eating” rather than vanishing completely. The Hanuman *marka* doesn’t just simply vanish. It goes where it pleases, per its own subjectivity. It shows up, like in Sartira’s childhood, to drink milk and reveal its authenticity but then I am inclined to see this not as an impossibility of the Hanuman *marka* per se, but as its only real possibility: a kind of perceptive promissory note that says, “I’m here. Catch me if you can.”

The implication of this is that it keeps the dream, or the *wish* if you will, of the Hanuman *marka* alive, potentiating an experience of a totality in the making—a network of possible efficacies—that cannot be objectified or represented as such. So the Hanuman *marka* might be possible after all, but only in an optative mood. One *participates* in its myth, irresistibly I might add. And this, I think, is precisely what the myth of the *marka* promises: an experience of totality that is currently virtual, not-quite-shared, not-quite-whole.

All this, quite charmingly, reveals the Hanuman *marka* as a quintessential trickster myth—the narrative of which is continually in the making. I do not take it as a coincidence that out of all the possible deities that could have their image stamped on this magical coin, it is Hanuman. The coin is, after all, Hanuman’s *brand*—a representation of a shapeshifting trickster, who misdirects enemies in the *Ramayana* to actuate his perfect self-less devotion to the Ram. Indeed, some of the rice-pulling fakes for sale in bazaars actually *warn* their buyers of the risk of deception as Hanuman’s image on the coin is sometimes stamped with the Hindi phrase *Sach bolo, pura tolo* (“speak the truth, weigh everything”). So while Hanuman may indeed be the deceiver par excellence, he is also the paragon of a devotee to regimes of truth and honesty. His brand, we might say, carries its own surfeits *and* counterfeits, whenever it appears and disappears (cf. Nakassis 2013a).

### **The Myth of Life and the Life of Myth**

*Life is...caught up in the contradiction that it can only be lodged in forms and yet cannot be lodged in forms, that it passes beyond and destroys every one it has created.*

– Georg Simmel, “Life as Transcendence” (2010: 15)

“Life itself” also carries its surfeits and counterfeits. It, too, is something sublime. Simmel, in

magnificent essay “Life as Transcendence” ([1918] 2010), argues for a metaphysics of life that is always contradictory: “Insofar as life’s essence goes, transcendence is immanent to it (it is not something that might be added to its being, but instead is constitutive of its being)” (ibid.: 9). For Simmel, life is pure vitality and flow, but as it necessarily gets dammed up in bounded, individual things (or persons), those bounds cannot contain it. Life always “oversteps its bounds” (ibid.). This “vitality dialectic,” that life is formless yet always needs forms and yet “reaches out beyond” those forms is, I think, crucial for understanding the “other side” of the Mayongian cosmographic situation. [Simmel, after all, argued that this contradiction is an ultimate, “world-shaping” principle.] For Mayongians, life is not just contradictory, it is *deceptive*. One experiences it, participates in it, but it is literally never what it *appears* to be. The conflation of Maya and Xokti—illusion and the force of life—creates a permanent ambivalence: one needs *Xokti* to flourish, but accessing it outside of the (proven) ritual contexts that mediate its social distribution (kingship, sacrifice) is a gamble: one wants bioeconomic protection, but one risks anomie; one wants healing, and one risks being harmed; one wants wealth, and one risks penury, grift, invisible assault, taxation...etc. This, I think, is why sorcery, secret accounts, and ultimately the Hanuman *marka* exist in the realm of *so’rang*—they permanently face the sublime impasse that representation (or objectification) fails to capture the forces of life.

This is quite abstract, so let’s recap: (1) Life is something sublime; we can index or evoke it but never represent it or capture it in a particular form. Indeed, as both Simmel and Mauss/Hubert argue, the form itself will ultimately (or must be) destroyed by the very thing that created it: the force of life. (2) Life underpins cosmological ideals like fertility, prosperity, order, health, vigor, etc.; i.e., life animates the socius. But these ideals must stand in a permanent tension with the objects or forms that life takes on. The forms wither, perish, or simply cannot

contain “life,” which consistently reaches out beyond itself, transcending every immanent presence it has. (3) The individuated “shortcut” methods of objectifying the forces of life—secret accounts, sorcery, and the elusive Hanuman *marka*—are thus always insufficient to access life itself because they attempt to do it directly without mediation.

Simmel shows us the “myth” of life: that it cannot be objectified without becoming something else or without transcending that form of objectification. For Simmel, that contradiction implies that “man” can be overcome, that we can transcend a given condition because at the end of the day, we are that limiting creature with no limit, that boundary-making figure with no boundary.<sup>24</sup> Early on in this chapter I reflected on Cassirer’s argument that mythical thought presupposes a consanguinity of all forms of life, that it allows for an experience of life as a participatory totality without boundaries. This is the “life” of myth: life *as* participation (in Lévy-Bruhl’s sense), or transcending one’s physical limitations in experience. To buckle this circle back to the Mayongian situation, consider that Mayongians conceive of things as *so’rang* not because they are, well, “so wrong” but because they are out-of-tune with that which is for the benefit of the public—or, better, out-of-sync with the *totality*. When people expect the *so’rang* realm to deliver the (Aristotelian) goods in some objectified form and discover, in fact, that this form is only an amoral adaptation that cannot quite contain the forces of life, they realize—as my informants’ qualifications and undercuttings in this chapter show—that the *myth* of life eludes them. But what Mayongians wanted all along was the *life* of myth: a form of participating in life itself that is proof of the overcoming of a given condition. So they are compelled to participate—literally, not just in Lévy-Bruhl’s sense—in something beyond themselves, something transcendent. This, I would argue, is the affordance of the shared account;

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<sup>24</sup> See also Simmel [1909] 1971; [1923] 1984.

it makes possible that which the *so'rang* realm cannot. Transcendent participation is *immanent* in the shared account, not something added to it. As I see it, Mayongians are compelled to bring the *so'rang* into the *raij* because the *raij*—through the king—*mediates* the forces of life rather than objectifying them. To return to metaphysics, we might say that the cosmographic situation thus compels Mayongians to opt for an immanent, negative dialectic rather than a transcendent, positive one.

Again, this isn't necessarily a willful or cognitive compulsion, but it is the structural effect of the situation. From the perspective of Mayongians, the matter is understood as follows: when it comes to prosperity and acquiring access to the forces of life, kingship is better than sorcery, shared accounts are better than secret accounts, public ritual and sacrifice is better than searching for a magic coin, and *participating* (in multiple senses) in life is better than objectifying it. The shared account is a dynamic set of processes; the secret account is a static form. The shared account reaches out beyond itself; the secret account only looks inward.

In the chapters that follow, we will look at the processes shared accounting in ledgers, writing, and speeches, as well as in analogous domains that the shared account draws its processual logics from. We will explore various acts of creating quiescence among the *raij*, discourses and technologies of speculation that occur in the wake of critical events, verbal play that incites and exhorts action in the interactional order, and forms of taboo containment of that revolve around particulate facts and processes of particularization. Collectively, these will provide us with a picture of the dialectic making, unmaking, and remaking of shared accounts.

## PART TWO

### THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE SHARED ACCOUNT

## CHAPTER THREE

### Analogic Kingship

#### The Quiescence of the Shared Account

##### The Public Python

It was early evening in Burha Mayong and, with two glasses of rice liquor already downed, Saritra was sulking in silence. It was the end of the month and I figured I knew why—being a laborer and share-cropper (*adhi khetiyok*) for Dipon Kathar, a village “Big Man” (*dangor manuh*), Saritra probably still hadn’t received his monthly salary or the arrears owed to him for several months. We were evening-drinking as usual, but there was no “enjoy,” no crass jokes, nothing familiar to Mayongian everynight, which is usually filled with gleeful hyperbole and Dionysian “timepass” (see Preface). This night, it was all gloom and doom. Saritra’s mood had already chased off two of our friends, so we were left alone, nursing our pegs of rice liquor by candlelight.

Eventually I, too, could no longer stand his silence, so I decided to break it with a proposition (which I recreate here from memory):

“Listen, *bangthai* [“chief,” a sarcastic nickname for Saritra his close friends often address him with], I know what happened. It’s pay day, isn’t it? No money came, eh? I can give you some money, a loan, until Dipon pays you. Don’t worry, just drink and relax. Have another...”

Startled, Saritra lifted his hands in a panic, as if to stop me from moving forward with any such thoughts: “No, no, no... Sean Da. Wait. Don’t give me anything—I received Rs. 10,000 today from Dipon Mama.”

I slapped him on the back and poured another glass. Seemed like a reason to celebrate to me. After a quick smile and a toast for what I thought was good fortune, Saritra's gloom returned. We had a couple more drinks, and then he opened up to me about what was getting him down. In a rare moment of transparency and trust, Sarita pulled his cash ledger out from under his bed's bamboo mat and ran his finger over the day's entry, which, after the reckoned income of Rs. 10,000, showed Rs. 3,000 short of a balance owed for four years of work. Dipon had *almost* paid his full debt to Saritra. And the stress here is on the "almost." This was more worrisome to him than revealing a secret account. With a fearful tone, Saritra muttered something that struck me then and still haunts me now: "*Ami koisu je 'ojogore upokarik khai, xorir bine xakh'khi nai*" ["We say: 'Pythons eat patrons, and without a body there is neither evidence nor a witness.'"].

A few days later, while interviewing Saritra about share-cropping practices in his *chang ghor*<sup>1</sup> out in the middle of one of Dipon Kathar's *boro* paddy fields, I took the opportunity to ask Saritra what he meant by this proverb. He clarified:

Dipon Mama's accounts are dying. I've heard he is selling his land, shutting down his rock crushing mill, taking loans from the bank, and paying off all his debts. There are too many demands on him. The *raij* finally ate him up at once. This is how it happens. The *raij* is a python—when they smell "money" [metaphor: "food things," *khowar bostu*], they demand it. And then they eat all of it. And what is left? Nothing. No work. No food. . . . When Dipon Mama's accounts die, he dies. I die. If I do not get paid all the money owed to me, it is a rotten state of affairs for sure [*hei ghotona tú gela gela hol dei*], but listen . . . rice liquor is rotten too (*sulai u gela*); it gets you just drunk enough to live [for/until] tomorrow (*okoman eimatro nisa lagibo je aho kali ei thakibo pare*).

There is much to unpack here. As far as metaphors of the everyman go, what makes Saritra's so powerful is that, in its remarkable use of paradigmatic selection, it unveils a concrete prediction

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<sup>1</sup> An elevated shack, or "stilt house," built in the rice fields during the winter months. Cultivators often sleep here to chase wild buffalo and rhinos away from consuming the young crop of *boro* rice, which is cultivated from the interior flood plains that are drier in the winter.

of what happens to a society that calls in and pays its debts. Yet, where we might—following arguments from Bill Maurer (2015) and David Graeber (2011)—see the resolution of debt as a source of freedom and individuation, here the closure of accounts by means of full payment signifies nothing short of death...an extreme form of freedom and indifference that is worth nothing to the account holders. As per Saritra’s proverb, patrons (*upokar*, literally: “those who give help”) are not eaten away bit by bit, but entirely raw and at once—and this by an amorphous “public” (*raij*) who draws secret accounts into shared, public forms of reckoning (and thus monetary demand). In his *jojona* (“proverb”) there is no witness to that event, just as there is no evidence; for the destruction of a patron’s ability to patronize is equivalent with the public digestion of his resources. The public *is* the python.

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I begin with this vignette—and will continue to unpack it below—to take us into the heart of the Mayongian shared account. As outlined in the Introduction, shared accounts are a cult of public reckoning in Mayong. Through various processes (outlined here and in Chapters 4-6), they draw out or transform the content of secret accounts—or the *so’rang* dimensions of social life in the kingdom—into a reckoning *ideally* by and for the “male” public (*raij*). Thus was the fate of Dipon Kathar’s secret accounts at the time (at least according to Saritra). The *raij*—notice the generalized agency here—supposedly took interest in his displays of wealth and effectively audited him in order to divert his resources elsewhere (more on this to follow). In such terms, this is largely understood as a positive and historically necessary process in the villages that comprise the ritual nexus of Mayongian kingship (Roja Mayong, Hatimuria, the Kalxila *khel* of Loonmati, and Burha Mayong). Shared accounts are the primary mode of sustaining the integrity of Mayong as a de facto regal (and thus inter-ethnic) unit, to negate (1) the fissural tendencies

aligned with the region's segmentary ethno-politics (see Introduction and Chapter 1), and (2) the enmity/jealousy immanent to secretive exchanges and sorcery logics (see Chapter 2). In colloquial terms, they function to “cool heads with love” (*moromei matta to thanda koribolei*) through the media of auditable and transparent ledgers coupled with oratorical rhetoric delivered through what Lempert (2012), borrowing from Foucault, calls “penal semiotics.”

But what was Saritra getting at with all this business of rottenness, death, and drunkenness? Saritra is, more or less, a proponent of secret accounts when it comes to his own family's well-being, but he is also a stalwart proponent of the shared account as a source for public knowledge. If he cares little about the integrity of the Mayong kingdom—being a Bengali share-cropper from Hatibhengi whose family migrated here after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War—he does care a lot about the epistemological effects of shared accounting, which reduces threats of sorcery and socio-economic manipulation by making exchanges more transparent at the public level. Moreover, Saritra's livelihood depends upon a key sociological effect of the shared account: the rise of big man politics. Big Men (*dangor manuh*) have effectively become a sociological type in Mayong, with an emergent institutional role in maintaining shared accounts. As charismatic figures, they have used skills in rhetoric, networking, and political pageantry to usurp the audit-centered roles historically regulated to kings, chiefs, and other consecrated nobility. Thus, Saritra was not railing against the shared account so much as doubling down on its ultimate value. Rottenness, death, and drunkenness each represent particular states of *quiescence*—of inactivity, of quietude, of separation, of basic survival (to bear going on until tomorrow), of reducing a dynamic totality into a static order (even if only temporarily). Quiescence is precisely what the *raij* was—putatively, at least—trying to cultivate by making transparent and re-distributing Dipon Kathar's wealth; i.e., preventing an upstart from engaging

in too much activity off the grid.<sup>2</sup> But for Saritra—at least in how he understanding the situation—it was the wrong agent and wrong type of quiescence: rottenness qua drunkenness via a patronly big man was preferable to payment and “death” via the *raij*. In Saritra’s eyes, the latter was usurping a usurper but unjustly so, thereby replicating a rather ancient Indic scenario that a kingly usurper fails to properly access the forces of life (Hocart [1927] 1969: 50). Or so he thought...

In this chapter, I articulate the connection of the shared account to processes and states of quiescence, and why the shared account turns less on the hypostatized maxim of *raijei roja*—“the public as king” (see Barman 2005: 1)—than on the carefully scripted analogic flows of kingship into figures of gerontocratic or charismatic authority. As I will show, the shared account needs such “analogic kings”—truly hierarchical figures—in order to cultivate quiescence, which—as Saritra described it—is best conceived as a form of controlled rotting, a kind of fermented flourishing, that opposes itself to (1) the hyper-dynamics (or, the “heat”) of uncontrolled exchanges, “sin” (*pap*), and hyperbolic speculation, and (2) the closure of accounts by means of final payment. Shared accounts are kept *open*—in senses of both transparency and non-settlement—so their operative quiescence is almost always spoken of in terms of an asymmetrical and hierarchical “debt” (*dhar*) that should never be settled—an ongoing process as it were. Closures, when they do occur, have their operative quiescence in the terms of “pardon” or “exemption” (*uddhar*). Yet, this “closure” is understood as a controlled transformation of a relationship of debt rather than its finalization.

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<sup>2</sup> It is to be understood that states of quiescence are not absent of information; rather they discern a transform of difference. As Bateston (1972: 319) argues with reference to the alcoholic’s situation, just as she cannot elect “sobriety,” but only “sobriety—not drunkenness,” in systems theory a state of quiescence always contains its polar opposite. One cannot speak of a quiescent state alone, but states of “quiescence—not activity” or “activity—not quiescence.” This, I think, allows us to note that “states” of quiescence are actually quite rare; most periods of inactivity are processually active in some capacity.

The language here is highly abstract, but it captures the Mayongian logic of why the shared accounts is not a publically *decreed* institution in the sense of being some expression of a prior general will. Rather, they are publically *focused*, wherein the *raij* serves as a site for gerontocratic and charismatic authorities to decompose or recompose the hierarchical order and reveal the value of “keeping things still.” To follow this Mayongian logic, we need to first understand the importance of analogic kingship with respect to the shared account, and how the bureaucratic attenuation of kingship has moved beyond the bounds of nobility in the contemporary moment.

### **The Quintessence and Quiescence of the Shared Account**

The “shared account” is my translation of the kind of “public accounts” (*raijor hisap*) that have become an emergent institution in Mayong. These accounts are publicly composed and debated in the first instance. When ledgers are used, which is most of the time, they are filled with names, dates, calculated monetary amounts, formal resolutions, descriptions of events, and eulogistic or baptismal forms of narration. They are drafted or articulated during what is called a *raijmel* (literally, “public meeting,” see below), an institution common throughout the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding highlands. And they are stored at the house of the “author,” who is almost always the one who presides over the shared accounting. Shared accounts also often adopt the form of liturgical rites wherein public worship and service coincides with public reckoning. When kept by the king, junior kings, or ethnic chiefs, they are used to manage debts and administer “pardons” (see below). When kept by Big Men, they are meant for socio-economic purposes (like granting “exemptions”) beyond—but inevitably reconstituted in—the hierarchical and ritual nexus of kingship. As outlined in the Introduction, they ultimately create a

detailed historical and cosmographic record (almost a chronicle) of the history of alliances, socio-religious life, ritual events, and inter-ethnic exchanges throughout the supralocal kingdom.

Not all shared accounts are “of Mayong” in the broadest sense of the term. In fact, most of the accounts are created at lower levels (or scales) of political organization, in the spaces between the supralocal kingdom and the domestic order. The most intense level of shared account activity occurs in the ethnic community (the *jatir raij*), but it also picks up steam at the levels of the village, the patriclan, and various residential units (*khel, jak, suburi*). The king has the right and authority to review the accounts created at any of these levels, although he rarely does so (see further below). Instead, prior to every annual *Goxai Uliuwa* and *Gor Bhanga* ceremonial, the king requests a basic description of the state of things from his various officers and nobles placed in charge of managing the social, economic, and ritual life of the different *jati* throughout the kingdom. Income statements relating to the ritual purse of the *raijs* are provided and any major issues that have been resolved or remain unsettled are discussed at a “closed” *rojar mel* (“meeting of kings,” like a *darbar*), which is replicated in a performative sense only during the first day of the ceremonial (see Chapter 1). Although the king does still involve his office in any kingdom-wide infrastructure programs like the building or maintenance of roads, bridges, schools, fishery ponds, etc., the basic accounting for these expenditures are now farmed out to big men (who often double as contractors) and local politicians or representatives from the *panchayat* (like the government appointed “village headmen,” or *gaon bura*), and they hardly involve in the *raijs*. These are largely state-controlled development schemes and, although the *raijs* sometimes participates in their accounting, they are not the object of shared accounts. The shared account thus does not only exist at the limit of secret accounts (see Introduction and Chapter 2), but also at the limit of the state. It is understood as a thoroughly ritual institution, modeled on the

function of kingship, that links the whole of the Mayong kingdom to its various parts, just as those parts attempt to replicate the whole in their functioning—its goal is to create a composite unity, a transparency of minds (see Chapter 5), socio-cosmic attunement, and access the reproductive potentials of the forces of life in ritually proper ways.

Thus, while the figure of the sorcerer dominates the *mise en scène* of the “secret account,” it is the figure of the king and his analogues (especially chiefs, junior kings, and big men) who dominate the “shared account,” and not without good reason. For if secret accounts are hidden mnemonic devices meant to aid or protect a memory of an event from becoming a shared memory, potentially at risk to sorcery or some other threatening source, then shared accounts, which by virtue of their publicness are always open to audit, need a person of authority to control the interpreting and shaping of that shared memory—to instill a kind of quiescence, so to speak. Indeed, auditing by the king, chiefs, and Big Men is a part of the necessary structure of shared accounts, which are not mere mnemonic devices, but *mnemotechnics* (in the Nietzschean sense), meaning that they *inflict* and *audit* a record and reckoning of reality as it is reported, uniting various perspectives under an authoritative (and thus legally and cosmologically legitimate) form of public memory.

### **The *Raijmel***

Whether a shared account involves meticulous bookkeeping, liturgical rites, or oratorical pronouncements, its scene of creation is always at a *raijmel* (literally “public meeting”)—which is an extension of the socio-political concept “*mel*.” In the most general sense, *mel* are meetings of intense debate, where anyone in attendance (called a *melkie* or *meluoi*) can have the floor to speak. According to Barman (2005: 1), *mel* range “from ordinary gossip to socio-cultural or socio-political discussion,” and in the main “function as a judiciary.” The institution supposedly

has deep historical roots in Assam (ibid.: 3-11)—with connections to the “periphery management” of the Ahom kingdom as well as to collective decision-making in Vaishnavite monasteries (*xotro* or *sattra*). From the perspective of the Ahom kings, the *puwali raijyo*—which included Mayong, Dimoria, Rani, Beltola, Darrang, Barduar (Gobha), Nauduar, etc.—were expected to mete out justice according to the Ahom juridical hierarchy by means of holding and arranging large *mel* known as *raiymel* (ibid. 16–17). The *raiymel* (also known as a *barmel* or *bormel*, meaning “great meeting”) is thus an extension of the *mel*, and is meant to deal with matters of importance, and especially conflicts, occurring beyond the confines of kith and kin (ibid. 35).

This has led Barman to reduce the significance of *mel* to being, essentially, a “village court,” which has its “primitive” origins in “pre-monarchic” forms of tribal self-governance that were a logical precursor to the Nehruvian *panchayati raj* (ibid.: 3–11). His argument is that it is an “indigenous” form of democracy that follows the maxim “*rajei roja*” (“kingship by the public”), thus any later historical expressions of the *mel* in Assam are survivals of an ancient acephalous socio-political order. Although the *raiymel* is indeed partly juridical in significance, Barman’s hypothesis lacks any evidence and seems to project a stateless society onto a distant past without any justification. What Barman also reveals—but unfortunately fails to account for theoretically—is that what unites all *raiymel* is that they are events of public sense-making involving linguistic devices of reportage (see, e.g., the *raiymel* of the *deka raij* in the Preface); and, in being so, they are (1) *always* authorized, controlled, and ultimately set up for interpretations/arguments to be made by a person whose office is consecrated by a divine king; and, (2) are decreed by God (Vishnu) to be expressions of his initial ordinances and reports concerning the role of *dharma* in the world.

Barman actually provides a myth of the first *raijmel* as told by various Vaishnavite monastic orders in the region, and documented in a biography of Srimanta Sankardeva (ibid.: 37). The *Bhakti* Vaishnavite myth is an illuminating counter-position to Barman's own myth-making that, I think, reveals not only the deeper cultural significance of the *raijmel*, but why it can also obtain to forms of reckoning like the Mayongian shared account. With permission from the author, I have reproduced his English translation in its entirety here:

*Raijmel* was so popular in the land of Assam that it was first conceived of as a means for taking a decision in heaven and repeating it on earth. . . . It is mentioned that there was no worship of gods and goddesses on the earth in the Satya age; therefore 33 crores of gods and goddesses prayed to Adi Niranjana<sup>3</sup> for this. Adi Niranjana disclosed the secret of religion, that is, obeisance to him in the form of *ramanama* [the name of Ram] was the only path open to the people on earth for salvation from sin. But as requested by the gods and goddesses, Adi Niranjana agreed to give options to the people for worship of the gods.

Mahadeva [Shiva] was commissioned for this but he was unwilling to misguide the people. Misguidance in the sense that worship of Vishnu or for that matter, the *bhagavat bhakti*, was the proper line of worship. And so, the introduction of worship of the gods was not acceptable to Mahadeva. That being the case, Adi Niranjana Brahma vowed that he would appear as a Sankara incarnation in the Kali Age to rescue the people from the committance of sin by worshipping at the altar of the gods and goddesses, as was approved by him. Thus assured, Mahadeva took steps for the propagation of worship of the gods and that too, by creating the illusion of attending heaven through worship of the gods. Worship of the gods was thus afloat on earth in full scale. Out of his compassion for the people, Brahma devised the path of *antaranga bhakti* (perceiving the eminence of God in all animate and inanimate objects), which was spread through his agents on the earth, viz., Prithu, Priyabat, Dasarath, Nimi, Ambasis, Dilip, Yudhisthir, Sudhanna, Surath, Bhogirath, Nahus, Khatanga, Yayati, Bhisma, Jadu, Alark, Ugrasena, Masukunda, Parasar, Basistha, Gargee, Brihaspati, Sukra, Dhruva, Nandi, Kashyap, Bhrigu, Marngi, Asi and so on and so forth.

But the mission was not successful. Therefore, Brahma set for a second mission for the propagation of the *bhagavati bhakti* (devotion to Vishnu) in Bharata Barisa (India). A group of his grandsons<sup>4</sup> were deputed to propagate it. This mission, too, was not fruitful.

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<sup>3</sup> A Vaishnavite conception of the Supreme Being who is prior to but manifests in the *Trimurti*: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. However, here it seems as if Adi Niranjan embodies the principle of creation in this myth, and becomes aligned with Brahma. One notes a shift in the passage from referring to the deity as “Adi Niranjan,” “Adi Niranjan Brahma,” and “Brahma.”

<sup>4</sup> This might be a reference to the “unmoored” intimacy—sometimes implied in reincarnation logics—between alternating generations across Assam. See Chapter 5.

Barring a few, all were involved in the worship of the gods. In order to divert the people from the path of worship of the gods to the path of his worship (Vishnu), Vishnu had ten incarnations—Matsya, Kurma, Narasingha, Bamana, Parsurama, Holirama, Srirama, Buddha and Kalki Krishna. Nine kinds of *bhaktis* were assigned to his incarnations, leaving out the essence, that is obeisance to Krishna, He being the Vishnu incarnation. Krishna tried to propagate it in Bharata Barisa. But the land was peopled with the sinners (unholy persons), as a result of which Krishna was not in a position to convert the land to his preaching. Krishna thus left Bharata Barisa for Baikuntha [heaven] to report to his father Vishnu.

Vishnu was unhappy to have seen the religious state of affairs in Bharata Barisa. A *Barmel* was summoned to be held in the Baikuntha to discuss about it: Altogether 35 Isvaras attended the *Barmel*, viz., Namdhvoj Balas, Nampur Balas, Pankaj Balas, Golok Balas, Nityananda Balas, Sveta Balas, Sanatan Balas, Kripan Balas, Ananta Balas, Hangsa Balas, Trikut Balas, Chidananda Balas, Kanakdanda Balas, Bhandir Balas, Marakat Balas, Sutul Balas, Svetakut Balas, Ratna Balas, Nilasav Balas, Nirakur Balas, Nirgun Balas, Bhakti Balas, Pravir Balas, Satya Balas, Kailas Balas and Rajan Balas.<sup>5</sup>

In the deliberations of the *Barmel*, Vishnu made it known to the Isvaras that God's worship was in force in preference to the ordinance issued by him for the satisfaction of the gods and goddesses. The ordinance was the cause of suffering of the people. The devise for attending heaven by worshipping the *devas* made them blind to *bhagavati bhakti*. In the *Barmel* it was thus decided that a fresh mission be sent out to India for the propagation of *bhakti* to Vishnu. In pursuance to this divine decree, a group of Saints were caused to be born in Bharata Bisara, i.e., Haribyas, Rupsanatan, Caitanya, Kabir, Brindabandas, Nityananda and Sankaradeva [the *bhakti* saint of Assam]. (ibid.: 37–39)

There are two major take-away points here. The first is that the divine *Barmel* (or *raijmel*) was established in order to figure out what to do with Adi Niranjan's original injunction that religion is meant to be devotion to one god by reciting his name only, *as well as* the reported event that the methods for implementing this injunction were failing. The idea was that a divine *unity* would, after the necessary appeasement of the 33 crore (330 million) deities, follow divine *heterogeneity*. But the world was not conforming to the divine order/injunction, thus a need for a *raijmel*. Here we arrive at the second major take-away point. In its deictic form, the *raijmel* was a means for Vishnu to report this situation to 35 Isvaras. These are all named "Balas," denoting

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously there are not 35 names here, and I also find it peculiar that the number 35 is important whereas most cosmic-counting regimes in Northeast Indian and Southeast Asian Hinduism work upon the numbers 9 and 12 (or at least on a duodecimal system, cf. Izikowitz 1962; Ramirez 2014).

here that they were “youthful” or “childlike,” thus must follow the orders of the elder divinity. Vishnu, the “elder authority” here, argues why the original injunction must be followed. Thus the *raijmel* was established to determine a liturgical order that would also compose (or recompose) a unity from extreme diversity via an authoritative injunction. Whether the decision to arrange the birth of the *bhakti* saints was ultimately “democratic” or *ex cathedra* is beside the point [note that the myth simply says “it was thus decided”], for the whole thing played out as a means to ensure an authoritative order about how the *dharma* was to be followed in the world.

In the contemporary Mayongian moment, the *raijmel* is not only a practical site for creating shared accounts; it is also, and more importantly, an event that gives the shared account its ritual and cosmographic significance. At the crux of it, shared accounts replicate the kingly duty of building a unity out of complex (and, perhaps, *falsely focused*) heterogeneity, and thus cannot be open to the “democratic” pluriverse of options for governance—only to the *plurivocality* of the *raij* as a means of encompassment. The options concerning “what is to be done” and how it is to be accounted for, however, must first be proposed by God—hence, through attenuation and consecration, by kings or their analogues.

### **Analogic Kingship**

Mayongian shared accounts begin with the king, but only as a “background figure,” so to speak. The shared account is modeled on the historical/ritual capacity of his office to shape the socius and cosmopolity of Mayong into an interdependent whole. In terms of functional equivalency, this means that the shared account replicates the following: settling inter-ethnic disputes, calculating and accounting for ritual income and expenditures, accounting to the *raij*, patronizing infrastructural development, drawing in outsiders and powers from afar, punishing transgressions, and maintaining a “working relationship” with the various deities localized in

Mayong. However, the analogic “flow” that makes this pragmatic equivalence possible is precipitated by historical circumstances that have rendered the symbolic dimension of kingship its primary focus in the present moment; effectively all political-economic matters are now being read through the medium of ritual and sacrality, including the non-royal authority of big men.

In Chapter 1, I outlined how the annual rituals of *Goxai Uliuwa* and *Gor Bhanga* do not simply affirm the “divinity” of the king, but act—in the Hocartian sense—as a means for purifying the kingship from the inauspiciousness accrued to the office over the year. In this way, the three day ceremonial functions as an annual installment/coronation of the king, to make, unmake, and remake the life-giving function of his role. Yet, as we also showed in Chapter 1, the contemporary situation in Mayong is such that the office can no longer complete the work of facilitating cosmic prosperity in ordinary life. The Indian state, its ethnic legalities, and the capitalist cosmoeconomy have reduced the ritual treasury of Mayongian kingship to an annual ceremonial only. Thus, junior kings, tribal chiefs, peripheral village kings, sorcerers (see Chapter 2), big men, and even oracles (*ai*) have adopted the role of patrons of sacrifices, accessors of the forces of life itself, and the daily managers of inter-ethnic affairs. The dilemma, however, is that this replication of the kingly duty of accounting for, containing, and measuring out the forces of life “downward” in more and more segmented sub-polities cannot sustain itself as a “Mayongian bureaucracy.” This happens for two reasons. (1) It has caused new political alignments whereby the sub-polities now align themselves with other political entities (mainly “Tribes,” with a capital “T”) who are recognized by the Indian state and thus a source for better resources. Effectively, this has created tensions between the Mayong king and his sub-polities, especially the Tiwa and Karbi people of Mayong who have been swept up in “Tribalization” (see Chapter 1). (2) These “analogic kings”—as I will refer to them—operate on the principle of “analogic kingship,” but

they lack the divine/sacred/separated condition of the king himself. They are, in effect, not “officials” but ersatz kings who look more like usurpers.

Still, they only “look like” usurpers from the timeless perspective that places them out of history, wallowing in the almost 400-year-old structure of Mayongian kingship. For Mayongians today—affected by the “cosmographic situation” described in Chapters 1 and 2—they fit the bill of an actual king. My friend Pornob Timung, made a rather strong statement to this effect during the 2014 *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial:

We Karbi people have a problem with kings. Here in our village [Burha Mayong], we have three kings who we must respect: the Mayong king, the Bor Bangthai, and the Deka Bangthai. Then we have people who do the work of kings: certain elders and “big men” (*dangor manuh*). These guys need respect, but nothing more than that. The Mayong king made the *bor bangthai* our second king hundreds of years ago. He commanded us and the army. And, after that, people also say we are of the Karbi *risu* [*recho*, “king”] in Diphu [in the autonomous district of Karbi Anglong]. The Tiwa people say we are actually of the Gobha Roja at Jagi. It is very confusing. . . . In the past, we were very close to the Mayong king. Today he says he is a king of the Karbi only. Maybe that is true, but there is no longer any real love between him and us. In the past, we needed him. But, our relation with him today is not very good. He says we did not give him one of the *goxai*—Basudeb, I think. But we did [give it]; it came from our jungle. In the present, we like to call our Bangthai the *real king* (*xosa roja to*). He handles everything we need and we owe our lives to him.

The *bor bangthai*, true to his historical office, denies this. As he made it completely clear to me in an interview at his house following the 2014 ceremonial, his office “officially” remains one of being a functionary of the Mayong king (even if that relationship is now a tense one due to ethnic alignments):

I am not a king. People say this, but it is not true. People also say I am the great priest (*bor deuri*). This is also not true. Our Kathar is the priest, like a Brahmin. I am responsible for managing all the laws, rites, and rules of the Karbi people in Mayong (*Mur dayito ase. Mayongor Karbi xokolor law aru niti-niyom porisalon korisu*). My clan is responsible for this. My house is the library of our accounts (*amar hisapor library*). The Mayong *bor roja*, many years ago, made the *bor bangthai* to be a person responsible for war—protecting the kingdom with the help of his Deka Bangthai [Junior Chief, or “Chief of the Youth” in today’s significance], Pator [a Tiwa general], and Karbi Xenapati [commandors-in-chief]—but also for keeping the Karbi rituals and rules true and

unchanged. See, [the Mayong king] lived far from us. He could not keep to all of our concerns for marriages, funerals, etc. And he and his *deka roja* had to keep the peace across the entire kingdom—and you know Mayong was very big in the past, from *Xildubi* in the east to the Kolong in the south and west. But, ultimately, we are not under the Karbi rule in Diphu or any Karbi *roja* elsewhere; we are always under the Mayong king. Yet it is also true that if there is a problem that I cannot resolve, I have two options: I can go to the Mayong king's *mel* and discuss solutions there. If the matter is strictly a Karbi concern, then I will go meet with the Baro Bangthai [12 chiefs] about the rules we need to follow. The Mayong king does not know much of our rules, so the Baro Bangthai are better for this.<sup>6</sup>

These two statements are charged with layers of significance that, unfortunately, I cannot unpack here. But what both reveal is that the office of *bor bangthai* was, in essence, an analogical extension of the office of Mayongian kingship, not a homologous substitute. It was a consecrated “chiefship” (see Appendix) that the king created because he was unable to manage Burha Mayong due to its distance and, putatively, because he was not well-versed in the particular rites and rules necessary for the Karbi society to function. It also established a de facto diarchy between the Mayong *bor roja* and the Karbi *bor bangthai*, being cosmocrats of peace and war, respectively. However, the office of the *bor bangthai* was necessarily “encompassed” (to use a Dumontian term) by the hierarchically superior office of the *bor roja*, intimating that the “peace” function was also a superior value of the kingship as a whole (or that warfare is a sub-function of the maintenance of order). In that one of the shared account's main functions is of promoting “peace,” we can begin to see where the structural coordinates and *origo* reside.

Similarly, the two *deka roja* (junior kings), *pas roja* (five kings), and *xat roja* (seven kings) were originally analogical extensions of the kingship like the *bor bangthai* (see Chapter 1 and Appendix). I have little information on the *pas roja* and *xat roja* as their relationship to the

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<sup>6</sup> In the present moment, the *Baro Bangthai* is like a “supreme court” of sorts, though organized in the fashion of a *raijmel*. The 12 Karbi chiefs can be invited from any village or *khel*, but there must be 12 present in number (and they must be Hindu rather than Christian). For matters concerning the Karbi *raij* in Mayong, they are usually drawn from the following villages: Hajonburi, Thakurkuchi, Panbari, Belguri, Xoguwa, Sinimar, Botakuchi, Borkhat, Samota, Komorkuchi, Nairakhat, and Goriyaguli. (Mrinal Phangcho, pers. commun.).

Mayong kingship seems to have ended after a massive plague wiped out much of the population in the late nineteenth century (see Appendix). The *deka roja*, however, are essentially replications of the “peace” function of the *bor roja*, being part of Suinat Singha’s “zero lineage” in the *Sari Bhagi* and *No Bhagi* segmented lineages now housed in Hatimuria and the *Kalxila khel* of Loonmati (see Chapter 1). In turn, the *deka bangthai* was selected from the lowest ranked and most populous Karbi patriclan in Burha Mayong, in effect to be the wartime trainer for the masses.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, all these figures have turned into gerontocratic figures of authority, and their analogic roles have been displaced by “new” charismatic figures: especially big men (*dangor manuh*), sorcerers (*bej*), and oracles (*ai*). Sorcerers have not adopted any of the ritual capacities of the king, even if their “separate” or “external” origins are marked as having the same origin and finality as the kingship (see Chapter 2). Big men and oracles, however, have rushed in where sorcerers have feared to tread. Big men have become analogous to chiefs and junior kings (managing political and socio-economic order), whereas oracles have become analogous to the “divine” capacity of the king by being literal bearers of the forces of life as “god-persons” (I will discuss oracles in Chapter 5). The trouble with oracles is that they fit somewhere between kings and priests and, thus, are not “analogic kings” in the most practical sense of the term. First of all, they do not participate in the shared account. Second, as I will show in Chapter 5, their pronouncements are not meant to be *ex cathedra* injunctions, but rather divinely-gifted *exhortations*—prompted by other exhortations—to get figures of kingly authority to make injunctions in the shared account. Among other things, this reveals—as will be outlined

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<sup>7</sup> In recent years, however, the *deka bangthai* is not understood to be a trainer in the arts of war, but a “chief of the youth,” but these might be more related than at first blush (see more on this in Chapter 1).

in Chapter 5—that it is the ultimate authority of elder women behind the shared account that creates a situation wherein they can decompose kingly/chiefly authority or (re)compose it.

All in all, this recent analogical extension has created a field wherein several figures besides the king carry out the everyday ritual functions of the kingship. We will examine these below, but first we must understand why such an analogic extension is possible and what it implies for Mayongian kingship.

In his classic article on “analogic kinship,” Roy Wagner (1977; cf. 1967) proposes that kinship logics based on homology—from Lévi-Strauss to Lounsbury—are fundamentally flawed because they do not capture the idea that a “relation” and a culturally assigned “relative” are part of the same analogic unit. This perspective on kinship makes no distinction between nature and culture, or between symbolic and physical substances. Kinship (especially in his example of the Daribi), for Wagner, is always ultimately an analogical (thus cultural) phenomenon that differentiates (a logically prior) undifferentiated unity on the basis of controlled exchanges and restrictions rather than some natural order of birth and role assignment. So when Wagner begins his essay with the proposition that “all human relationships are analogous to each other” (1977: 623), this is not meant to be a universal statement about a natural order of human relationality, but a heuristic to help push back against the idea that there is an innateness to kin terms and relations based upon birth and the genealogical order.

Suppose we take this insight into the realm of kingship, an obviously *cultural* and *hierarchical* institution that needs no heuristic to disassociate it from naturalistic ontologies. Kingship is also often opposed to kinship in some fundamental way (see below). So what difference would Wagner’s proposition make to our conception of analogic kingship, especially in Mayong?

To start, we need to dig deeper into what Wagner is getting at. Borrowing his terms from evolutionary biology—of all places [and left curiously unremarked upon by his interlocutors, especially McKinnon (1991) who, elsewhere, takes evolutionary biology to task (see McKinnon 2005)]—Wagner’s argument about the nature of kinship juxtaposes his “analogical” approach against the “homological” approach found in genealogical reckonings. He offers the example of Lévi-Strauss’ treatment of Spencer and Gillen’s work on the Aranda totemistic complex in its original homological argument—i.e., that a cultural series of relations adopts its form as a homologue of a natural series of relations. So, the relation between “witchetty grub men” and “honey ant men” are homologues—or “resemblance-based” relations—of the relation between “witchetty grubs” and “honey ants.” Wagner then suggests that if we look at this relation through an analogical approach, we will instead see that these *totemic* relations are not broken between “natural” and “cultural” kinds but are part of the same relational units (or sets) based on contiguity and incorporation that have *analogic* flows moving between them.<sup>8</sup> Wagner then shows how the same two approaches can be taken in the study of kinship when it comes to dealing with differential solicitude and kinds of kin—i.e., how “a brother can be a little father,” or a “mother can be a kind of father.” But whereas the typical descent-focused (or genealogical) approach sees relationships between “cultural” solicitude and “natural” kinds of relatives as ontic homologues, the analogic approach again sees them as part of contiguous cultural units (see Figure 3.1). Why the genealogical method is always “homologous” rather than “analogous” is

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<sup>8</sup> Descola (2013) would later argue that the distinction Wagner is trying to articulate here is actually one between “Totemic” and “Analogic” ontologies rather than a methodological distinction. However, see Sahlins (2014a) for a riposte that shows both totemic and analogic ontologies to be two variations of anthropomorphic animism—respectively, “segmentary animism” and “hierarchical animism.” Using the cosmocratic deities of Hawai‘i as an example of hierarchical animism (i.e., analogism), Sahlins illuminates how a tropic logic of an anthropomorphic deity encompasses the differentiated plenitude of the world, so that persons and things are not only manifestations of that deity (in part or whole) but derive their animated subjectivity from it. See also Valeri (1985: 34–35).

because it “is basically synchronic and emphasizes the systematic deployment of re-correspondences across an invariant grid. What we might call the ‘temporal’ factor can be located as one of a number of logical implications subsumed in the total constellation” (Wagner 1977: 626). On the contrary, “an analogical analysis is of necessity diachronic and sequential: concerned with ‘relationship’ as the analogical consequence of contrived differentiation,<sup>9</sup> it exhausts a terminological-relational series through temporal sequence rather than logical systemization. Each differentiation has its consequences and is reestablished or altered diachronically” (ibid.).

In sum, analogic kinship takes us into a conceptual world where there is no particular “domain” of kinship proper to begin with, but frames it as a result of sequential processes of symbolization and creative apprehension where analogic correspondences are the result of contrived differentiation. In the Daribi example Wagner provides, these processes unfold through *controlled* marriage exchanges that both differentiate lineages and unite (or recompose) them into a single lineality (at least from the perspective of the child that is one of the results of these exchanges). At the basis of all this technical language is the idea that the “essence” of kinship is *restriction* (or “controlled analogy”), whereas its “opposite” (whatever that might be),<sup>10</sup> is “total unrestricted analogy or . . . complete familiarity and lack of constraint” (ibid.: 639).

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<sup>9</sup> Or, as Wagner summarizes elsewhere in his article, “The means by which relatives are differentiated from one another and the means by which they are differentiated from an ego (reciprocal) are one and the same. My mother is a mother to me and she is also my mother in contrast to other relatives, who are aunts, and so forth. This point is sometimes complicated, but not necessarily contradicted, by terminological usages (that is, separate terminologies for ‘address’ and ‘reference’). We differentiate relatives, broadly speaking, by the same criteria that specify our relationship to them” (Wagner 1977: 639).

<sup>10</sup> Friendship, perhaps? See Chapter 6, this thesis for reflections on the oppositional contrasts between kinship and friendship in Mayong.

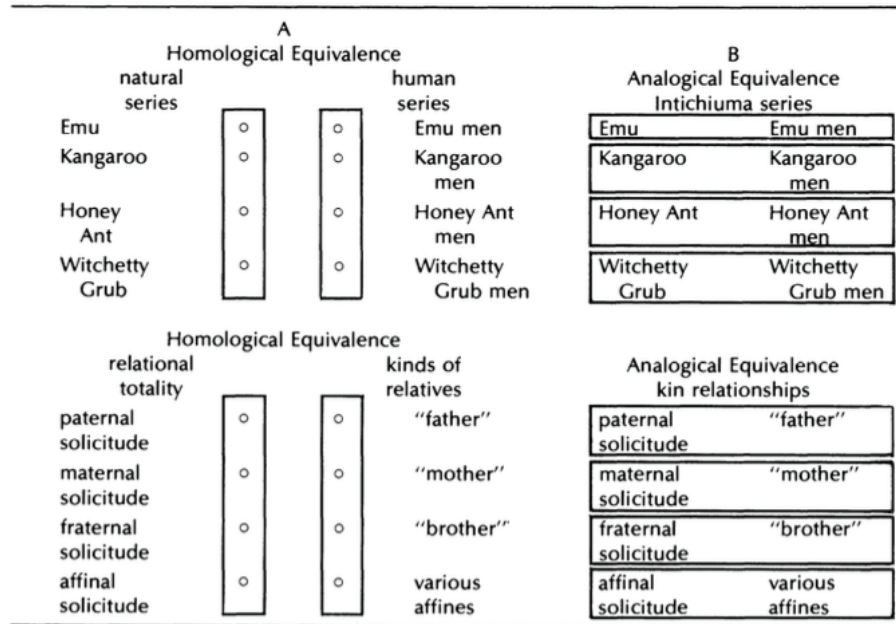
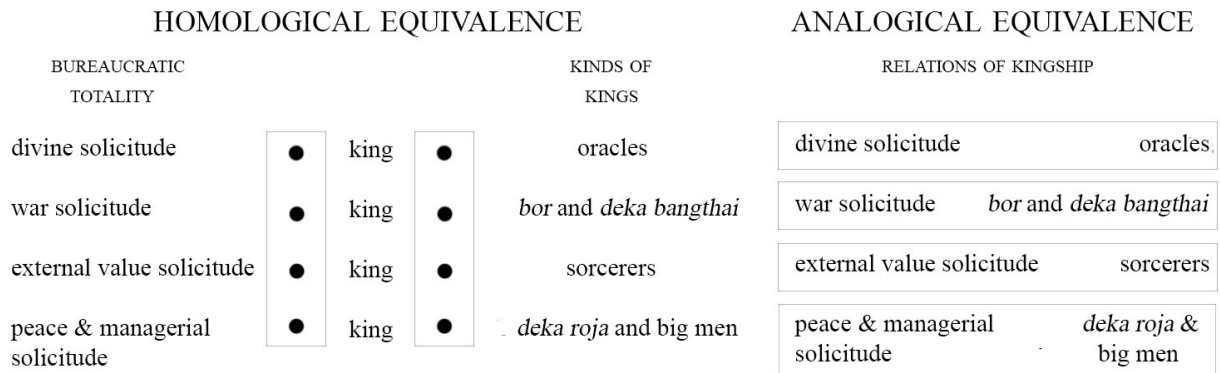


Figure 1: A comparison of Lévi-Strauss's "totemism" model and its ritual transformation among the Aranda (Spencer and Gillen 1968) with the model of analogical kin relationship presented in this discussion. Boxes indicate contiguity or incorporation, parallel alignment indicates resemblances.

Figure 3.1. A diagram from Wagner (1977: 625) comparing homological and analogical approaches to totemic relations in the Intichiuma rite among the Aranda and to kin relationships (broadly understood).

Regarding Mayongian logics of meronymy and paronymy, we can see how the two approaches Wagner outlines work with respect to "ideal" kingship in Figure 3.2. On the left, we see how homological equivalence can be created between kinds of kingly solicitude parceled out in the bureaucratic totality to kinds of "kings." The contrived equivalence is based on a resemblance regarding function of office alone; i.e., oracles can solicit divine presence like kings, sorcerers have access to external values like kings, etc. Thus here the parallel alignment represents the necessary mediating presence of the king to create (metaphorical) homologies. On the right, however, we see how analogic equivalence is created by a contiguous relationship between the need for certain kinds of solicitude and restricted figures who are capable of doing that work—or, because of "flows" between the boxes, any of the work at any time—*with or without* the king as a symbolic mediator. The relations of equivalence here are due to the

(metonymically) contrived differentiation made possible by kingship, but the king himself has effectively disappeared from the relation as a necessary mediator for establishing equivalence.



**Figure 3.2.** A diagram of “ideal” Mayongian kingship relations based on Wagner’s distinction between homological and analogical equivalence. Analogical equivalence here reveals the possibility that kings can disappear as the mediating category for establishing congruity or incorporation.

To return, then, to Wagner. In analogic kinship, the perspective is that, logically prior to all forms of terminological or relational differentiation, there is an *undifferentiated unity* that makes differentiation and analogy possible. This, for Wagner—as much as for Strathern (1988) and McKinnon (1991)—is what allows us to see that there is no innate or “natural” character to any kinship relation or social category of being and how power/hierarchy/difference is diachronically construed. Hierarchical (or symmetrical) relations are made—i.e., *differentiated*—out of controlled (restricted) exchanges occurring across a field of what Schneider (1980: 116) termed “diffuse, enduring solidarity” (or what Sahlins [2013d] would later refer to, with a related but slightly different agenda, as “mutuality of being”).

In what I am proposing to call “analogic kingship,” however, there can never be a prior *undifferentiated* unity, logically or otherwise. The king is only an anthropomorphic *origo* for analogic differentiation; in Mayong, he is a figure who replicates both divine differentiation *and* unification, the guardian and agent of an antimony of qualitative decomposability, if you will.

His primary ritual function is to recompose and put everything in its right (pre-given) place—which results from the inevitable degradation of the socius in real time—and through this he must compose a cosmically legitimate unity. According to various Mayongian cosmogonic myths (see Chapters 1, 4 and 6), a differentiated (or “speciated”) world of *jati*—both human and non-human—is there right there at the beginning of all things. For Mayongians, cosmogenesis is always already ethnogenesis. But the primordial relations between such *jati* are not fixed—even the question of their hierarchical ordering is tenuous and underspecified. Vedic/Sanskrit myths have been (and still are) remediated by both the Vaishnavite monastic tradition in Assam and “tribal” cosmogonies; to use Wendy Doniger’s (2010: 6) term, they have undergone “*deshification*,” being transformed by oral or local traditions. As we will show in the next chapter, this has led to a conception of *jati* as “primordial multiplicity” rather than a strict sense of hierarchically ordered “castes.” Yet, because “*deshification*” also *begets* “Sanskritization” (ibid.; cf. Srinivas 1952: 32), hierarchical order rears its head as potential cosmic principle. On the part of the Mayongian king, hierarchy is less important a cosmic principle than that of controlled order and a “place logic” of who belongs where. This involves, presciently for the king and poignantly for our purposes, the management of *marriages* over anything else.

Here, we need to dig deeper into what “kingship” really means and *does* for Mayongians as much as for anyone else. In history and anthropology, the going assumption is that kingship *must* be conceptually different from kinship, even if only in a minor (but very important) way. For the most part, this assumption is derived from a logical need to understand *political* order, i.e., how acephalous segmentary societies transform into states.<sup>11</sup> As the going theory has it, if

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, lineal kinship and (often strategic) alliances sustain kingship as much as kingship sustains the reproductive forces of society. To oppose them in any fundamental sense is a strategic means for understanding the origins of states. For my part, I would argue that kingship is primordial because its office has always been primarily about ritual order and only secondarily a matter of “political” authority.

kinship and kingship are “in some sense fundamentally opposed” (Quigley 2005a: 8), then it is because kingship *encompasses* kin relations (especially lineages) at a higher order of incorporation by virtue of its ability to access cosmic forces that even segmentary societies also need to access. Southall’s (1953, 1988) model of the “segmentary state” paints just such a theoretical picture. Luc de Heusch’s argument also suggests a temporal and mechanical relation on top of this logical one: “The sacred chief emerges from a society based on lineages or clans as the result of a breakdown of the domestic order. . . . The phoneme that separates the English words ‘kinship’ and ‘kingship’ deserves to be known as the ‘g’ factor in history. The phenomenon of royalty is the principal motor of this development, not its origin” (de Heusch 2005: 66). During my fieldwork in 2013, advertisers for the Bollywood blockbuster *Aurangzeb* (dr. Atul Sabharwal) ran several dialogue promos with the English-language tagline “Kingship knows no kinship.” The story—which is about corruption, police, and revenge—is not worth going into right now, but the tagline was supposedly taken from the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb: a timeless claim that kingship must disassociate itself from the intimacies of kinship in order to function properly.<sup>12</sup> All in all, we have a rather strong and cross-cultural idea that kingship *overcomes* or *encompasses* kinship, whether logically, temporally, or practically.

Yet—and forgive the digression—what if, following an insight on caste from Hocart and others,<sup>13</sup> we saw kingship as a logical *source* of kinship rather than being its opposite or hierarchically encompassing pair; that is to say, what if kinship was an *expression* of kingship, which is “the single institution in which everyone in the society is connected” (Quigley 2005a: 5). Here, Wagner’s “essence” of kinship—i.e., *restriction*, or “controlled analogy”—is quite

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<sup>12</sup> And this is ironically so given the fact that Aurangzeb is often treated as an icon of deceitfulness in India, something the movie itself touches upon.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Hocart ([1938] 1950), Galey (1989), Quigley (1993, 2005b), and Raheja (1988).

useful. Consider that in some English-speaking, heteronormative, and nuclear households, fathers are usually referred to as “king of the house,” just as mothers are “queens” and daughters “princesses.” Here, it is hierarchical metonymy that gives certain kinds of restrictions *qua* kin relationships a particular sense of role-alignment that the soliciting of metaphorical relations on its own cannot. Indeed, just such a metonymic extension exists in hundreds of Indo-European languages even beyond the “domain” of kinship. Anywhere a hierarchical relation of higher-order encompassment is invoked, the subject is inevitably a “king” or “queen” (e.g., “king of the road,” “king of rock-n-roll,” “king of the apes,” “le roi de science,” “la reine de la mode,” “raat ka raja aur raat ki rani,” “Schwalbenkönig,” etc.). Common kinship metaphors, however, do something else entirely. When we speak of the “father of the nation,” “the mother of invention,” “India’s seven sisters,” we are not necessarily making claims about encompassment and hierarchy, but about particular relationships and cultural role-alignments (e.g., generative/seminal power and care). As Wagner points out, we differentiate relatives through the same criteria that we mark our relationship to them.

But if we differentiate relatives on the basis of hierarchical restrictions and encompassment, then what’s that meta for (cf. Sahlins 2014a: 286)? Wagner’s whole point, further developed by McKinnon (1991), is that hierarchy in kinship is a cultural intention. If it gets produced in kin differentiation, it is because exchanges drive the higher-order encompassment. This might work for cultures like the Daribi or the Tanimbarese, but for a great many societies that know kings and have kingship—and even for many who do not—there is another factor to consider. I already mentioned it above: kingship is a replication of divine differentiation and its own hierarchical order.

In a forthcoming work by Sahlins and Graeber (2017/forthcoming), the idea that acephalous societies lack hierarchical order, even a political state in its most basic sense, is proven to be untenable; but this is not proven on the basis of kin differentiation via exchange. Rather, in such societies there are always encompassing meta-persons (ancestors, spirit-masters, various cosmocratic deities) to whom people owe their existence and whom they exist in an asymmetrical hierarchical relationship to. Thus, the Marxist (or Feuerbachian) and Durkheimian position that the gods are mystifications of the socio-political order is equally untenable.<sup>14</sup> In Sahlins' Hocart Lecture (n.d.), this position is elaborated in the fact that "kings are imitations of gods, rather than gods of kings; there are kingly beings in heaven where there are no chiefs on earth." So we could say that there are analogic kings in heaven before there are kings on earth, but a better way of putting all of this is that both kings and analogic kings are actually analogues of cosmic meta-persons (gods, ancestors, etc.). With this view in hand, it is not so much that kingship itself is the logical source for differentiation in kinship, but that kingship replicates cosmocracy. As outlined in chapter one, the reason the king can do this is because of his necessary alterity, being both a separated figure and an encompassing unifier: the perfect stranger.

Mayongian kingship is, at its core, a replication of the model of Krishna-as-cosmocrat and his violent consort "Kamakhya" (any mother goddess can be substituted here) as the prosperous life-force of that cosmocracy (see Chapters 1 and 2). This is, of course, modeled on

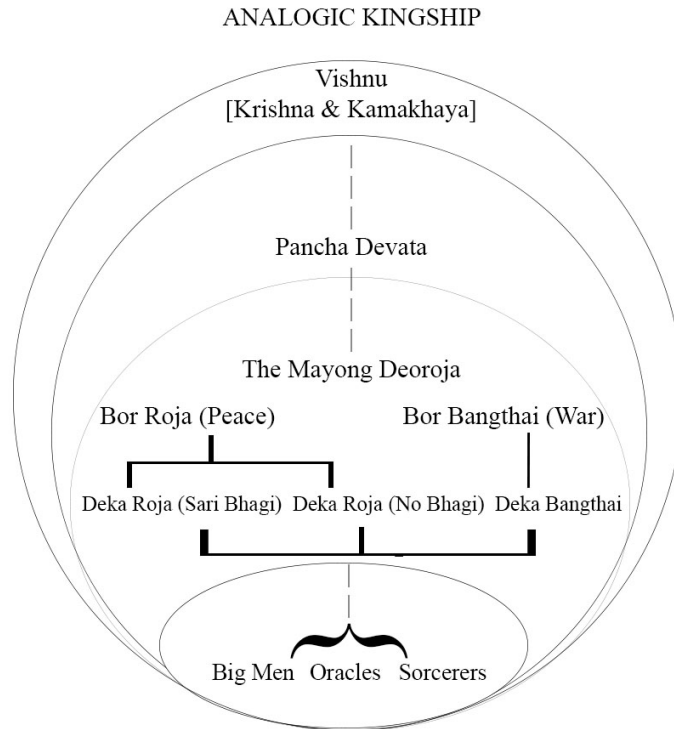
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<sup>14</sup> However, and I thank William Mazzarella for reminding me of this, Durkheim's theory of religion, or the realm of the sacred, is not that it is a "mystification" but a socially necessary misrecognition of the social order (to borrow a phrasing from Bourdieu). This is not a distinction without a difference, for if religion were a mystification (as in the Feuerbachian formula), it could be removed without affecting the social order. Yet, for Durkheim, the social order cannot exist without the sacred. When I teach Durkheim, I often give my students a thought experiment from which to compose a mid-term essay: Would *atheism* be a religion or an exemplification of the sacred according to Durkheim? What I think Sahlins and Graeber are getting at here, though, is that sacred figures are not an effect or product of society, but that society is an effect and product of them. They are primary, logically or otherwise.

the divinely prior Vishnu/Laksmi dyad as cosmogenitor and cosmogenitrix. The Mayong “king” may indeed have a lineal relationship to Ghatotkacha and the Brahmaputra River via Suinat Singha’s triumph as the first stranger king, but the Mayong “divine kingship” (*deoroja*), which manifests “ideally” in the offices of *Bor Roja* and *Bor Bangthai* as, respectively, peace and war kings during the *Goxai Uliuwa* and *Gor Bhanga* ceremonial, is a replication of Krishna. Recall that Suinat Singha (or his children) took *xoron*, thus establishing the religious narrative of the Mayongian kingdom as a Vaishnavite one. Of course, the king is only a replication of Krishna through the medium of the *pancha devata* (the five “patron deities” of Mayong) who ritually transform the king’s body into a divine cosmocrat, if only for three days per year (see Chapter 1). As the current king of Mayong explained to me—after I asked him “what God he becomes” during the annual ceremonial:

Always Krishna, because he is the one God; he restored order to a chaotic universe. Being a great unifier, he also pardoned everyone (*sobok uddhar dile*). Read the stories. Krishna even pardoned the hunter who killed him. But do not be confused. I am not a God; I am only a man. People *believe* I am a God during our Bohag festival, but it is actually Krishna who gives them shelter. He is the true meaning of the *pancha devata*. They see God in me because it is the duty of my post (*mur postingor dayito*) to give them shelter.

Despite the current king’s modesty or grasp of symbolic worship, the *raij* does indeed see the transformation of the king into Krishna as a necessary *physical* transformation, a *participation* rather than a *representation* of divinity (see Chapters 1 and 2). He is God, especially during the annual ceremonial. No two ways about it. Yet the king is also correct that he is only part of a sequence of encompassment from a divine order down to the ordinary dimensions of attenuated kingship in figures like big men (see Figure 3.3).



**Figure 3.3.** Analogic kingship in Mayong viewed as nested levels that replicate and are encompassed by cosmocratic divinity.

Moreover, what matters to the current king in Mayong is that, just like Krishna, he restores order by granting pardons (*uddhar*). Analogic kingship thus works on two mechanisms: (1) the replication of a divine hierarchical unity (all under the shelter of Krishna), which, by virtue of the king’s “separateness” and place in the sequential hierarchy, allows him (2) to grant pardons and grant the power of pardoning. And this is precisely how, first, chiefs and other nobles and then big men were historically granted the ability to do the work of the king in Mayong: by receiving a divinely replicated pardon (*uddhar*). In turn, they can now grant *uddhar* as well, though as we will see below the meaning shifts more to an “exemption” rather than a pardon in the case of big men.

A final take-away point from all this is that behind both senses of *uddhar* surges a notion of “ownership” (*adhi potyo*). Every kingly or chiefly pardon, and every big man exemption,

establishes a relationship of perpetual debt that locally resonates with the concept of *adhi*—or “giving half of what is owned.” Hence, the idea of “ownership” itself—*adhi potyo*—is marked by a sense of “owing half” and “owning half.” *Adhi kheti* (share-cropping) and *adhi puwali* (livestock baby gifting) are other expressions of this idea, but so is *uddhar*. At the core is a sense of debt ownership which is reckoned in an affective register as “love” (*morom*) and “help” (*xohai*). I do not have the space to go into *adhi* further here; but, in short, the constellation of these background concepts, notions, and affective registers shows that Wagner’s concept of analogic kinship being, in essence, about “restriction” or “controlled analogy” is not that far off the mark from analogic kingship in the end. Each pardon or exemption is actually a controlled exchange that not only ties the partners together into a single bond of ownership (each owning “half” of each other, as it were), but differentiates the hierarchical order in the same process. Similarly, the background notion of “ownership” establishes a restriction of analogic flow. Just as “a mother can’t be like a wife” in kinship solicitude, small men (*xoru manuh*) can never be kings...and both chiefs and big men do not quite make it there either at the end of the day.

### **Kingly and Chiefly Audits: *Uddhar* as “Pardon”**

Having identified the mechanisms for analogic kingship in the hierarchically motivated concept of *uddhar*, we can now see how the shared account works to create kinds of quiescence. Let’s start with the king and the (Karbi) chief. The Mayong king’s actual participation in shared accounts is primarily limited to the management of his own *khel* (*Rojar Sowki*, or “Seat of the King”) and sometimes to the management of his “own” ethnic community (*jati*), the Xoru Koch (see Chapter 1 regarding the ethnicization of the kingship). Occasionally he will oversee the production of kingdom-wide shared accounts, but only if the ritual order the account is concerned with applies to the entire kingdom (like the annual *Goxai Uliuwa* and *Gor Bhanga*

ceremonies). Most of the time, he is busy trying to handle problems of speciation and particularization with respect to his “own” groups.

For example, in the early spring of 2014, I witnessed the king presiding over a *raijmel* and *raijor hisap* at the entrance of the king’s own *namghor*. The *mel* was called because a young boy in the king’s own *khel* and Xoru Koch patriclan had eloped with a young woman from Roja Mayong who was a “Das.” In Assam, those who belong to the Das *jati* are considered to be low ranked and are reckoned by the state as a “Scheduled Caste” (SC). Xoru Koch are considered slightly higher—generally stricter on vegetarianism because of their Vaishnavite origins—and are reckoned by the state as an “Other Backward Caste” (OBC). As what usually happens in these circumstances, the couple returned from their sojourn for forgiveness from the *raij* and a post-festum “arrangement” of the marriage (see Chapter 6). The king gave the duty of handling the accounts to a younger member of his *khel*. Upon taking the ledgers from the king, this gentleman proceeded to exhort the *melkie* present as to how the fines now owed by the father of the bride and the father of the groom were to be collected and redistributed throughout the Xoru Koch *raij*. Debate ensued and turned less upon payment but upon how the feast was to be organized since there was a lingering question of pollution transfer and most Xoru Koch marriage feasts are strictly vegetarian (*niyar mix*).

In a striking difference compared to what happens in chiefly-led *raijmel*, the king himself hardly spoke throughout the entire ordeal. He waited until all matters were formally discussed and settled by the *raij*, then raised his hand in a gesture of closure and gave three declarations: (1) he would allow fish to be served at the feast, but both bridal parties would have to eat separately; (2) he granted the “pardon” of *uddhar* to both the bride and groom’s family; and (3) ordered that the groom’s family will have to continue to pay fines for their improper union for

every future wedding feast in the *rojar sowki khel* (see Figure 3.4). The king then picked the account books back up and uttered the following: “I have made my audit and all seems to be in accordance with our religion and rules.” After giving blessings in the name of Krishna to the fathers of the bride and groom, and to the rest of the *raij*, he returned to his house. Soon after that, the clan member who was keeping the books said the following to me: “He is our king and only he can allow an ‘upgrade’ to happen in our society (*amar xomajot okol tekhet ‘upgrade’ onumoti dibo parise*). Today SC became OBC. Easy, isn’t it? [She] only needed his blessing (*axix*).”

Kingly auditing and pardoning is spoken of as a “blessing” (*axix*) of sorts, but as can be seen, it also includes the shared reckoning of proper fines/liabilities and ritual proscriptions/credits meant to control the spreading of pollution created from improper unions, broken taboos, or other socio-cosmological transgressions (see also Chapter 6). Moreover, the kingly audit/pardon reveals three more important features of how a shared account should ideally devolve into a state of quiescence. First, the king himself is quiescent (if actively so, see footnote 3, this chapter). I witnessed 5 different kingly *raijmel* like this one over the course of 26 months of fieldwork. In each one, the king passed on the accounting to another and remained utterly silent until the end. In his own bodily comportment, he therefore represents a state of tranquil unity that the *raij* itself should come to embody. Second, we can see that in kingly terms *uddhar* amounts to a complete change in personhood. Marriage itself does not do this by itself; it requires the formal injunction by the king who has the power (or “blessing”) to make a stranger an intimate. But after *uddhar*, one also is now “stuck” in a relationship that one can never escape. Fines for *uddhar* must be paid at ritual events even beyond the marriage itself. Finally, even if *uddhar* created a change in personhood, it also reestablished the lines of speciation between two

*jati* even more—as can be seen in the fact that both groups would have to eat separately at the wedding feast. There is transformation and movement, but with regard to the structure, everything is seemingly put back into its right place.



**Figure 3.4.** The Mayong *bor roja* (left) at a *raijmel* in the *rajaor sowki* (“seat of the king”) residential unit declares *uddhar*—and gestures “closure”—while a junior member of his *khel* composes the accounts (right). Photographs by Mohsin Hussain.

Kingly *uddhar* is thus only a “kind” of closure. The clearer significance here is that it does not exempt a person from debts, but actually inaugurates them, via pardon, so that the society can be opened up and allowed for someone to change their personhood in contexts of marriage (cf. Leach 1954). Yet it also heightens the hierarchical speciation between *jati* (see also Chapter 4), and, in the king’s composure, offers a model for tranquil quiescence. In the case of the chief (the Karbi *bor bangthai*), the “pardon” function is identical except that his granting of

*uddhar* is never quite so peaceful. Chiefly auditing in Burha Mayong often involves angry exhortations, an entirely different kind of “penal semiotics” (Lempert 2012), wherein discipline to counteract socio-cosmic transgressions is not peacefully meted out, but reckoned (with) in an almost violently inciteful way. Although it is not framed as such, one might see this as a further alignment of the peace/war dichotomy of the *bor roja* and *bor bangthai*.

Consider the following example, here created from a family history narrated to me by my friend Diganta Timung. Diganta is a Karbi who lives in Burha Mayong. His paternal grandfather, Gonesh Oja Timung, is one of the more famous named sorcerers in the area. But the story of how that came to be—as well as the particularities of Diganta’s father’s life-course—find its narration around the granting of *uddhar* by the *bor bangthai*.

Gonesh Oja was born in the area of Borpeta in Lower Assam. Employment and a knowledge of sorcery eventually led him to Mayong. While there, he met a Karbi woman named Bumoni Timung and fell in love. However, Gonesh was not only from another caste/ethnicity, but his paternal home was also quite distant. So when it came time for them to be married, the question of whether or not he would stay in Mayong or take his bride back to his natal home was a serious matter for conjecture. I won’t go into too many details, but the choice was finally made that he would live in the house of his bride (*ghor juwai*, “uxorilocality”) and that an *uddhar* would be granted to allow him to take on the ethnicity (*jati*), clan (*kur/phoid*), and patriline (*bongxo*) of his wife, and her patrilineal descent would hold for their descendants thereafter. Fines were paid and recorded publicly, rituals that nullified transfer pollution were completed, a new name was taken, and Gonesh Oja *became* Gonesh Oja Timung, a Karbi man.

Gonesh and Bumoni had many children, one of whom was Diganta Timung’s father. He expired from liver failure—due to an entire adulthood of heavy alcohol consumption—

approximately two months after I first arrived in Mayong. But it turns out there was a particular problem with his post-mortem destiny. According to divinations by the *rongbong kathar* (high priest), Diganta's father's "life-force" or "self" (*atma*) was lingering in ghostly form (*bhut*) and was not taking a rebirth.

It all began at his mortuary rite, which ended up lasting several weeks. After a body is cremated, per Plains Karbi rules and rituals, a memorial stone (*longdrang*, see Figures 3.5 and 3.8) must be laid flat on the ground and upon its base a sacrifice of a pig must be made by the dead person's eldest sister's son (*bhagin*).<sup>15</sup> A few days following this sacrifice, a divination is made to find out if the dead person's *atma/bhut* has "left the village" and/or taken a new birth. The divination involves a technique of sieving rice beer (*kesa mod*, *lau pani*, or *hor*) made in the deceased household through a small net. The beer is sieved over the *longdrang*. If there is any sediment left in the net after the sieving, then the deceased's *atma/bhut* is said to be restless and has not yet left the village. If there is no sediment, then the *longdrang* is finally erected and the first stage of the mortuary rite ends. In the case of Diganta's father, the same sacrifice and same divination were made three times over the span of three weeks: there was still sediment so the *bhut* was still lingering.

Members of Diganta's patriclan became worried and called upon the *bor bangthai* for ritual assistance. It was assumed that something must not have been conducted properly, for rarely does it take so long for rice beer to run clean. Accordingly, the *bor bangthai* gathered with the *rongbong kathar*. The latter confirmed that all rites were conducted properly. So, in a curious but rather clever move, the *bor bangthai* decided to run an "audit" of Diganta's father's life. This

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<sup>15</sup> Since Diganta's FeZS was not part of the same patriclan and patriline of the deceased, he is put in charge of the sacrifice, which the *raij* will eventually eat, so as to not spread the contagious pollution inherited in the patriclan as a result of one of its members dying.

audit was effectively an oratorical recitation of the “sins” (*pap*) as well as “merits” (*punyo*) he accrued over his life.



**Figure 3.5.** *Longdrang*: memorial stones of the Karbi community in Burah Mayong that are erected after a mortuary rite has been completed.

The audit began with a speech delivered to Diganta’s patriclan that took the form of a “eulogy” of sorts, wherein the *bor bangthai* spoke of ritual fines accrued and paid over a lifetime (culled from the ledgers of Diganta’s patriclan). These were fines not only associated with Diganta’s father, but his grandfather, too. The latter’s initial *uddhar* was a debt that continued on through Diganta’s father’s life. But alongside a reckoning of Diganta’s father’s *bhagyo* (“destiny,” see Chapter 6) in terms of a moral calculus, it also turned into an opportunity to scold the *raij* at large. During the speech, the *bangthai* angrily accosted the patriclan about the dangers of alcoholism and why Diganta’s father was so hooked to this “deadly habit” (*birad beya*

*oybhyax*) that it must have been the reason for his untimely death and lack of peace in the after life. This enraged the patriclan *raij* who argued that the *bangthai* had no place to say that drinking was wrong when it is at the center of so much of Karbi ritual life. Shouting went back and forth until, finally, the *bor bangthai* interjected with a prayer at the base of Diganta’s father’s *longdrang* and then proclaimed that *uddhar* was granted to his spirit for the sin of alcoholism, “which destroyed his life and his family accounts/money for years.”

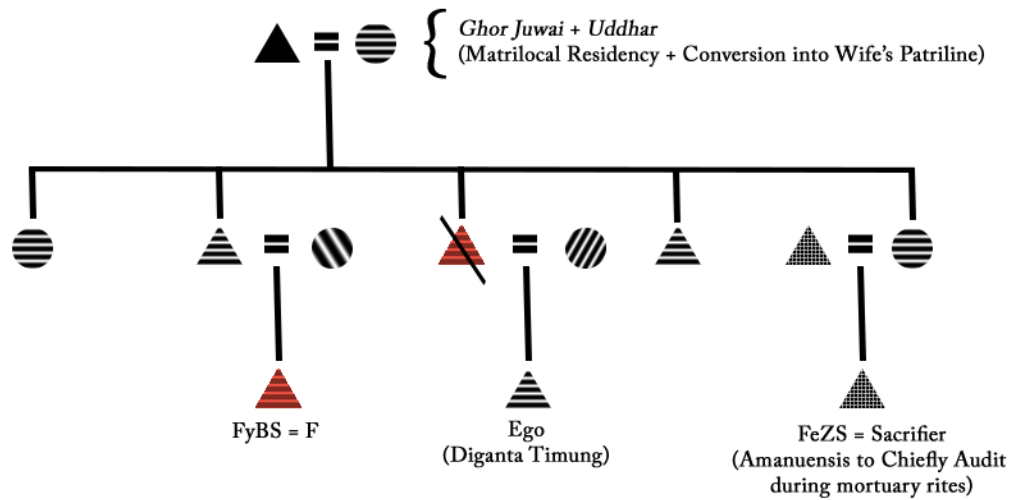


**Figure 3.6.** Diganta Timung posing with a picture of his *FyBS* who, after further divination rituals following the eulogistic account, was confirmed to have the life-force/self (*atma*) of Diganta’s recently deceased father.

Diganta’s *FeZS* then erected the *longdrang* and the mortuary rite was completed. A couple months later, more divination was completed and it was discovered that Diganta’s father had reincarnated as his own younger brother’s eldest son (see Figure 3.6).

From Diganta’s perspective, his father’s life and after-life required two major chiefly audits as conditions of possibility—the granting of *uddhar* to his paternal grandfather, and the granting of post-mortem *uddhar* to his father. Following “standard” patrilineal rules of

succession and residence, none of this kind of accounting would have been necessary. Indeed, had his paternal grandfather not undergone *ghor juwai* (uxorilocal residence) and received *uddhar* from that, Diganta would not be Karbi, nor would his father had to have a chiefly audit, sacrifice, eulogistic shared account, and memorial erection of the *longdrang* [which were referred to collectively as his father’s “life account” (*jibonor hisap*)] performed during his mortuary rites (see Figure 3.7), which thereby *ensured* his reincarnation into his mother’s patriline.



**Figure 3.7.** A modified kinship diagram of Diganta Timung’s immediate family (several relatives not shown) showing the two *uddhar* that led to Diganta’s father’s reincarnation as the latter’s yBS. Patterns in the shapes for kin reveal different patriline/patriclans.

One night in 2014, Diganta took me out to visit his father’s *longdrang* again; there he prostrated before the stone, gave honor to his father and other ancestors, and told me, “although alcohol may have killed my father, I will make sure it will never kill me” (see Figure 3.8).



**Figure 3.8.** Diganta Timung pointing to his deceased father's *longdrang* in April 2014.

### **The Big Man Difference: *Uddhar* as “Exemption”**

Now, big men like Dipon Kathar have no consecrated authority to grant *uddhar* in the sense of being a kingly or chiefly “pardon,” but they do have the capacity to settle disputes, compose shared accounts, and this position thrives on the maintenance of their indebtedness to the villagers they patronize. When they do grant *uddhar*, then, it has the sense of “exemption” that turns on logics of gratuitous gifting.

Big men broker their village-internal status on the basis of access to external resources. Dipon hires people like Saritra to work his fields and fisheries and handle his householder duties

while he travels to Morigaon, Nagaon, Guwahati, and other regional cities to create networks of opportunity for his family and for the village as a whole. Big men thus require even more supplementary labor, like drivers and assistants, to increase their access to these networks, and in turn, their own social capital. However, like their Melanesian counterparts (Strathern 1971; Strathern and Godelier 1991)—and unlike their South Indian ones (see Mines 1984, 1994)—big men in Assam often lack the liquid capital to compensate the labor. They are, in so many terms, *cash poor*. So, they instead promise a future payment that the laborer cannot afford to back away from, yet hardly ever manifests. In some cases, as with Saritra, big men patronize their laborers further with access to a home, food, education, etc. as a form of ostentatious gift-giving. It is important to point out that these are always spoken of in terms of “free gifts” and accepted by laborers also as “exemptions” (*uddhar*)—i.e., they never take on the language of paying off *wage debt*, nor feature in accounts as a form of reciprocity/compensation for work completed.

What’s more, in contemporary rural Assam, big men are rarely understood to be a twice-removed analogue of kings, but rather as those who fill a political-economic niche that, from the early 1980s until the new millennium, was occupied by local leaders of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). ULFA is the militant wing of Assamese nationalism (*Oxomor Jatiyotabad*), which also has formally “sanctioned” parties like the Ahom Gona Parixod (AGP), and the “youth” wing of the All Assam Student Union (AASU). At the core of all these groups is an ideology of separatism that seeks to embrace Assam’s diversity under the banner of topographical (and sometimes linguistic) identity rather than an “ethnic” one.

Now ULFA, for the most part, are quasi-Marxists who reject the “Bengali” arrogance and veiled ethnic elitism of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), but their relationship to Marxism has also been filtered through the guerilla tactics of Che Guevara and Lenin’s concern

with the “national question” (see Tamuli Phukan 2011). During the 1990s, ULFA cadres occupied hundreds of Assam’s villages, especially those beyond the reach of the state, and set up a kind of de facto administration that was meant to mirror the political and economic system of the Ahom Kingdom (ibid.). ULFA cadres “gave” [meaning they *commandeered* from the state or absentee landlords] usufructory rights to communities devastated by floods or dispossession; this meant that they usurped access to forests and public land from the state and then distributed plots (usually 8 *bigha*, or 4 *pura*) for every household to freely cultivate on. They also provided loans, food, shelter, and other resources gratis—requesting military conscription (in the Ahom *paik* style) rather than taxes as reciprocal compensation. In Mayong, ULFA made sure that everyone who joined their ranks and trained with them in their camp in the Mayong hills had adequate food, flood-free land, shelter, and rice liquor. In a clandestine—and formally disavowed—agreement with the Mayong *roja* and the Karbi *bor bangthai*, they converted several acres of hunting grounds and forests (which were annexed by the state in the 1980s) into militant training sites.

In a nutshell, ULFA rushed in where the state failed to tread in the postcolonial period. They then became analogic kings of a different sort—built from kingship logics immanent to the Ahoms in the medieval period that required the destruction of “seven kingdoms” to build one all-encompassing one (ibid.). State-centric administration reforms following decolonization had already reduced the role of customary kings to ritual patrons only (see Chapter 1), but with the state not following up on its own promise of biopolitical patronage, there was room for kingly patrons to take over the role of bestowing life-giving goods upon the public.

In this current, “post-insurgency” period in Mayong—and across much of Northeast India—the state still keeps a distance, however watchful, from matters relating to customary law

or local political economy. On one hand, they simply lack the resources to intervene. On the other hand, the “punting” back to traditional forms of governance in Assam was part of the “bargain” of ULFA’s surrender, and is enshrined in protections achieved for districts or states that have been granted autonomy via Schedule 6 of the Indian Constitution—thus continuing both the colonial methods (via princely states) and post-colonial policies (via Nehru and Verrier Elwin) of handling “customary” sovereignty. Mayong’s customary king and the various ethnic chiefs of the kingdom are now too busy handling matters of ritual and cosmological importance; the basic needs of economic life, social networking, and access to external values, however, still need their agents. Enter the poor, yet enterprising big men who, as with Dipon Kathar, have become professional bricoleurs of kingly biopower...the new bearers of analogic kingship in contemporary Mayong.

Big men operate their public life and political pageantry on the premise that their *charismatic authority*—to borrow a term from Max Weber ([1922] 1947)—will carry them forward into new and more expansive opportunities. But with one foot always necessarily connected to the gerontocratic and kingly bureaucratic order of Mayong, their power and authority is necessarily constrained, if not already “routinized” to some degree. This tension, between the linkage to a legitimate order and the capacity for expanding beyond it unpredictably (see Chapter 5)—in part creates the irresistible features of charismatic efficacy. Dipon Kathar—who learned the art of mixing politics, business ventures, and networking with traditional forms of governance from a deceased relative who saw in him the potential for charismatic reach—would often teach me the arts of big man-ship whenever I would find myself caught up in the resource-sucking flow of political and economic life in Mayong. To be charismatic, I should always *listen* and never *talk* until the time is *just right*. To build networks, gain honor/status, and

avoid depleting my resources, I should never give out loans (*dhar*), but only “gifts” (*upohar*) of the maximum amount I could afford. Small gifts are better than loans that will probably never be paid back anyway. To further garner status, networks, and honor, I should “absolutely never” drink with “small men” (*xoru manuh*), use foul language or bad speech in public, or miss an opportunity to speak before crowds or journalists. I should always attend every social function and make my presence known in some capacity. I should befriend district commissioners, superintendents of police, politicians, and officers locally but also anywhere else I can. I should always spend more on other big men and less on the *raij*, so that my capital would not be drained away quickly. These, among other exhortations, were given to me as cherished maxims for how to live in current Assam. Since many people already saw my time in Mayong as organically connected to Dipon Deuta, I had no choice but to follow his guidemap the best I could.

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We can now return to Saritra’s gloom and doom and the grotesque proverb of the python outlined in the beginning of this chapter. Saritra usually gets paid from Dipon only twice per year, whereas he is *supposed* to be paid monthly. After months pass with no payment, Dipon calls Saritra and his other laborers to his courtyard. The event is entirely ritualistic—I observed it happen at least 3 times, and each time Dipon would stand on his verandah making dozens of phone calls, then retreat into his house and come back out again, delaying the transfer of any words or cash those to whom he promised payment. Nervousness abounds on both sides. Laborers talk amongst themselves, sharing cigarettes, saying that the whole situation is *gela* (“rotten”) and talk degrades into theories of conspiracy and corruption: “The money was stolen.” “There is no money.” “The money is hidden in the attic or in a bamboo trunk.” After a couple hours of delaying, Dipon addresses everyone at once, accusing his laborers of being too

demanding and ungrateful and ignoring the debts he owes to “Bigger Men” (*aru dangorei*), often using the same term “*gela*” (rotten) to describe the situation (*Ghotona hol je mur dhar to iman dangor; khobor to gela hol*). After this, Dipon—performing the figure of the impoverished patron—hands out small payments to everyone...usually around Rs. 1500 each, which may cover a month’s salary for some, but for most is only a fraction of the total arrears from previous months still owed. The crowd disperses, sullen yet satisfied for the time being, and the cycle continues. This precarity is mutually understood to be a rotten one, but also a necessary means for continuing a relationship. The debt perspective of the big man and the laborer thus oscillates eternally between commemorative time (a past promise/agreement) and anticipatory time (a deferred payment). [More on this in the concluding remarks to the chapter.]

Now, not only was that day of Saritra’s gloom the fourth time he had been paid that year, the back-pay owed to him—at least 1 years’ worth—was now almost paid in full. To Saritra, it seemed as if, rather than letting the rot go on as usual, Dipon was taking steps to settle all his accounts, which had grown so large that a kind of bankruptcy needed to be declared. What frightened Saritra was the possibility that Dipon’s social capital was being replaced by liquid capital, which would not only end their relationship with a full payment, but force both into a situation where hard earned status would be lost. It made sense for Dipon, but what of Saritra’s status? Could he not simply find work elsewhere?

The hypertrophied relation between a big man and his laborers is so familiar in rural Assam, that, at first glance, we might frame it simply as a kind of standard form of patronage and clientelism...or, in terms more appropriately politicized, as a token of the historical/sociological type of “bonded labor” linked to sharecropping practices across the sub-continent (Habib 1963; Kara 2012; Prakash 2003; Rachauduri and Habib 1982: 165; Singh 2015: Chapter 5). Of course,

Mayongians have their own ideologies about the big man/laborer situation. At one level, Saritra and other laborers refer to and address Dipon as *Mama* (“mother’s brother”), given that their relationship most resembles that of an avunculus and uterine nephew (*bhagin*). The laborer (as uterine nephew) receives *uddhar* as gifted “exemption” and can demand excessive services from a big man (as maternal uncle). Moreover, the fact that big men are always in wage debt to laborers similarly reflects the hierarchical relation that makes uterine nephews (potential and “ideal” wife takers) ranked higher than their mother’s brothers (potential and “ideal” wife givers). Yet, what pervades this relationship at a moral level is deep sense of mutual obligation and mutual *ownership*, not despite but *because of* the rotten-ness which distills it. Both Saritra and Dipon have a lot to lose: not least of which being status *and* security.

Like Mayongians, then, I’ll take the risk of false consciousness and suggest that we aren’t really looking at debt bondage or typical patronage, but rather at a kind of mutual consent to a static social order<sup>16</sup>—to the quiescence of the shared account, where if there is any movement, then its closest analogy (as Saritra put it) is in the slow process of fermenting rice into strong liquors. The slow “oinification” of the social relationship might pick up steam into the boiling of distillation (i.e., partial payment), but it will nevertheless cool down to sit on a shelf for a long time, “rotting well” as it were.

### *Fermented Value*

Social rot and quiescence in Mayong is not only mutually manufactured, but *overcooked*, so to speak, in that it requires a vigilance and upkeep (including the necessary partial payments). To further our analogy, consider the difference between *kesa mod* (raw liquor) and *pokka mod*

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<sup>16</sup> Which may be more related to, or grounded in, debt bondage and patronage than we might think—cf. Tocqueville’s [1856] 1955: 163–64 reflections on pre-bourgeois patronage during the collapse of the *ancien regime*. Saritra is convinced he is not in debt bondage, but in fact “owns” Dipon Kathar as much as the latter “owns” him. The trouble here, again, rests on the notion of *adhi* (“half”) at the heart of ownership logics in Mayong.

(cooked liquor) in Table 3.1. Both require human intervention, but *pokka mod*, which is also referred to simply as “the rotten” (*gela to*), does all the more so in that it takes extra work to “get the smell” as Mayongians like to say.

**Table 3.1.** Fermentation and Cooking (Controlling the Rotten).

<b>KESA (equiv. <i>kaccha</i>) MOD</b>	<b>POKKA (equiv. <i>pakka</i>) MOD</b>
Rice Beer ( <i>lau pani</i> )	Rice Liquor ( <i>sulai</i> )
Sour ( <i>tenga</i> )	Rotten ( <i>gela</i> )
Fermentation via application of yeast ( <i>jungli oxud</i> , “wild medicine”)	Distillation of fermented <i>kesa mod</i> until it “gets the smell”

Rice liquor is literally “overcooked” via distillation, even though it bears the connotation of being a further “rotten” (*gela*) form of the sour (*tenga*), fermented rice beer. With apologies to Lévi-Strauss (1965), the rotten in this context is not a natural process of atrophy, but a hypercultural intention. Production of this kind of alcohol thus might be called “actively non-interventionist,” which is also a perfect description for the debt relationship between Big Men and Laborers as much as for role of the state in Mayong following ULFA’s surrender. [The state now takes an active stance not by intervening in Mayongian political economy but by acting as an absent “patron” itself, its agents, capital, and political agendas working through Big Men like Dipon.]

“The rotten” (*gela*), in this sense, also carries a connotation of a particular kind of conviviality—the almost motionless yet carefully scripted “time-pass” of male-bonding over drinking *pokka mod* in the evening. This connotation is most importantly *olfactory*. Like fermented fish, pork fat, areca nut (*tamol*), and other foods prepared through controlled rot, the putrid smell adds to the value; it calls to mind celebration and ceremonial.

I won’t chase this analogy any further, but given the moral and economic aura that pervades the debt relationship of big men and laborers, its inextricable links to the state and the cash-labor nexus as a whole, and its sensory and sumptuary connotations, I would qualify the

quiescent debt relationships as one of distilling *fermented value* down to its most intoxicating capacity short of death.

## Voice and Solicitude

*[T]o argue with the king, one has to use the king's language, whether or not the initial premises make sense.*

– David Graeber (2011: 8)

Until now, we have only had a glimpse of the *processes* of creating quiescence in the shared account. We have skirted around the issue of how states of inactivity—however temporary they might ultimately be—are actually manufactured in the moment of public reckoning. Here, we must take a necessary and final detour into the kind of language and performance that goes into a *raijmel*—the context for creation of every shared account. In Burha Mayong, the *bor bangthai* no longer ventriloquates the king as his “direct representative.” At least since Xarassa Chandra Singha’s kingship in the late sixteenth century, his primary duty has been to be a ritual chief for the Karbi, and a representative of their needs in the king’s *rajdarbar*.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in style and *voice* he does speak as any analogic king must—with gruff vocatives, elaborate metaphors, “registers of the written word” (*likhito bhaxa*), and elaborate hand gesticulations like pointing (up, down, and at people), raising to indicate “uplift” (see Introduction), circling in a wax-on / wax-off style to indicate dynamism/exhortation, and hailing with palm facing out to indicate closure/quiescence (see Figures 3.4 and 3.9). Moreover, the premises of kingly/chiefly language are often not clear. They are largely performative in essence and do not establish fully-developed arguments. As in Pierre Clastres’ (1983: 153–54) reflections on the “chief’s speech” in Amazonia, the goal is not

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, his war powers at that time were already being attenuated in the kingly bureaucracy; generals, ministers, commanders-in-chief, and a junior chief were created to make the *bor bangthai* the master of Karbi ceremonial. See Chapter 1 for how this attenuation looks today.

necessarily to persuade the public with argument, but to distill a “traditional” or “ancestral” way of living and *say* it accordingly; or, in Bakhtin’s terms, to “voice” the ancestors polyphonically. The *bangthai*’s speech is not only about what he is saying, but also *how* he is saying it—and this relies on delicately crafted mechanisms of reported speech, interlocution, gesture, voice, and especially *solicitude*.

Solicitude is another term I borrow from Wagner (1977; see also above), but here the idea is that the *bor bangthai*—as a chief, an analogic king—is not only trying to solicit the “goods” of the divine/kingly order, but trying to *elicit* or *exhort* the *raij* into action (see Chapter 5). If they acquiesce to his injunctions, then we have a shared account, plain and simple, and quiescence follows suit. Yet the *raij* can always challenge his injunctions—and therein lay the possibility that the shared account can be unmade, or *usurped* by charismatic figures like big men who can then establish their own conditions for reckoning. “Regular” members of the *raij*—or what are analogically referred to as *xoru manuh* (“small men”) can shout and argue and give windy speeches as much as they want, but without proven charismatic authority, their speech never quite meets the substance or style of a king or analogic king.

To grasp the substance and style of the chief’s speech, we will consider below a transcription of a *raijmel* / shared account being conducted at a particularly complex set of rituals in Burha Mayong. In this context, an entire Nepali family was “converting” to become Karbi. The rituals lasted three days and included a marriage, an *oxus* and name giving ceremony for a newborn (see Chapter 6), a “coming-of-age” ritual for the family’s young daughter (*tuloni biya*, a first menstruation rite)—although this particular daughter had her first menses at least four years prior to this ritual—and finally a ritual of granting *uddhar* to the family as a whole (giving the patriarch a Karbi mother and father), thus cleansing any pollution and settling the accounts of

their prior ethnicity before they were adopted into the Ingti *phoid* of the Karbi. *Uddhar* was granted by the *bor bangthai* and given on the basis that both the Chetri *jati* of the Nepali family “matched” the Ingti *phoid* of the Karbi—both are “priestly.” In one of my research assistant’s terms, this was a “downgrading” because of the movement from being a Nepali *kshatriya* to being a “Scheduled Tribe,” although the Karbi looked upon it as a “transformation” with no hierarchical implications (see Chapter 6).

The first day of the mega-ritual was the *tuloni biya*, which went rather smoothly and involved only minor work on the part of the *raij*. The second day, which involved an *oxus* for an infant, was slightly more complicated and involved an entire day of account keeping on the part of the *bor bangthai*. It also involved planning for the third day, a marriage which would necessarily involve a carefully performed pig sacrifice and rank-ordered meat distribution (see, again, Chapter 6). Due to trouble with the schedule of the *rongbong kathar*, the *oxus* had to be performed *prior* to the marriage ceremony (which is almost unheard of in Karbi ritual progression). However, the *kathar* was given a pardon by the *bangthai* and this particular mega-ritual was already too complicated; as long as all the rituals were completed within three days, this was good enough.

The backstory, in a nutshell, was that the son of the single Nepali household in Burha Mayong—the house of Mr. Chetri, a forest officer living in Nambari *suburi*—had taken a job of being a truck driver a few years ago and, during one of his trips to Arunachal Pradesh, he fell in love with an Arunachali Christian girl who became pregnant. When they returned to Burha Mayong to confront the family about the situation and arrange a Hindu/Nepali marriage, Mr. Chetri had no resources or networks to handle a proper wedding for his son. So, being close to the Karbi community, he went to their *raij* for help. Mr. Chetri had already considered taking

*uddhar* before so he and his family could participate with the Karbi in their rituals and events without being sent to the “non-polluting” sidelines, so to speak. In the meantime, Mr. Chetri’s son and future daughter-in-law had their baby. So, to avoid further delay, both Mr. Chetri and the Karbi *raij* came to an agreement that they would handle the ethnic conversion, a menstruation rite for Mr. Chetri’s teenage daughter, *uddhar*, the marriage, and the *oxus*/name giving ceremony all at once.

The transcript (with translation assistance from Tanmoy Sharma) here picks up on the second day, the *oxus* ceremonial, with the *bangthai* describing to the *raij* the problem facing the *kathar* and why even in a difficult situation, he cannot neglect his ritual duties. [Bangthai=Bor Bangthai; Kathar=Rongbong Kathar; Melkie=participant in the *raijmel*.]

**Bangthai:** Yesterday, Mr. P. [the *bisar dhora*] said that the *kathar* said in the morning, “I’ll not be able to accomplish the task of pig sacrifice tomorrow.” He said that the *kathar* may kindly select/pick someone to do it instead (*Katharei jen bisari lobo*). Apparently, his daughter is not well (*tai okoman serious*), so he has to take her to the hospital (*medical*). So *raij*, please consider the fact that everyone goes through hard times (*aapod-bipod*) in life, no one can tell when and how troubles arrive. Therefore, considering that he is going through some trouble, and he won’t be able to do it, and that he has a younger brother, we can accomplish our job through his brother too. He just needs to put this before the *raij* that instead of himself, he will assign the task to his brother (*bhai ektuk dim*). We, the *raij*, will not go to solicit the brother (*bhai ektuk khujibo-loi najau*). We would rather not go, for there is no reason to go solicit him because we already informed him of everything. Let the *kathar* tell us whether he’ll be able to put his brother forward (*bhai ekok dibo paribo ne nuwaribo*) due to his absence, whether the brother will be able to do it or not—just this. If we get an answer from him—yes or no (*hobo aru nohobo*), then we will make a different decision. If it is a “no,” then the *raij* will have to arrange something (*byobostha eta koribo lagibo*).

...nervous babble from the *raij*...

**Melkie (asking the Kathar):** The *kathar* must tell us what exactly is the issue, and where do you need to go . . . ?

...Babble (and silence from the Kathar)...

**Different Melkie (telling the Kathar):** Just say something quickly, no need to keep waiting...

**Kathar:** *Raij*, please hold on... I will give an answer after considering everything... my *bhaiti* (younger brother) is not here, how can I give the answer now, just because you all are asking me to? I have a serious risk here (*Mur risk ase tu tat*).

**Bangthai:** The thing is, they say, “*rati to aru hati to*” [“the night and the elephant,” meaning, in this context, “at night everything can change”]. In the blink of an eye, this day shall pass (*ei bela to gusi jabo*), and night sets in (*xondhiya ahil*), and the day breaks after nightfall, and right at the dawn (*rati puwalei*), we need the *kathar*. We need the *kathar*, first of all. Since there will be a feast (*bhoj*) tomorrow, and the feast requires the work of cooking and since the children will come to feast (*bhoj khabohi*), also since mothers and guests from afar will come (*duronibotiya ai-alohi*), we should get started as early as possible. At least, if we can manage to sacrifice the pig after cutting it up (*gahori to kati dibo parile*), if the chopping, etc. (*kata-kuta kam-khini*) gets done beforehand...

**Kathar (interrupting):** Okay, please tell me something... I will leave after cutting the pig, I’ll leave at 9 O’ clock, after cutting the pig, is that OK?

**Bangthai:** That can be done (*tetiyahole para jabo*). But the task of atonement (*porasitto*) will remain. Tomorrow, the entire family will have to be atoned.

**Kathar:** But isn’t that work already done today?

**Bangthai (angrily):** You only did the *oxus* today!!!!!!!!!!!! (*Aji toi oxus to he koirili*). You will do the atonement tomorrow as you must! Anyone can challenge this, but it is our law that the *Kathar* must arrange the atonement for the sins. Our ancestors have followed this rule and we shall do so as well. Only I speak for them (*Tekhetorei moi okol kotha pathisu*). Their words are our destiny. It is our debt (to them). This is my final word. Will you challenge it?

**Raij:** No, no...

**Kathar:** I will do the cutting at 8 am, then my brother will do the atonement after I leave.

**Bangthai:** Good. I am writing this down in the *hisap*. Call your brother now...

Now, this *raijsmel* and shared account was particularly difficult for the *raijs* to deal with.

The next day’s marriage involved a massive amount of work and an expenditure of at least 2 lakhs (around \$3,200 USD) on the part of the Chetri family and the Karbi “Keleng” (= Ingti) patriclan that they were joining. Several loans were taken and a concern over the need to close ritual debates and proceed with the reckoning of expenses weighed heavily on the *bor bangthai*.

Accordingly, the *raij* did not object to any injunction by the *bor bangthai*, who performed his role with extreme skill (note the use of metaphors, interjections of anger, voicing the ancestors, reported speech, etc.). During his speech, the *bangthai* also gesticulated wildly, making his presence felt at the center of everything. The requests made to the *kathar* were poetic in style and put the duty of ritual order above everything else in substance. With full acquiescence by the *raij* and the *kathar*, quiescence followed so that the marriage accounts could be credited for the next day's expenses. This was, to rephrase and resituate Barney Cohn (1996: Chapter 2), *the command of speech and the speech of command*.

If the Bangthai establishes his authority and respect by voicing the ancestors, showing poetic skill, carefully gesticulating, and speaking in a register that members of the *raij* can neither copy or refuse to do so out of respect for him, then a truly *shared* account is created. In other contexts, however, it is a common occurrence that a “big man” can usurp the chief's speech, unmake the accounts, and take over the accounting matter for himself. Let's consider another transcription from a *raijmel* held on the first day of the new year (*Bohag Bihu*), which reveals a big man voicing the *bangthai*, mimicking his hand gesticulations (see Figure 3.9), and in effect, usurping his ability to run the questioning, exhortation, and argumentation. We might notice that he is able to do it because he appeals to the “ends” of a divine order higher than that ritual pragmatics of gerontocratic authority. Among other things, this moment exemplifies classic Batesonian “complementary schismogenesis,” where a big man—who only has charismatic authority—draws on the religious essence of the moment to usurp the *bangthai* with a speech that argues on the side of encompassing divinity.



**Figure 3.9.** The *bor bangthai* (left) gesticulating “exhortation” and Mr. N., a “big man” (right) doing the same.

In this context, the chief’s speech begins with a concern over the fact that a member of the *raij*, Mr. B., had caused a major problem in handling the accounts for the previous year’s *Bihu* programs held in the village. There were some major discrepancies and particulate data were fudged, which called for him to pay an account penalty (*ortho-dondo*) of Rs. 500 and a *lau bota* (“gourd vessel”) of rice beer. Following this, the *bor bangthai* had to raise the matter of a controversy about a fist fight between a father and son (the former seriously hurt by the latter). This controversy was also overshadowed by another major dispute (involving adultery and violence) in the household of the Rajbarika (Bordhuliya), a minister in the Burha Mayong Bangthai Committee. In so many words, “sin” (*pap*) was accumulating heavily at a time when the goal is to purge society of sin. This left the *bangthai* in an overwhelmed position: he had to restore the ritual order of things, but also exhort the *raij* into quiescence during a period of heated emotions.

**Bangthai:** We have a custom that when we audit (*lekha porikhya*) the money and accounts, *ortho-dondo*, Rs. 500 and a gourd vessel of alcohol will be offered [by the account keeper]. We elders (*burha-keita*) will have to come and drink this vessel of

alcohol. We will be *fed* this vessel of alcohol by Mr. B. However, this one vessel of alcohol will be considered an offering to the entire society (*xomaj*). Now, will this alone constitute *ortho-dondo* or is something else needed?

**Raij:** ...*babble*...[not understanding the question]

**Bangthai:** Okay, leave it be. Mr. B. anyway said that he won't be able to offer the *ortho-dondo* today. He will need one more day. I said to him that as this day of Bohag passes, you must offer Rs. 500 and a vessel of alcohol to which he conceded. Then I heard another thing, that there was a brawl (*khanda-juddha*) between a father and his son. In the fight, the son apparently beat the father. Now, this is [also] a sin (*pap*). This is the first one. Now I will tell you of the second sin. The *rai* is well aware of the dispute in our Bordhuliya's [= Rajbarika, see Chapter 1] house who is in our midst today. I took an interest in the matter. I suggested to you [pointing at the Bordhuliya] that you bring all your clan members together and discuss the matter. Then you could come to a conclusion about the dispute. You will have to have gather the *rai* (*raijkhon to edin sopaboi lagibo*) to tell them that "we'll govern and destroy our evil by all means." Please tell the [rest of your clan's] *rai* that this is the only truth. Then the *rai* will think of a way and give you some advice. [Turning and pointing to the other *melkie* present] But despite my offering him this suggestion, he still hasn't gathered the *rai*. I get to hear boo-boo-baa-baa about him wherever I go. Rightly so, because it's a sin and as they say, even if you put a heap of things [*dom*] on top of it, you cannot hide sin.

**Melkie:** Absolutely not. Sin is sin (*pap to papei*).

**Raij:** Yes, yes...correct.

**Bangthai:** So here are the issues we need to ponder upon and judge in this house of *dhormo* [*dhormor ghorot*; referring to the *deka chang* ("boy's dormitory") where the *raijmel* and shared account are happening]. I have brought out these two matters. First, the feud between the father and the son which is hardly a couple of days old, secondly, the matter of Bordhuliya which has exceeded two-three months already. Now the *rai* will judge this and I will note it if the *rai* so desires [uses gesticulation for exhortation].

**Raij:** No, no...please leave all this be for today. (*Aaji eitu rakhok.*)

[An upstart Big Man stands up and starts speaking.]

**Big Man (Mr. N.):** Actually, there is no disagreement that will allow us to all sit in judgment on this. We know what needs to be done. But here is the thing, the event happened (*ghotona hol*): today, we will not decide upon who's committed a sin (*pap*) and who's earned merit (*punyo*). *Raij*, please do not accept my proposition if it's not acceptable. But today we assemble here for a *porbo* (ritual event) and we must not waste our time talking about sins committed in the past [uses a gesture to indicate closure]. On the first day of the new year, we certainly don't want to land in a mess. Therefore, we are welcoming the new year (*ami adorisu*); we all come and pay obeisance and then go back

home [uses gesture to indicate exhortation]. The families back home are waiting fretfully—for the feast, for this and that *puja*. Especially today, on the first day of the year. . . . So if my proposition is not acceptable, please do not accept it.

**Raij:** No, you carry on. This is acceptable.

**Big Man (Mr. N.):** Hence, on the event of us preparing to organize a *porbo*, let us not talk about sin and such...

[...*rai*j becomes somewhat angry... someone tries to disrupt, but the Big Man continues before anyone can interject.]

Please listen, the matters brought forth by the honorable Bangthai are certainly important. But on the first day of the new year, when we come here to bow our heads and pray, there is no logic to dwelling on other matters [uses gesticulation for closure].

**Raij:** Yes, yes! Not today, not today!

**Big Man (Mr. N.):** We will certainly pick another day for this. We will all sit together on that day and adjudicate all matters. But today on the first day of the year, on this very *tithi* [lunar day], we have come here to pay obeisance to our venerated deity (*pujoniyo goxai*) by lighting an earthen lamp so that our days in the year pass in prosperity and goodness, so that we can write our accounts, and so that our people do not fight with each other and this all, in my opinion, we should vow to follow.

**Raij:** Yes, yes, we agree [followed by a commanding silence for 12 seconds].

Now, this second transcription has been cut for strategic purposes (and for length) to show how a big man can usurp a *rai*jmel and establish quiescence by diverting public attention to the things that *really* matter: prosperity, worship, and the goodness of the new year as a restart mechanism. Mr. N. also deferred resolution of the issues, but this felt temporarily satisfying to the *rai*j. Yet, in reality, this *rai*jmel lasted another 30 minutes before the accounts were finally brought out, composed, and reckoned. During this 30 minutes, two other big men spoke and emphasized the necessity of payment for “sin,” until the *bangthai* became so angry, flailing his arms and body this way and that and shouting at one point “if sin really mattered to you all, you would have demanded payment earlier! No one asked Mr. B. anything! If he said he will pay it tomorrow, then he will! [bends over and pounds fists on the ground]” Pure chaos followed with

everyone shouting over the top of everyone else, until the *bangthai* kneeled in front of the *lai xuta* (the pillar representation of the god *hemphu* at the apex of the *deka chang*) and begin chanting *nam*. Everyone kneeled and followed suit. When the prayer was over, everyone calmed down and Dipon Kathar—who is perhaps the most successful big man in Burha Mayong and commands a great deal of respect—took one final shot at quiescence. His speech was short yet calmly given with heavy gesticulation of pointing and closure. He ended with a direct address to Mr. B.:

Listen, [Mr. B.], I don't know about what others are saying about this and that. Who actually settled the accounts for last year [without checking for discrepancies], I do not know. I did not give [the reckoning], but it was *your* responsibility. And this year, it is my responsibility, so do not make things difficult. I will make the payment for you today and you bring the vessel of rice beer. Tomorrow, you will pay me back and all will be forgiven. The honorable *bangthai* said just as much. And the *raij* agrees. We must now settle the *raijor hisap* so we can get on get on the new year as Mr. N. wisely encouraged us to.

Here we see masterful creation of quiescence whereby Dipon Kathar manages to make the outstanding debt one between Mr. B. and himself rather than between Mr. B. and the *raij*, while managing to acknowledge the authority of both the *bor bangthai* and Mr. N. In the quintessential style of a big man, this was not a “pardon,” but an *exemption* of immediate payment so that pressing matters could be settled. And it worked. Everyone left feeling that the matter was resolved. Mr. B. did indeed pay back Dipon Kathar and even paid an extra Rs. 500 to the *raij* for formal forgiveness. Still, that quiescence was short lived. The scandals mounted over the next month as the previous year's accounts were unraveled by new exhortations toward Mr. B. concerning controversies over money being directed outside of the *raij* (a matter of speciation) and references to missing numbers and names from the accounts (a matter of particularization). Dipon and Mr. B. became locked into a relationship of trying to balance the previous year's books with the current year's. They were caught in debt ownership, so to speak.

In sum, for the shared account, quiescence is never necessarily a final state but part of an ongoing set of semiotic processes like speciating, exhorting, and particularizing (to which we will turn in the next three chapters). For if the open nature of the shared account makes it perpetually at risk to further audit or decomposition, it also allows it to be recomposed. Indeed, the search for quiescence, for trying to keep things ritually ordered, locked into the divine hierarchy of things, and overall to instill a kind of fermented value is a bit of a self-defeating mechanism. As much as the shared account attempts to be a ritually closed off space for public reckoning, it also has to deal with the wider world of events, interactions, and circumstances that lock subjects into relations with others beyond the account. The quiescence that is sought is only a *moment* in an ongoing series of processes.

### **The Perspectival Python**

I conclude here with some final reflections on death, ritual, and debt to draw us further into the making and unmaking of the shared account. I began this chapter with a vignette that occurred during an everyday, time-pass rite of evening drinking, which I spoke of in Nietzschean terms. Now, the Dionysian element here is rather minor, but it is one that all drinkers understand. If a day is marked by the orderly Apollonian time of commemoration and anticipation, then the disorderly time of nightly intoxication doesn't simply mark a forgetful reprieve, but *completes* and *unifies* the time of the former. The tension, then, between memory and prediction—one's inchoate past and future—becomes both grounded and dynamic.

In Mayong, the normative feature of debt is that it should be prolonged as far as it can go—and this “open debt” is precisely what most shared accounts are concerned with. But debt cannot thrive only the dry logic of *reconciling* and *balancing* secret accounts, which would need schedules of payment and calculations of anticipated closure. It also must be interspersed with

the excesses of social rot, the fermented value of an open account that marks the intoxicating—and public—reprieve of partial payment. In this way, the debt relationship—and the life of those involved—acquires a staying power that is both commemorative and anticipatory. In the specific situation of a big man and a laborer, the rite of partial payment is less like a “fine” mired in penalizing exhortation and more like a ritualistic bender on rice liquor (*pokka mod; sulai*); it is enough to temporarily satisfy the parties involved—to make it to the next day, as alcoholics justify it (cf. Bateson 1972). But *total payment* is analogous to alcohol poisoning, which in Mayong almost always has the consequence of certain death. In effect, Saritra’s two kinds of quiescence—rot and death—represent the difference between the “making” and “unmaking” of shared accounts, respectively.

Put otherwise, debt is not merely a socially binding relationship built on promises and a negatively assessed sense of unfreedom. More importantly, it is a “time-binder” (to use a term from James Fernandez [1986: 45]), that unifies pasts and futures into a meaningful duration that has to stay “open” for that unification to be meaningful. Or, in Hocartian terms, we might call it a “life-giving myth,” which rather than being a minimal mode of survival—an expression of a politics of bare life—instead expresses the mythical value of “living well...for the full span allotted to man.” (Hocart [1952] 2004: 11; cf. Chapter 2). Yet here the emphasis should not be on the “living well,” but on the “full span allotted to man,” which as we saw in the case of Diganta’s father above can even go beyond death.

I would venture so far to say this is an overlooked and underappreciated consequence of debt in general. In David Graeber’s (2011) treatise on debt in human history, the debtor is inevitably in the position of being locked into a relation of unfreedom—that is, until the scale of debts owed is high enough to “own the creditor,” so to speak. But, in Mayong, debt is relation

wherein figures of authority and power *owe* and *own* the subaltern, as much as the subaltern *owes* and *owns* them. And this is by no means a kind of “manufactured consent” or “false consciousness.” There *is* depth psychology here, of course, but it is not one that misrecognizes an ideology for reality. Rather, what is disavowed is the dynamic character of the shared account; both Saritra and Dipon act as if quiescence will hold indefinitely. Thus ideology, if we wish to call it that, is constitutive of reality rather than a veiling of it.

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So what, then, of the public python who eats patrons whole? The *raij*, who demands payment immediately and all at once? Perhaps Saritra’s metaphor for the gluttonous demands and thanklessness of the *raij* was too idiomatic and delivered in haste. On one hand, the *raij* cannot really act on its own accord in any meaningful sense. The shared account, and every *raijmel*, attests to a situation where so-called “democratic governance” is mediated, ordered, managed, and authorized by analogic figures of kingly authority. The shared account, after all, is a means for preserving social order in the face of a potential breakdown or unincorporation of political belonging. In this light, it is a *conservative* institution. The *raij* is too finicky and, as was the actual case with Dipon Kathar, it was not the demands of the public that opened his accounts, but a strategic attempt on his own part—and in consultation with the *bor bangthai* and others—to close some accounts and investments in order to open others. Not more than two weeks after Saritra finally received his share-cropping arrears from Dipon, he was put to work on new, smaller projects, allowing Saritra to use his newly acquired capital and time to invest in other ventures. Some freedom thus emerged, but the debt ownership remained, giving both Saritra and Dipon a sense of comfort and protection for the time being.

On the other hand, pythons are ambiguous. After all, many of the mythologies of Mayong's multi-ethnic society have pythons in them from the very beginning of time—as ancestors (Jugi Nath), the goddess Manoha (Bengali), guardians of clanic deities (Garo), the first cosmocratic kings (for those who claim Meitei origins), or, as for the Karbi people in Burha Mayong, *as patrons themselves* who ferried the “original people” across primordial rivers until they arrived safely in their homelands. The time-binding debt to pythons is, thus, tremendous. But in the current moment of the Mayongian cosmographic situation, that debt is largely forgotten; pythons are considered no more than pests that snatch away chickens and deplete fisheries. I once watched Saritra spear a python who had found its way into one of Dipon's ponds to feast on the bountiful carp therein. “How could I allow it to live?” he asked. “Those fish feed Dipon Mama, and he feeds me...”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ichthyonomics, or Fish and in the Time of Floods

#### Speciation in Mayong

*Iamque mare et tellus nullum discrimen habebant.*<sup>1</sup>

– Ovid (*Metamorphosis*, Book I)

The making and unmaking of shared accounts depends upon more than the (often temporary) quiescence instilled—through gerontocratic or charismatic authority—by analogic kings. It also requires processes of what I have been referring to as speciation, exhortation, and particularization. This chapter concerns the first process: speciation. Such a process is crucial for the creation of any *raijor hisap* because it separates out who should get what, on what basis, and ultimately how the larger cosmography of Mayong will be made, unmade, and made again. The shared account goes to great lengths in order to restore “everything in its right place”—people especially—as we saw in the previous chapter. In order to do so, much of the work of the *raijmel* involves figuring out how to balance the rites and rules (*niti niyom*) of the surfeit of Mayongian *jati*. Yet this does not happen in the ritually controlled site of the *raijmel* alone. Indeed, the majority of work that goes into figuring out the appropriate relations among Mayongian *jati* occurs in the wake of what Das (1997) calls “critical events.” The occasional violent disagreement over land, the mob lynchings in the days of ULFA (see Kashyap 2013), a change in the state government (see Preface: Footnote 6), dealing with an inter-ethnic marriage elopement (see Chapters 3 and 6)—these and other politicized events are prime arenas for amplifying and working out the kind of ethnicized *qua* speciated valuations and transvaluations that make it into shared accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> “And now the land and sea are not distinct.”

This chapter, however, takes a more capacious and iterative view of the “critical event” and explores the kinds of speciations that occur during the annual riparian flooding of Mayong. Floods are often the catalyst for debates that make their way into the shared account. What was previously assumed to be matters of secret accounting necessarily become public in that households are drawn out into a context that literally submerges and erases boundaries between households. In this context, an analogous “*goroka* register” of the shared account, speciation is not only socio-political, but socio-ontological; it involves relations between different kinds of fish as much as between different kinds of humans, and beyond this the riparian landscape, technologies of pisciculture, and the sinking soil itself. This chapter thus develops a notion of *ichthyonomics* to understand how the kind of speciations that occur and are managed during flooding make their way into Mayongian cosmologies and thus into the shared account.

The central analytic question of this chapter is how we are to understand *jati* in Mayong—not on the basis of caste or even “ethnicity” (which is its normal register in Oxomiya)—but on the actual basis of species management among humans and fish. To propose an answer to this question, the chapter explores technologies of containing and sieving, which throw into relief the boundaries upon which *jati* is both ontologized and undermined. The chapter concludes with reflections on the obvious tension between a world ordered by *jati* and one in which *jati* can be overcome by a composite unity. Being an expression of the same antinomy in shared accounting, it allows us to see how this tension constantly pushes against the kinds of quiescent unity shared accounts attempt to demarcate.

### **The Logic of the Fish (in Mayong)**

I remember when I first started thinking seriously about fish and floods. It was a humid mid-summer day in Burha Mayong village during my first year of ethnographic fieldwork in 2012. Tea time was approaching, so I thought I could use a pick-me-up. Dragging my way into the dining area of the home I shared with the Kathar family, I arrived to find my neighbor, Rupali Kathar, watching television with her sister and my host mother (Rupali's paternal and affinal aunt), their eyes affixed on the screen. My host mother instructed me to sit and walked into the kitchen to prepare everyone tea. I thanked her, sat next to Rupali and asked what she was watching. It was one of those televised renditions of Puranic myths broadcast in Hindi. That these programs were in Hindi—a language most villagers in Burha Mayong can only partially understand—never bothered Rupali.<sup>2</sup> She relished the images and divine emotional expressions as operatic dramas, replete with life-lessons, gut-wrenching climaxes, and entertaining scandals of cosmic proportions. And, indeed, when it comes to dramatic entertainment, one cannot do better than rehearsing myth in Mayong.

Glancing at the screen, I recognized the image of Vishnu in his fish *avatar* (Matsya). My head started swimming. Maybe it was the humidity, but I started rambling—trying to explain to Rupali that I knew this story well: Vishnu appears to Manu (the primordial man and king) as a minnow that swims into his hand. He pleads Manu for protection from the big fish who will

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Hindi television is peculiarly the norm throughout rural Assam—so much so that even English-language channels delivered in satellite dish packages are dubbed in Hindi. Local news channels are the main source of Oxomiya-language television. It is a weak hypothesis on my part, but I think this has something to do with the reason why Hindi is seen as a language of outsiders across contemporary Assam. In Mayong, many villagers assumed and informed me that Hindi was a “mother tongue” in the United States and defended that claim by pointing out white people speaking in dubbed Hindi on the television. Even in the urban center of Guwahati, Oxomiya shopkeepers (meaning native Oxomiya speaking people) would often address me in broken Hindi (even when I would answer in Oxomiya). The consistent awkwardness of these encounters prompted me to ask a few shopkeepers why they assumed I spoke Hindi. The most common response was something like “Hindi is spoken around the world, isn't it? (*Prithivit Hindi to soli ase neki?*)”

immanently devour him. Manu agrees and places the minnow in a bowl, but soon Matsya grows too big to fit the bowl. Manu has to keep putting him into larger and larger containers, until he eventually places Matsya in the ocean. Alerting Manu that a flood will soon wipe out everything the world, Matsya instructs Manu to gather grain (and in some versions, the Vedas themselves) so they will be rescued from imminent destruction. The flood finally comes and Matsya carries Manu and his cargo to safety in the mountains, where Manu will then inaugurate a new age of humanity.

I tried to tell the story the best I could. At this point, no one was watching television any longer and, in fact, the room had become crowded with neighbors and family arriving for tea, all listening to me ramble on about what I thought to be the “meaning” of this myth. Thinking this might turn out to be an interesting conversation, I asked everyone if I could turn on my phone’s voice recorder.

I continued, but my story eventually turned into a stilted academic lecture. Listening to the recording now, I hear myself fumbling in Oxomiya as I tried to explain the philosophical importance of the myth and its relation to *rajadharmā*. In more precise terms than I could deliver at that time, the exegesis goes something like this: Discourses on the Matsya *purāna* myth often turn on the so-called “logic of the fish” (*matsya nyaya* – “big fish eat the little fish”), a highly debated nature/culture ideology in studies of Indian kingship, developed perhaps most clearly in the *Mahabharata*. This is a logic of a world without kings, without centralized socio-political order. Philosophers took note and accordingly asked: is a king necessary to protect the weak from the strong? What about protecting a few big fish from a mass of little ones (Peabody 2003: 1)? Was this “logic” a way of talking about a “state of nature,” not so different from Hobbesian *warre*, a natural law where strength and appetite dictate social power?

After straining to follow my lecture, Rupali yawned and with a snarky laugh said to me, “Yeah, there are big fish and small fish; big fish eat the small ones; it can’t be changed. Whatever.” Everyone in the room nodded in agreement, as if the formula was so obvious, so natural, that it simply didn’t matter.

Since Rupali and I often discussed politics and social problems, I thought I would press her on the analogy of the *matsya nyaya*: “OK, so it’s true for fish, but don’t big men also eat little men? Meaning, big men exploit little men? Who gives protection to the weak people? Is a king necessary or not?”

Before she could answer, Rupali’s paternal uncle Mukunda looked at her and groaned, “Eh, he doesn’t understand.” Glaring at me with an instructive gaze, Mukunda Da corrected my assessment of the Matsya Purana:

Do you understand this story or not? God, fish, men, kings—no one could stop the flood when it came....Now when floods come, we must struggle to protect our lives, our homes, our rice, our fish. We remember the devastation every year, but floods are getting worse! This is our burning question. We need help (*xohai*). Who will help? Who will be accountable (*dayito*)? . . . Actually, it doesn’t matter *who* helps, but [whoever does] must think like a king. And a king has to know how to think like fish, small men, big men, Karbi, Koch, Nath, Bengali. Who can manage (*porisalon koribo pare*) all these *jati*? Fish *jati*...*borali, puthi, chitol, ari, botia, singorah, xol, rou*...human *jati*...Ahom, Saikia, ST, SC, Christian, Miyan...so many *jati*.

Rupali giggled and turned to me saying, “Dada, listen, that’s the thing! This is *matsya nyaya* in Mayong!”

From the logic of the fish to their contextual management: in Mayong, we are dealing with “ichthyonomics,” as it were. Mukunda Da’s emphasis on the surfeit of *jati*—of fish kinds and human kinds—and his discussion of someone who can and should act and think like kings, and in turn have to think like everything and everyone else in order to manage such multiplicity—a kind of multiperspectival empathy—, was not only idiomatic but rather startling

compared to common exegeses on the Matsya Purana and the *rajadharma*. After all, “administration” often connotes a bureaucratic possibility where one doesn’t have to *participate* in the perspectives of those being administered in order to for the work to unfold. But here we have a distinction with a difference.

First, there was Mukunda’s emphasis on the flood as catalyst. His connection between the Puranic flood and floods in general seemed to turn not on the replication of cosmogony (beginnings re-established, as it were), but on the *crisis* of an annual event, its memory, and what must be mobilized in its wake. Second, there was his peculiar emphasis on the help, protection, and management of diversity afforded by a king (or his analogue), which turns on an ecology of multiplicity itself, on the variety of forms of life (social and ichthyan, as it were) that make up the cosmos. On one hand, Mukunda Da’s interpretation of the *matsya nyaya* seemed to echo Walter Benjamin (1968: 255) on the critical moments of history: seizing a flash of memory in a moment of danger, as it were. On the other hand, it seemed to suggest that such critical moments are not necessarily an opportunity for social change, but for eliciting the kind of person who can return the cosmos in its speciated diversity—its ecology of multiplicity—back to a state of proper order. *Plus ça change...*

As it happened, though, I soon understood that Mukunda Da’s take on the *matsya nyaya* was not so much a grand theory about politics, structure and event, or even a recapitulation of mythic thought per se. Rather, it was quite *pragmatic* in its orientation, and this in an idiom quintessentially *Mayongian*—as Rupali so matter-of-factly put it. Indeed, it is a popular discursive trope in Mayong that there are more *jati*—human and animal (especially fish) “kinds”—than anyone can practically count or remember. This diversity is something both the Karbi senior chief (*bor bangthai*) and Mayong’s customary king emphasized to me repeatedly

regarding the uniqueness of Mayong and the kingdom's particular difficulties in managing local political economy, ritual, and taboo. Moreover, there was an imminence to Mukunda Da's pragmatism: flooding season had arrived.

A few days after our conversation about the *matsya nyaya*, the heavy rains began and the Brahmaputra River broke its banks overnight. Soon, all land except the slightly elevated main road and the towering hills of Burha Mayong were underwater. It was the first time I experienced the infamous flooding of the Brahmaputra River. I had seen smaller floods in Mayong before, but this time it was as if a sea appeared overnight. Nets, fishing lines, and boats packed with residents from nearby villages, most of whom I had never met, flooded the floodwater. On the road, men and women from all communities were hauling in overfilled buckets of flopping fish: small, large, whiskered, finned, unfinned, scaled, and unscaled. So many *jati*...

### **An Ichthyonomic Perspective**

To the point: during the annual riparian flooding (from June through September) in Mayong, fish become good to think, better to eat, and best to contain. Indeed, a good deal of analogic reflection about fish-human relations, and the boundaries that mark those relations, takes place at this time—especially regarding types of fish and types of persons, and where they all belong in the “appropriate” order of things. Accordingly, for Mayongians, the shared event of flooding amplifies, and sometimes reconfigures, discourse of what *jati* is and, by extension, how speciated parts point to a “whole.” How fish and humans relate and mediate each other, then, might best be understood as an “argument of images” that occurs within a particular temporal and phenomenal “domain of belonging” (Fernandez 1986: xii–xiii, 152 *et passim*)—a shared *time*, as it were. With a shared critical event as the basis for belonging, the conceptually distinct domains of fish

and humans come to share a set of tropes and practical orientations. In other words, their mutuality and collective destiny is underscored (see Chapter 6).

Forgoing a discussion of the booming anthropological literature on political ecology, climate change, multi-species ethnography, and ontologies more inclusive than the human socius (especially the latest fad on water ontologies), I turn here to something very particular, yet of immense importance to the theoretical and practical lifeworlds of my friends in Mayong: namely, what *jati* and its relations of speciation are among the lifeworlds of fish and humans, and how such relations are managed during the critical event of annual flooding.

I will not seek to explain or describe *jati* in terms of some unique cultural theory of “caste,” “ethnicity,” or even “race” (cf. Cantlie 1984). Rather, I take this opportunity to reflect upon *jati* in the context of an event during which Mayongians also critically reflect and act upon the relations implied in this concept. The stakes here are not so much anthropological as they are *local*—for what I hope to show is that despite all the talk of “bewildering diversity” and intransigent “ethnicity” that floods discourse on Northeast Indian people, politics, and culture, commentators and social scientists often ignore the contexts and idioms through which actual Northeast Indian people frame and manage diversity and ethnicity (like Mayongian shared accounts). Accordingly, we must ask: what at all can we learn from local discourses on such relations and the contexts in which they matter?

Despite recent critical histories that seek to denaturalize the idea that Northeast India is historically, conceptually, and ethnographically “out of place” with respect to South Asian lifeworlds (Chatterjee 2013; Kar 2008), discourses on the region continue to emphasize tropes of exception within a given national framework: e.g., borderlands, insurgencies, and complex *ethnic* differences within an already dizzyingly diverse nation-state. And yet, whatever ideologies

overlay or figure this pattern in discourse—from primordialist assertions of ethno-nationalist belonging to liberal models of national multiculturalism—the ground for speciated complexity in places like Mayong is entirely normal and by no means pathological. To paraphrase Marshall Sahlins (2013b), the socio-ecological multiplicity of Mayong is “a cultural intention”—it is something actively cultivated and managed. What is *intentionally* produced is a tension between order (intimations of a unified whole) and infinite multiplicity. And yet, behind that intention are contexts where speciated multiplicity is put more starkly into consideration and question.

Adopting a cue from Gregory Bateson (1972; cf. Serres 1980, Kockelman 2013) this chapter engages fish and floods not as background “noise” or context of social speciation, but as the very signal we need to interpret. Said otherwise, the move I am suggesting is to bracket considering Assam and Northeast India in terms of ethnic multiplicity as such, and instead explore the relational contexts in which socio-ontological differences are drawn out, debated, and (re)formulated. This is part and parcel of the context of making shared accounts. In doing so, we can effectively create a new perspective for how we might think about *jati* in Northeast India: one that is oriented toward critical events and the social (re)configurations that occur in their wake—one that explores the active creation of both human and non-human “kinds” and the effects their reification has on how “wholes” are classified and managed (cf. Hacking 1995). Necessarily vicarious, this “ichthyonomic perspective”—the perspective of managing species (between and within societies, both human and nonhuman) in the time of floods—offers us a way to rethink speciated classification in a thoroughly *temporal* way. Anchored in the indices of a recursive event, this perspective is one where determining “species-being,” to butcher a

beloved concept from Marx, is not so much a philosophical problem but a pragmatic and contextual one.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Time of Floods**

To tease out the ethnographic contours of this “ichthyonomic perspective,” I would like to first return to where I began: to cosmogony and the “time” of floods. Cosmogonic myths tend to equate the beginning of cosmic order with the movement from an undifferentiated mass (e.g. fragrance, darkness, water) to differentiated forms (e.g., light, stars, people, land, animals, etc.).<sup>4</sup> However, flood-based cosmogonies tend to showcase undifferentiation as a part of the order of the universe. While a cosmic deluge, like the flood in the Matsya Purana or the Abrahamic myth of Noah, might indeed be a “restart” mechanism of sorts—i.e., an ending of one order and a beginning of a new one—floods are neither random occurrences nor do they precede existence itself. For one, in myth, they are often portended, and thus never truly contingent. Moreover, existence, knowledge, and order from the old world pass on to the new—*through* the chaos of the flood, as it were. Hence, for example, Matsya has Manu collect the grains of all living plants to bring them into the new world order; God has Noah collect animal pairs to do the same.

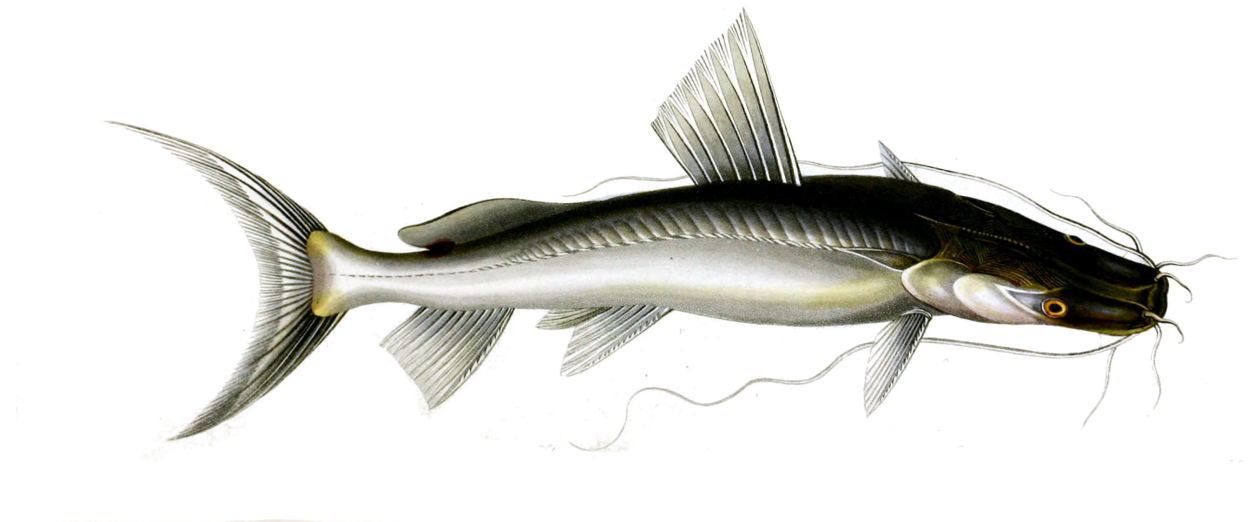
Mayongian cosmography is actually littered with references to flood cosmogony (and fish). One of the many historical traces that links Mayong to deeper origins—prior to the arrival of Suinat Singha as the founding stranger king—has to do with the Oedipal “fish king” Arimatta, who ruled the Pala/Kamata/Koch Kingdom west of the Ahoms from 1365–1385 CE. Son of King Ramachandra (a.k.a. Mayamatta), Arimatta was said to have a head (*matta*) shaped like the *ari*

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<sup>3</sup> However, one might recuperate Marx’s concept into Mayongian speciations when we consider that a prescient sense of “generic humanity” does raise its head in flood-born ichthyonomics. See the section below on fishing magic.

<sup>4</sup> See Valeri ([1995] 2012) for a detailed, ethnological comparison of how cosmogonic myths are invaluable to the pragmatics of socio-political order.

fish (see Figure 4.1)—hence his namesake. As the myth has it, a Brahmin visiting Kanyaka Village (somewhere in what is now Darrang District, considered to be the home of Arimatta’s mother) gave him the name after examining his head and declaring it to be a sign that he would one day be a king (Deka 2009: 9).



**Figure 4.1.** The *ari* fish (giant river catfish: *Sperata Seenghala*). Image from Sykes (1839: no page number).

There are many myths that circulate about Arimatta, but almost all involve three elements: (1) he was actually a bastard child of the Brahmaputra River<sup>5</sup> who, in desperation, continuously flooded the region because he desired King Ramchandra’s wife Chandraprobha; (2) Arimatta “accidentally” killed his stepfather (or biological father, depending on the myth) King Ramachandra and, upon discovering he had done so, Arimatta spent the rest of his life trying to atone for his sin of patricide; (3) many of the *puwali roja* and *datiyalia roja* (“border kings”) of central Assam—at Dimoria, Raha, Rani, Dandua, Baghara, Beltola, Gobha, and Mayong—claim

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<sup>5</sup> In some of the Arimatta myths, his biological father was not the Brahmaputra River, but a Kachari prince named Luit Konwar—literally, “Prince of the Luit [Brahmaputra] River” (J. C. Das n.d.: 18). The nominal slippage here is suggestive in itself, but the disambiguation found in texts that treat Arimatta’s story as history vs. those that treat it as myth vs. those that see no difference between the two involves ideologies about how history/myth should be written and who it is being written for.

some form of kinship to Arimatta, often with further Oedipal tones. Here is one version of the Arimatta myth (from Dutta 2013) that contains themes Mayongians pick up on with respect to their own cosmogonic and mythopoeic history:

Folklore has it that a prince named Ramachandra, great grandson of King Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty, ascended the throne of a kingdom situated in North Guwahati. He was married to a beautiful princess named Chandraprobha.

However, his kingdom was ravaged by floods of the Brahmaputra, a credible enough occurrence given the kind of havoc this river is notorious for causing—repeated inundations had reduced his subjects to penury. He consulted his priests who advised him that the annual floods were due to the anger of the Brahmaputra god who was infatuated with Chandraprobha, and only the sacrifice of his queen would stop the ravage in his kingdom. Much to his sorrow, but impelled by a sense of duty towards his subject, the king set his wife adrift on a raft over the Brahmaputra. According to folklore, Chandraprobha was ravished by the Brahmaputra god upon the raft and conceived.

A Brahmin rescued Chandraprobha and brought her to live with his family. She gave birth to a boy who was named Arimatta and who grew up in the Brahmin's household. As was to be expected, King Ramachandra discovered to his chagrin that the floods did not cease despite the sacrifice of his beloved wife, and left that area to establish another kingdom on a land which did not suffer from inundation, while changing his name due to shame. Meanwhile, the priestly advisers, learning that Arimatta was the queen's child and assuming he was son of Ramachandra, installed him as the king of the latter's old, abandoned kingdom.

But very soon Arimatta's expansionist ambitions brought him into conflict with neighbouring chieftains, which included Ramachandra, whom he slew on the battlefield not knowing that he was his mother's husband and thus his stepfather. Learning too late who his adversary had been, Arimatta undertook great penance. But, unable to rid himself of the crime of patricide, he finally committed suicide on the bank of the Buroi river.

Mayongian versions of the Arimatta myth pick up on many of these details—especially the “credibility” of the floods—and treat them as cosmogonic. In the contemporary moment, evidence that Mayong had a connection to Arimatta has first to do with the fact that there was a taboo on eating the *ari* fish among the royal family up until the late nineteenth century (Taranikanta Singha, pers. comm.; cf. Hazarika 2011: 15). According to the current king of Mayong, this is because Suinat Singha established his kingship uxorilocally (*ghor juwai*); he

took residence with the daughter of Jay Singha, the reigning chief/king of the region who is believed to be an ancestor of Arimatta, and “became Koch” (see Chapter 1 and Appendix). The royal family thus interpreted their relationship with the *ari* fish in quasi-totemic terms; due the blurring of matrilineal and patrilineal created by the *ghor juwai* (and a prior condition of “Dimasa Kachari” ambilineal descent), it was better to avoid anything that might be sacred to either.

Another Mayongian myth turns on the moment King Ramchandra left his kingdom in exasperation due to the continued flooding. According to Lokendra Hazarika’s *Mayongor Itihax* (2011: 12), the non-inundated land where Ramchandra settled, changed his name (to Mayamatta), and established a new kingdom was none other than the hills of Mayong:

Mayamatta left his flooded kingdom and sought refuge at the place called Bangthai Bheti among the hills (presently called Burha Mayong, but initially known as Borgaon). After seeking refuge for some days there, by appeasing some of the powerful locals he was able to get their support. Later he declared himself as the king of that area and started expanding his kingdom. He was able to conquer some of the small kingdoms and bring them under his rule. Since King Mayamatta established this kingdom, some say it was named after him as Mayong.

Hazarika treats this story as apocryphal in that it conflicts with many other versions of the origin of the name of Mayong (see Chapter 1) and does not actually establish a lineage to Arimatta, but to his (step)father (cf. L. S. Deka 1975: 59). Yet, a few pages later (*op cit*: 15), Hazarika—in a feat consistent with the inversions and transformations consistent with mythic thought in Mayong more generally (see Chapter 2)—actually refers to Mayamatta as *Arimatta’s* son and recapitulates the uxori-local myth as told by the current king of Mayong:

Mayamatta, the son of Arimatta, ruled over the kingdom of Mayong initially. Mayamatta was believed to have arrived in the 13th century and established a kingdom at Mayong. Again when Suinat Singha came to Mayong in the 16th century, the king (Jay Singha) who ruled this land was heirless, due to which he married off his only daughter, Princess Phuleswari, to Suinat Singha, who later ascended the throne of his father in law. It is quite possible that Jay Singha belonged to the family of Mayamatta and, as mentioned in the royal history, the king who ruled Mayong when Suinat Singha arrived had no son but a daughter named Phuleswari. Suinat Singha married Phuleswari and a relationship grew

up between the family of Arimatta and the family of Ghatotkacha [founder of the Kachari Kingdom].

Another myth popular among the Tiwa (Lalung) community in Mayong claims that Arimatta did not commit suicide, but was rather killed by his son Jongalbalahu (Jakanka) in a repetition of the Oedipal crime Arimatta himself committed. Jongalbalahu is said to have been the one to actually commit suicide by throwing himself in the flooded water of the Kolong River at the western border of Mayong (Kajoli), his body then resurfacing and sinking again at various places downstream. For Mayongians, this myth carries with it the idea that kingdoms peripheral to Mayong—and now deemed to be “tribal” kingdoms of the Karbi and Tiwa people—also grew in the wake of Arimatta and the floods of his riparian father. Guneswar Deka (2009: 21–22) details a version similar to this myth in his dissertation on Mayongian socio-political history:

[Arimatta] had another wife named Gangavati who was not legitimately married to him through whom he had another son named Jongalbalahu, also known as Jakanka. His illegitimate wife Gangavati was a Tiwa girl and the princess of the kingdom named Khola. Arimatta left Gangavati in her kingdom due to the dissatisfaction amongst the Lalung chieftains. He became the king of Khola and extended his kingdom up to the area of Kaliabor. He established his Capital in the area of Raha-Chahari. High embankments named Jongalbalahu Garh around his capital is still existent beside the National Highway near Raha. It is said that Jangalbalahu killed his father, Arimatta in a fight not knowing him to be his father during his expedition towards the Mayong kingdom. After that, he was killed by the Kachari king at Kajalimukh. The legend goes further to say that Jongalbalahu dived in the flood water of the river Kolong at place now called Raha and emerged out of the water downstream at a place now called Jagi. The names of the places Raha and Jagi were derived from this incident. The name of another place called Baha is also said to be derived from the fact that he sat at this place. Jongalbalahu left his son Ratna Singha at Baghara. Ratna Singha became the king of Baghara kingdom. After the death of Arimatta, his son, Sataranka ascended the throne. Two other sons namely Jakanka and Mriganka ascended the throne of Dimoria kingdom one after the other

Fish and floods are at the heart of Mayongian cosmography and cosmogony. But for Mayongians, the Arimatta myth most importantly indexes the ambiguous origins of the kingship's *jati*: Was the Mayong kingdom Koch or Dimasa Kachari? Does the stranger king

myth of Suinat Singha and his uxorilocal marriage resolve the two ethnically speciated theories?<sup>6</sup> Guneswar Deka (2009) is convinced that the Mayong kingdom was always Koch, even if he doesn't make a distinction between *Xoru Koch*, the formal "tribal" people who took *xoron*, and *Dangor Koch*, who were part of the Kamata/Koch Kingdom in the medieval period. The current king, Taranikanta Singha, thinks otherwise, and is convinced that the Dimasa Kachari prince Suinat Singha married a *Dangor Koch* princess via *ghor juwai* and became *Xoru Koch* (= Hindu Vaishnavite) when he took *xoron* (shelter in Shankardeva's Vaishnavism) upon his death. But in all the overlapping and competing theories, the *shared* sense of Arimatta being a progenitor of the Mayong kingdom turns on the fact that the flooding of the river is a cosmogonic event in which structures pass through the inundated conjuncture, as it were. New kingdoms begin, but they retain and renew the previous order of things—indeed, their very legitimacy depends upon that previous order.

Annual floods, especially on the scale at which they are now experienced and reckoned in contemporary Mayong, help to establish the "credibility" of these myths (as Dutta 2013 puts it; see above). But annual floods themselves are more or less micro-cosmogonies—at least insofar as the disorder and undifferentiation they produce (or elicit) is built into the cosmological order as a recurring problem. I don't think it is much of a stretch to say so either. Indeed, with annual floods come perennial flood stories, memories of the devastation of previous years, accounts of losses suffered and/or feasts celebrated—all in all, there is an almost ritual quality to them. Moreover, the discussion around floods—at least when it is not about fish or rice yields—is often a lament about a not-so-distant past when the order of village life was very different.

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<sup>6</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, it is important to be reminded that the mapping of contemporary names of ethnicities, castes, or tribes onto medieval persons, places, and political orders is central to the "cosmographic situation" that compels the making of shared accounts in Mayong. If the past is being read in terms of the present, it is not because of historical amnesia or the legacy of colonial classifications, but of conscious attempts to change the present order of things.

As oral history and living memory have it, the big change that occurred over the past fifty years or so hasn't been an increase in the intensity of the floods per se,<sup>7</sup> but that property relations have changed. Once it was possible to move fields and houses, and thus maintain residence in the hills of Mayong during the flooding season. We might say that this memory is one of when people contained the place rather than place containing the people. According to Mayongians whose families have been there for generations, the king or the colonial state—which did not have any direct control over the *mauza* of Mayong until the 1880s—never forced Mayongian subjects to adopt decennial leases during the colonial period (cf. Baruah 2005). As such, shifting cultivating and temporary residency on higher ground was much more common up until the middle of the twentieth century in Mayong. Today, property is fixed—homes are adjacent to the hills and the road, rice fields are scattered throughout the illuvial floodplains and their tenancy is permanent. The higher ground of the Mayong hills is now “owned” and protected by the state’s Forest Department. Even the road itself, which was designed to block the complete cresting of floodwater, is fixed in such a way that it too cannot withstand the occasional swell and surge (see Figure 4.2). So although intense flooding is expected to happen every year—indeed being the condition of possibility for the massive rice output across the Brahmaputra valley—its intensity is thus now registered differently: the flood itself being caught in another cosmogonic transformation that we are all very familiar with: the property relations of capital.

As historical memories about land and property relations surface during the floods, so do memories of the devastation floods bring. Much of Mayong has literally disappeared off the map due to soil erosion, expanding river banks, and altered courses of the river caused by

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<sup>7</sup> Some villagers claim that an increase in irrigation techniques has also weakened the soil and made flooding from both mountain run-off and river cresting more intense in recent years. This aligns with the consensus put forward by environmental science that the intensity and duration of problems resulting from riparian flooding in Assam is due to sandbank erosion (Phukan et al 2012). Global climate change has not, however, made it into local exegesis for explaining flood intensities.

earthquakes. This loss registers so greatly that among the late additions made to the Mayong Buranji (see Appendix) by Pawan Kumar Bishaya, the following is mentioned:

It was in the year 1937 AD that Mayong also came to be known as the “*Brahmaputra e gora khohai uthai dia gaon*” [“a village created and destroyed by the Brahmaputra”]. This was so because some of the villages of Mayong—Xogunpori, Xiyaaltari, Uzatari, Kolatoli, Barhoitari, Mantari, No. 1 Hiloikhunda, No. 2 Hiloikhunda, No. 1 Ganeshgaon Pakoriguri, Xaapmari (Chapari), Kotahguri and Pakori Mukh were flooded and during 1948 AD were entirely washed away by the Brahmaputa. No trace of any of these villages are found today.

To this, we can also add the village of Kalxila, which formerly sat between Loonmati and Hatimuria and was the site of a famous Vaishnavite Monastery that has since been relocated. Deka (2009: 18) adds even more villages to the list from the Buranji: Aparia, No. 2 Ganeshgaon, East Sildubi, North Kajali, and Kheroni.

In the time of floods, however, it is not the topic of land and loss that truly peaks in discourse, but the topic of fish. During floods, fish stories circulate phatically, much like the topic of the weather. Who caught which fish where? How big was it? How much money could it be sold for? More to the point, what the classificatory repertoires in the flood season privilege more than quality of “fish” in the molar, generic sense are the characteristics of particular fish species. When I would ask about fish in flooding season, the typical response was “Well, *what* fish? What species?” (*Ki mas? Ki jati?*). And in that access to, sale of, weighing of, and consumption of fish, moreover, is marked by affiliation to particular *jati*, it is also to the point that human actions related to fish raise the question of *who* a person is (“What person? What community? What title does (s)he write?” *Ki manuh? Ki jati? Ki likhe?*).

What interests me here is not only the isonomy that applies to both fish and people—i.e., that actions, and especially transgressions, can be deduced from a species category (which is another way of saying that fish and humans are part of the same ontology)—but that questions

like these, which elicit specification, *are themselves forms of speciation*. Another way to say this: if the time of floods is the departure point for articulating a cosmology (with either new configurations or old assumptions being carried through the critical event), eliciting specificity by asking “*what species?*” is the very articulation of cosmology itself. I will now turn to this deictic act of eliciting a species by attending to the various technologies, practices, and metaphors mobilized to direct “species management” during the time of floods.



**Figure 4.2.** A view of the devastation caused by flooding in Mayong. Here, we see the road from Mayong to Kamarpur during the 2012 floods. In 2011, this road became impassable when a bridge was destroyed by flooding, and has made interaction between the two areas more strained. As of 2016, the bridge has not yet been repaired.

### **Undifferentiated Water, Containers, and Sieves**

We need some ethnographic assistance here. Let’s look closer at the event of flooding in relation to the act of fishing.

The morning the flood finally encompassed the lowlands of Mayong in 2012, I took a walk down the main village road where crowds of villagers were drying out their grain in the morning sun, putting together fishing nets, and worrying about this year's potential devastation. A rhinoceros had escaped from Pobitora Wildlife Reserve earlier that morning, and after going on a rampage through the village, it finally took shelter in the forested hills of Burha Mayong. The already cluttered road was now filling up with forest officers, their trucks, and elephants, all seeking to recapture the rhinoceros. Other roads were already underwater and it was feared that the road between Roja Mayong/Pobitora and Burha Mayong would soon also become impassible. Everyone was on alarm.

Nearby, my neighbor Xuneshor was frantically heaving his fishing net (*sieve jal*) in and out of the floodwater next to a drainage pipe. Loads of fish, all the same species (*rou mas*), were being hauled out and deposited into a makeshift water-cage built of netting and bamboo (see Figure 4.3). Thinking him to be lucky, I inquired as to how he was able to catch so many fish. It turned out, however, that he was rather unlucky. The rising floodwater had encompassed his fishery pond and his stock were now escaping their container in droves. With the pond boundary collapsed, Xuneshor was trying to save his stock from swimming out into the vast expanse of floodwater (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5).



**Figure 4.3:** Forest officers and a crowd of onlookers from Burha Mayong and neighboring villages observing a rhinoceros seeking shelter from the flooding in Burha Mayong village in September 2012. The *sieve jal* fishing net (see right side of image) is being used to prevent the stock from an overflowing pond from escaping into the floodwater the other side of the road. The net is in front of a drainage pipe which allows for a flow of water from one side to the other: in this case, a tunnel through which fish can escape.

I sat down with Xuneshor to discuss his situation. He lamented,

You see, I cannot catch these fish until Bhogali Bihu [January]. It is forbidden. They are not ready to be sold or eaten. But if they escape into the flood (*banpani*), others will catch them and eat them...maybe they will even try to sell them in another village market.... [W]hen the flood arrives, no one obeys the rules (*niyom*) of their community. Anyone can fish. Anyone can weigh [them]. Anyone can sell [them]. All fish can be caught....Others will eat now, but my family will starve during Bihu...[and] Bihu is the time when rules are lifted and all can fish together; it should not be so [during these days of flooding]. But there are no boundaries during the flood. Who will stop others from catching our fish, these *rou mas*? It's very bad....Kela, everyone is hungry when it floods—if I see *rou mas*

in the market or in someone's fish basket (*khaloi*), how do I know those are not *our* fish, *our* Karbi fish that *our people* (*amar Karbi raji*) eat and earn profit from? So, now, I have to catch them keep them here [in this cage] until the flood goes away...



**Figures 4.4 and 4.5.** Photos of the same pond in Figure 4.3 taken during the flooding season in 2013. The photo on the top (Figure 4.4) was taken approximately one hour before the one on the bottom (Figure 4.5), showing that the pond boundary, noticeable in Figure 4.4 as a grassy divide in the middle of the photo, had already eclipsed.

Indeed, many ponds in Burha Mayong contain fish that are only extracted annually during the month of Magh (for both ritual and economic reasons). As such, they are an important source of capital. It is also during Magh—on the festival of Bhogali Bihu—that so-called “community fishing” is allowed in Mayong and the taboos about who can and cannot fish are ceremonially lifted. With private fisheries emptied of stock and water levels low, all the “ethnic” communities of Mayong gather together to fish collectively in the public lakes and wetlands owned by Mayong’s king.

But now, with the floodwater mixing with pond water, and then flowing out into the flood plains, the specific social, ritual, and economic values that such fish would potentiate in their *appropriate time* were at risk of being compromised prematurely. Similarly, the question of who should be fishing where and doing what with fish (weighing, selling, eating) was thrown into stark relief. Xuneshor was worried that taboos were being broken in an inappropriate time...for such taboos are not merely a matter of abstract belief or custom, but of the material ecology that connects humans and fish (cf. Barua 2013), and the mutual relations among different communities that make up the socio-ontological order of Mayong. Flooding disrupts this order as it becomes difficult to control who is doing what. Surplus is everywhere and the promise of feasting or cashing in bodes well. Containers leak. Boundaries blur. Like a cover of darkness, the flood undifferentiates the world.

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As early as Malinowski (1935), anthropologists have been keen to note the uncertainties that accompany activities like fishing. Water appears as an undifferentiated surface; whatever value can be extracted from its murky depths often becomes the object of magical practices. Yet such an observation is, pardon the pun, rather flat. Consider fishing in the morning vs. in the evening,

fishing in storms vs. calm weather, fishing in floodwater vs. fishing in lakes, rivers, ponds, or oceans. Not only do different temporal and spatial qualities create different kinds of uncertainty,<sup>8</sup> but the different phenomenal quality of water itself creates different kinds of undifferentiation (!).

So, for floodwater, we must ask what is to be done with water when it is not only the surface that lacks differentiation, but when the water of one place becomes the water of another, when the contents of one micro-container (Xuneshor's fishery pond, for example) become the contents of a macro-container (the expansive floodwater itself). How, then, might the practical activities of containing fish imply or index the practical activity of containing types of persons?

### *Containers*

Floodwater registers displacement in such an explicit way that as water becomes undifferentiated—as stream water, river water, pond water, etc. all become mixed into a new molar form (“floodwater”)—the boundaries that were set up to keep water bodies impervious are thrown into relief. If floodwater displaces fish from a pond, it also displaces the money that those fish will eventually potentiate and the persons that will make up the eventual relation of exchange—the very telos of there being fish in fishery ponds in the first place. Like Archimedes in his bathtub, the displacement of water becomes a way to measure a relation—the effect that an object or person has on an environment from within and without (cf. Holbraad 2005).

Consider fishing in Sonoka (Chanaka), one of Mayong's most remote villages—to where it takes a three-four hour trek on foot or bicycle from the nearest road during the dry seasons. In flooding season, traveling there on foot is almost impossible, and Sonoka villagers must take boats from their homes to travel anywhere. Only two communities live in Sonoka: Assamese

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<sup>8</sup> Recall Malinowski's (1935) point that Trobriand fishing magic happens more dramatically the farther out to sea one is.

Hindus who hold the title of Saikia and Biharis who immigrated there in the 1960s. Over time, these two communities developed a mutuality when it comes to fishing—a mutual relation that becomes quite strained in the time of floods. Although the ponds here do not crest (i.e., the flood water does not rise high enough to mix with pond water, as it did with Xuneshor’s pond), the boundary of Mayong that is supposed to contain these people within its administrative, economic, and political apparatus is displaced during the time of floods. All roads and navigable paths are submerged or blocked. Although Sonokans have practically no ritual or customary political relationship with Mayong’s king, their economic livelihood relies very much on access to the main village market (almost 10 kilometers away).

Moreover, as Sonokans narrate it with respect to the taboo of their *jati*, Hindus with the Saikia title cannot weigh or sell fish, but they can eat them. Preferably, they also should not catch them. Accordingly, they hand the job over to the Biharis who, upon extracting fish from Saikia-owned ponds, proceed to weigh the fish. Saikia families inspect the fish and then decide which ones to eat and which ones to sell. Those that are not saved for eating are taken by the Biharis all the way around the Mayong hills to the market in Roja Mayong. Upon return, whatever money has been made on the sale of fish is then given back to the Saikia family that owned the pond. The Saikia owner then offers the Bihari fisherman a “commission” (*masul*) on the profit culled from the fish sold or caught.<sup>9</sup>

However, since flooding increases the possibility for Saikia-titled Hindus to fish discreetly in floodwater, and then discreetly sell those fish to middlemen who can weigh them—the mutual relation between the two communities loses its practical convenience. Effectively, a new “kind” of person has popped up—what Mayongians refer to as “modern Saikia manuh”—

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<sup>9</sup> The exchange here resembles the *adhi diya* “system” of share-cropping and livestock gifting common throughout Assam, where “ownership” is conceived of as an “owing/owning” of “half” (see Chapter 3).

who, even in affirming that they still do not “weigh” fish, nevertheless catch and sell them without the threat of punishment or banishment (*egoriya*).

The Karbi community in Burha Mayong explains that they once followed the same restrictions as Saikia-titled Hindus. Rupali Kathar’s younger sister, Khakoli Kathar, elaborated on this point during an interview I held with her on a particularly wet day during flooding season:

Karbi people have always eaten fish, but in the old days we could not sell them or weigh them. There used to be a lot of Dom *jati* (Kaibrata) people living here. They used to do all the fishing themselves. They know a lot about fish. But the floods last too long these days and in order for our community to be developed, Karbi people now have their own fisheries. Dom *jati* cannot find work here anymore. So most of them left...at least twenty-five years ago...maybe more.

I asked Khakoli if there was such a thing now as “modern Karbi manuh,” to which she replied:

No, all are [just] Karbi. But there is one difference. My father says that we were given “pardon” (*uddhar*) when our Karbi people began to build fisheries. Now, the Bangthai [chief] frowns upon anyone fishing during the floods. Fisheries are only for storing fish, they are taken out for eating and selling in the month of Magh....[T]he Bangthai says we must observe *our* rituals and laws, and also the government’s laws. We Karbi people like eating dried *puthi mas*, and you will catch a lot when flooding happens, more than any other fish. But, the government’s law is that you cannot catch small fish during the rainy season. They have to grow into big fish first. So the Bangthai becomes angry if Karbi people are catching fish in the floodwater...

The practical issue of fish storage, and what it implies for drawing boundaries between Karbi and other *jati*, is an important one. Yet, storage isn’t the only thing that makes a container a container. Many containers draw out the substances they contain—not only if they are defective and leak, but because they are also sites of transfer: they are elicitory vessels, as it were (cf. Strathern 2013: 110).<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, this makes floodwater itself a kind of “container,” but one harder to manage and draw boundaries around.

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<sup>10</sup> Such is the case in the Oxomiya language, where a term like *bota* implies both elicitation, as in a tray that holds gifts (like in serving areca nut [*tamol*] to guests), and containment, as in a bottle that stores fluids like rice wine (*lau bota*).

Fishery ponds (*pukhuri*) and public wetlands (*bil*) in Mayong are an excellent example of containers that are explicit sites for transfer and elicitation in that their function is unequivocally *economic*, as Khakoli mentioned above. Minnows are bought or brought in from outside the village, stored in ponds or cordoned off wetlands until they mature, and are then sold or eaten during the month of Magh (January/February). Their political and cosmic dimensions also flood the historical record. In the Mayong Buranji (see Appendix), the digging of ponds seems to have been a central feature of the patronage of the Mayong Kings in the *longue durée*. Throughout the line of kings, ponds were built by the kings to deal with the scarcity of clean water, to resolve political disputes, to serve as sites for religious rituals, to mark off spaces appropriate for bathing, washing of clothes and utensils, consumption, and the farming of fish. Indeed, compared to other regional *buranji*, the building of ponds is more commonly mentioned in the history of Mayongian kingship than war or usurpation. Symbolically, this makes sense in that the containership of ponds involves the controlled transfer of resources crucial for the reproduction of the kingdom itself. It is the ur-sign of infrastructure in an era before stable bridges, roads, and electricity.

Stationary yet elicitory, an analogue of containership here might be a house or village—quintessential containers for persons—where people are drawn in and out via marriage. Residency patterns in Mayong are indeed the very hinge of kinship itself—for the ideologically preferred movement of brides (*virilocality*) extends the family beyond the boundaries of the house or village and the ideologically despised (but historically common) movement of grooms (*uxorilocality*) allows for a one-way movement of desirable men into the house or village (see Chapters 1 and 2). Effectively ponds and villages/houses all have a *telos* of “controlled transfer” built into them. What floods do to ponds, however, is force the moment of transfer before it is

ready to be realized. We might call it a kind of “uncontrolled transfer of value” in that the pond is *leaking* what it once contained. So as fish leak outside of the pond, the scramble to prevent them from doing so must involve employing a different, if related, kind of technology: a sieve.

### *Sieves*

Sieves work in conjunction with containers; yet, whereas containers primarily emphasize the storage and transfer of persons and fish, sieves emphasize the separation and differentiation of the elements contained (desired from undesired, part from whole, etc.) (see Kockelman 2013). Sieves winnow, and their act of winnowing has pragmatic and often unintended effects.

Nets are the quintessential sieves for fishing. And while they are not the only way to catch fish in the time of floods, they are the most practical and effective. The most popular net to use is, in fact, called a *sieve jal* (or *tongi jal*, see Figure 4.6), which is heaved in and out of the water allowing for water to pass through while it catches anything that is swimming between it and the surface. During flooding season, however, sieving works not only to separate fish from water, but fish from fish.

During the flooding season of 2013, my neighbor Xuneshor—the one who was frantically using nets to sieve his fish from the floodwater that had submerged his pond, and thus transferring them from container to container (see above)—developed a new, less intensive strategy for preventing his fish from escaping through the drain pipe out into the floodplains. Using bamboo, he built a gate that sieves water and *puthi mas* (minnows), allowing them to move through the gate, but preventing his stock of growing *rou mas* from escaping (see Figure 4.7). I asked him why he decided to build this new sieve rather than using a net as before. Xuneshor smiled and said,

This year I will take no risk. I lost at least Rs. 25,000 worth of fish last year and who knows what became of them. But, now these will be *Karbi mas*...not *Miyan mas*, Koch

*mas*, Bengali *mas*, but our *mas*. The Karbi *raij* will eat and I will pay my debts, and whatever fish others eat will not affect our Bihu. They will not eat *our rou mas*....I also am following the government's rules, allowing the minnows to go free. This year will be different. We will feast on Magh Bihu and commit no wrongdoing.



**Figure 4.6.** A *sieve jal* (also known as a *tongi jal*) is often used for catching fish in floodwater. Here it is being used felicitously in front of a drainage pipe—another sieve of sorts—that was built to prevent floodwater from encompassing the road. Here, two Koch villagers from the Nambari hamlet in Burha Mayong are attempting to catch a *borali mas* (freshwater shark: *Wallago attu*), which they say is attracted to feeding spots like this where minnows tend to congregate due to the fast suction of the currents in the drainage pipe.

The kind of speciation seemed shocking to me at first. Could the sense of *jati* be so intransigent that fish themselves could be classified as belonging to human kinds? Perhaps, but Xuneshor's comment was again more pragmatic than philosophical. He proudly points out how

he is the one observing the law and how *his jati* will benefit in the end. With persons and future values sieved as such, Xuneshor re-establishes and reifies the ecology of multiplicity.



**Figure 4.7.** A bamboo gate (another “sieve”) meant to let water but not fish through. This photo is of the same drainage pipe in Figure 4.3, but this specific photograph was taken in 2013 after Xuneshor devised this new material strategy for preventing his fishery’s *rou mas* from swimming out into the floodwater.

However, sieving also creates unintended and uncontrollable effects. Just as floods bring in the potential harvest of fish, they also bring in a surplus of stories about magic. Fish magic, in Mayong at least, cannot be pinned to a functional equivalent of uncertainty and luck. Rather, it is largely a controlled technique used to bring one success at fishing by disrupting or blocking another’s. Fish tend to disappear from one’s *khaloi* (fish baskets) and magic acts of another

person are often to blame. After the catch, the fish are said to be torn away by some distant sorcerer (*bej*) or snatched by nearby ghost (*bak* or *bira bhut*) working for a greedy interlocutor. So here we have another sieve, another net...this time the net of Indra (*indrajal*, another term for “black magic” or “deception”). But getting caught in this net paradoxically involves thinking one’s way out of it (Wagner 2001: 15-16).<sup>11</sup>

D. K. Kalita (1992) collected several examples of Mayongian fish magic during his fieldwork there in the 1980s. One story, told to Kalita by one of his informants, Sashiram Saikia, stands out in that it shows how fish magic is both a controlled and uncontrolled transfer of value (depending on the perspective):

There are numerous *bils* (marshy natural lakes) in the Mayong area. The *bils* are auctioned by the Government; one such *bil* was procured by the management of a local school. The sale proceeds of the fish from the *bil* was supposed to be spent for development of the school. But another group of people, mostly fishermen from Bihar, were against allotting of the *bil* to the school. They had been taking the *bil* on previous auctions. The village people, including the informant, went for fishing on behalf of the school. But they made a poor catch. This incident took place only eight days before my interviewing the informant. The people including the informant believe that the rivals resorted to magic and transferred the fish from the *bil* to another *bil*. (Kalita 1992: 286–87)

The magical transfer of fish may be a way to control (or sieve) value, but it is a risky business on the part of those who doing it (or who are assumed to be doing it). To engage in fish magic is to put oneself into what I have called “the sorcery cycle” (see Chapter Two), where an agent of magic is always potentially an unintended victim.

Consider the following example. On the northern side of Burha Mayong village, where the road turns toward the villages of Xoti Bheti, Loonmati, and Roja Mayong, there is a large bridge that was built over permanent wetlands (*bil*). Nearby, along the road, are concrete

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<sup>11</sup> Or better, if more cryptically stated, “To know the net as a net, see it as a net, grasp or perceive it in any way as a net, is to get caught in it. To *not* know it as a net, humor oneself, and go by the counsel of perception alone is to get positively entangled” (Wagner 2001: 17).

embankments with drains that help to prevent floodwater from cresting over the road (see, again, Figure 4.6). This is a prime fishing spot, and tends to fill up with nets during the flooding season. The Koch residents of the nearby hamlet of Nambari in Burha Mayong tell me that it is an excellent spot to catch *borali mas* (freshwater shark: *Wallago Attu*), due to its location at the edge of the waterways that link the Brahmaputra River to the vast flood plains of the Mayong area.

One day during the floods, I went out to fish in this area with a friend of mine who we call by the nickname of “Tractor.” He had propped his *sieve jal* by the side of the road near the bridge and before we begin, he huddled over the net and whispered some mantras. When he was finished, he sprinkled some water from a short bamboo container over the net and shouted at the top of his lungs: “*Joy Vishwakarma! A borali mas will come today!*”

Spitting out a mouthful of reddened saliva from the areca nut I was chewing, I asked him with gargled words: “O Tractor, why are you praising Vishwakarma? How can he bring you luck?”

Tractor dropped the net into the water gently and said “See how strong this net is? Fortune (*bhagyo*) is something different. I’m giving honor to the net, so it keeps strong and will pull up a *borali mas*.”

“OK, I understand,” I chirped, “But why whisper *jadu mantra*, too?”

Tractor’s tone changed to an almost dismissive growl, “These Bengalis who fish by the bridge, they keep catching all the *borali mas*. I need help to bring the fish to my net instead. These aren’t even their fields, but they come here to fish because they know it is a good place.”

After about an hour or so, Tractor noticed activity in the water and became excited. Giving it a good heave, he drew out the net to reveal a massive *xol mas* (*Channa Striata*). But Tractor looked dejected.

“What’s wrong?” I inquired.

Eh, I don’t know if I can eat this fish or even sell it. Look at its black color. Maybe it is forbidden. I have never caught one before....I will give have to ask the *gaon burha* (village headman) what to do. But this is my bad fortune (*beya bhagyo*); the magic of the Bengalis fishing nearby is so much stronger. I know this. Even our (Karbi) sorcerers go to them to learn better mantras for fishing...I think they knew what I was doing and now their success is my failure...had it been a *borali mas*, I would have made good money today....[I]f this fish is inauspicious, then my misfortune might harm my family if we eat it. Not a good thing at all...I shouldn’t have used mantra. It shouldn’t be like this...it should be *manuhe manuhor babe*, shouldn’t it?<sup>12</sup>

Thus is the sieve of fish magic, which in its unintended consequences can reify another’s *jati* as much as it can change the fortune of one’s own. But Tractor’s final question here is intriguing for it raises another problem. Here, he references the lyrics to a famous Bhupen Hazarika song and suggests that his magical sieve should not have been done for his own benefit. The unintended effects of his intentional speciation (and reification) of the Bengalis brought into relief the idea that their relation should not be one of jealousy and animosity, but one of being generically human and ethically humanist.

### **What *Jati* Is (in Mayong)**

Why the categories of the abstract human (*manuh*) continue to co-exist (even, or especially if, rather tensely so) with concrete/particular *jati* is not merely a political question. Or rather, it cannot be reduced to a matter of politics...or even to historicity. Whether we like it or not, ideologies of *jati* exist and draw heavily on the logics of speciation. This is perhaps more

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<sup>12</sup> “*Manuhe manuhor babe*” is the title and lyric of a famous song by Assamese songwriter, Bhupen Hazarika. It translates to something like “A human for the need of a human.”

vibrantly the case in Assam, where slippage between “caste” and “ethnicity” is well-documented in post-Independence political histories and ethnographies (see, for example, Cantlie 1984; Ramirez 2014). Yet, in our hesitancy to recognize and properly theorize how and why local arguments of speciation apply to both humans and non-humans, we disregard the capaciousness and indexical quality of what makes “*jati* pragmatics,” if you will, a grounded dimension of the ideological discourse that often presents itself to us as natural, ordinary, and unmediated. More than that, it suggests that such pragmatics might even undermine the very sense that *jati* is really what is at stake in times of crisis.

Nevertheless, human-human species interaction holds strong in Mayong, not only for humans between societies, but those among the very same “society” as well. For example, in Burha Mayong, among the Karbi community, *jati* is almost as recursive as the floods are. Being applied to the category of “Karbi” itself, Mayongian Karbi point out that their *jati* is different from the Karbi who live in the hills, but also from other Karbi in the plains as well. They speciate further, saying that the Karbi in Mayong have traditions that can’t be easily reconciled with those of the Karbi in Dimoria or Thakurkusi, or other nearby places. Politics, of course, weighs heavy on these recursivities, but the logic of society-internal speciation felicitously differentiates at the socio-ontological level. Speciating unique forms of gift-giving, marriage preferences, and prosperity rituals all create conditions for a *jati* being something more than just an intransigent entity, more than just an “ethnicity.” Society-internal difference creates dynamism, conflict, life...the stuff that makes something like a *jati* coherent in both practical and analytical senses in the first place.

Consider this recursivity even further. Pragmatically, while local distinctions between families who belong to one *kur* or *phoid* (clan) among the Mayongian Karbi or another are not

emphasized on an everyday basis (see Chapter 6), they nevertheless hold up well enough that only certain families are allowed to become chiefs (*bangthai*) or priests (*kathar*), for example. Occasionally one will even hear clans referred to as *jati*! Recursive speciation in this sense begins to look like political segmentation, if not a more familiar sense of “caste.” And yet, this notion of *jati* remains malleable and context-specific. In the Karbi community in Burha Mayong, one can effectively change one’s own *kur*—if given a title like *bangthai* or *kathar* out of respect, a person can pass that title on to their children, and over time those children can effectively become chiefs or priests (as name and substance are interchangeable; see Dowdy 2015; Chapter 6, this thesis). Speciation in this case is, again, *indexical*; it is driven by ritual contexts where such offices become necessary.

To be sure, floods are thus not the only events that elicit this kind of indexical speciation in Assam. Events as small as a shared account negotiation over an inter-caste marriage (see Chapter 3) or as large as the 2012 Kokrajhar conflict have the same finality as floods, insofar as they are moments in which the question of one’s specific being is up for negotiation. That the end may be either felicitous or violent demands that we attempt to understand the role of speciation in the context of critical events. What we need to grasp for a solid ethnographic theory of *jati* in Assam are the conceptual hinges that people use to differentiate themselves from others contextually and dynamically. When Carolyn Brown Heinz (2013: 33–34) suggests that the ethnographic call for action should be to “ask how particular local *jatis* construct their bonds of community such that they appear given, natural, and immutable, the only constant in a world of change,” we should perhaps take pause. Why should we not ask instead how *jati* itself appears indexical, mutable, and a cultural intention conforming to a world of change? Shifting the term away from its political and ideological grounds back to its classificatory and speciating logics in

a world of humans and non-humans might be a step in the right direction for a study of relationality in Northeast India, if not in the sub-continent as a whole. Insofar as it is part of the conceptual-pragmatic register of everyday life in India, it cannot be reduced to politics or to a given theoretical fashion.

Whatever *jati* ultimately is in Mayong, one thing seems certain: it doesn't sit still. Like the feature of participatory deception immanent to Mayongian cosmologies in the making (see Chapter 2), *jati* flops around like a fish, so that the more you try to pin down its significance, the more it wiggles (Taussig 1998: 285). *Jati* might be the kind of felicitous ethnographic concept that an ichthyonomic perspective generates. At least more felicitous than "ethnicity" or "caste"—for neither does anything to help us explain why there could be something called a "Karbi fish," why Saikia-titled Hindus in Sonoka who weigh and sell fish are now interpolated as "*modern Saikia manuh*," or why one would fret over the fact that speciating acts of magic might distort a benevolent and generic sense of humanity...or, conversely, how that ethical horizon of generic humanity problematizes the ethics specific to *jati*.

### **The Snake, the Mongoose, and Waiting for Gogoi**

Wrestling with *jati*—between the figure of the generic human and the virally segmented social order—is at the heart of the processes that both make and unmake the shared account. As Mayong itself is speciated, the *raij* too undergoes speciation. The politics of deciding what resources are allocated where, who belongs in what place, and how to manage those differences is a necessary path toward any sense of shared belonging in Mayong. But is an ethos (or ethic) of a generic humanity really possible in this cosmographic situation?

In the example above, Tractor cites lyrics from a Bhupen Hazarika song to reference a generic ethos and ethic of "humanity" above and beyond the speciations of *jati*. Yet, in Mayong

at least, there are other references to a superordinate cosmos where *jati* not only does not matter, but must be rejected completely. Primary among these is the space of the *nam ghor* (“name house”) where devotional recitations (*kirtan*) of the names of Krishna are carried out. A *nam kirtan*, however, is more than a *bhakti* hymn. It is often a performance flooded with ecstatic dances, drums that are pounded with surging rhythms, and crashing gongs—all meant to incite the divine presence and blessings of the one God (Krishna/Narayan). Shankardeva’s Vaishnavism, like most *bhakti* movements, rejects the divisions of *jati* on a theoretical level. There is no God but Krishna, and all of us are Krishna. In his *Kirtana Ghosa*, Shankardev makes *jati* an object of non-knowledge: “Do, therefore, regard all and everything as though they were God himself. Seek not to know the *jati* of a Brahmana nor of a Chandala.”

Of course practice is a different matter, and *jati* makes its appearance as an object of knowledge in almost all contexts. Still, Mayongians *try* to make the *nam ghor* a space where speciated differences are “left at the door.” During large *nam kirtan*, there is usually a man designated to dance with a snake (*xap*) and a mongoose (*neul*)—plastic or plush versions are often used (see Figure 4.8). The pairing is meant to evoke two things. First is that the *nam ghor* is a space of non-enmity (the snake and mongoose being “natural” enemies). Second is that “natures” (*prokriti*) are ritually changed/purified/dissolved in the *nam ghor* so that there is no distinction even between species. The snake and the mongoose have an equal place in the *nam ghor* just like everyone else. And yet...



**Figure 4.8.** A man dancing with a plush snake and mongoose at a *nam kirtan* in the Maj Khel *nam ghor* (Roja Mayong).

Once in Burha Mayong I was attending a *puja* to Gonesh at the Kesakhaiti/Kamakhaya *than* or sacred grove (see Figure 4.9). Gonesh is considered a protector of Mahamaya in Mayong as his idols (carved in rock) are found at the sites where the streams coming down the hills meet the plains. But, ironically, Gonesh is worshipped in Burha Mayong by doing *nam kirtan* (just as all other deities are, including the goddess, who nevertheless still receives blood sacrifices). Because of this, all *jati* take part. In Burha Mayong, the population is mainly split between Xoru Koch in the Nambari hamlet and Plains Karbi and Tiwa people in the remaining 5 hamlets. For

most smaller *nam kirtan*, elder (post-menopausal) women are usually in charge of reciting the hymns, so a group of Koch women and a group of Karbi women gathered at the *than*.



**Figure 4.9.** The Gonesh idol at Kesakhaiti/Kamakhaya *than* in Burha Mayong. Photography by Mohsin Hussain.

The Koch women arrived first, put a mesh tarpaulin down on the ground, and took their seats. The Karbi women then arrived and took their seats next to the Koch women on the tarpaulin. In a matter of minutes, an argument broke out and one of the elder Koch women declared that the Karbi women must move off of the tarpaulin and sit next to the adjacent Goddess temple where sacrifices are done: “We are big (*dangor*, here meaning “higher ranked”), you cannot sit with us!” A (Koch) man visiting from Roja Mayong interjected saying, “Hold on, hold on...all are equal in the eyes of God when giving *nam*. If a snake and mongoose can get

along in the *nam ghor*, then Koch and Tribal can sit together here. Please let them sit.” The elder Koch woman nodded in reluctant agreement, but the Karbi women had already got up and took their seats next to the temple. Immediately upon their leaving, a Koch woman took off the *gamosa* wrapped around her head and began sweeping the area where the Karbi women were sitting—to clean it in the most ritual sense of the term (see Figures 4.10 and 4.11).

I walked over to the Karbi elders and asked them why they did not take the invitation to return to where they were sitting before. No one responded. Finally, my host mother looked at me and uttered, “We are scared to do anything. This is how things are, isn’t it?” (*Ami bhoy khasiu. Enekuwa solai neki?*). The *nam kirtan* went forward, everyone singing the name of Krishna in front of Gonesh Baba, distinct yet indistinct, separated but somehow united. *Jati* was dead. Long live *jati*.

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When I wrote this chapter in March 2016, the elections in Assam were approaching. Assam’s Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, had recently given an extended interview with the press where he critiqued Narendra Modi’s disregard of flooding in Assam over the past two years of him being Prime Minister, despite the latter’s attention to flooding in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>13</sup> The year’s floods hadn’t begun yet, but just as the dry season does not prevent the topic of floods from entering into political discourse, Mayongians were also already preparing for the inevitable.

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<sup>13</sup> See: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/idea-exchange-assam-assembly-elections-2016-what-is-anti-national-if-i-go-by-centre-rule-whole-assam-would-turn-into-a-jail-cm-tarun-gogoi/>, Accessed March 23, 2015. See also, Baruah 2014.



**Figures 4.10 and 4.11.** On the top (Figure 4.10), a Koch woman sweeps the tarpaulin where the Karbi women had been seated. On the bottom (Figure 4.11), the Karbi women take their seats next to the goddess' sacrificial temple.

I was writing up in Guwahati so I took the opportunity to visit and catch up with my friends in Mayong. Although the upcoming festival of Rongali (Bohag) Bihu was on everyone's minds, an occasional morning burst of rain kept calling forth what the summer would eventually bring. During a brief morning drizzle, I sat under a verandah with my good friend, Diganta Timung. As we looked out through the hazy sprinkling at young calves scratching their necks on tree trunks, I asked Diganta if he thought Tarun Gogoi or the Central Government will do anything this year to assist if the flooding in Mayong is particularly bad.

Diganta sighed, "Who will know? Manmohan Singh never did anything [and he represented Assam in the Rajya Sabha]. Modi does nothing. Gogoi is too slow...he always says to wait and wait, help will come. Maybe, if Pobitora [Wildlife Reserve] is in danger, then he will act to save the rhino and foreign [tourist] money."

I followed, "This is sad, eh? I remember you once told me...maybe it was the first week I lived in Mayong...you said the flood is Assam's 'burning question,' not insurgency or economy or things like that. Does the question still burn?"

"Listen, Sean Da...the fire here grows little by little every year. And everyone knows that a little flooding is good for Assam. Our rice paddy needs it. But, if a fire is left alone, it grows bigger and soon the whole jungle burns. Understand? You have to tell people in America about the flooding here. They might know how to help....Majuli will be underwater...We will not be able to harvest our rice anymore in Mayong, our fish will all swim away, our homes will be destroyed."

Feeling a little guilty for not taking more action than I probably could, I punted a response: "I am writing a chapter on flooding and fishing now, maybe it will help. What about

the Indian government? What might get their attention? What can I do while we wait for Gogoi?”

Diganta responded with his casual wit and in an idiom so “ichthyonomic,” so Mayongian, that I can do no better than conclude with his reflection. Among other things, it reveals that the scale of the “ichthyonomic perspective” I have been elaborating in this chapter is not limited to a local sense of a “whole,” but that it can and does draw arguments of containership, sieving, and socio-cosmological speciation into larger totalities, new cosmogonies, and new senses of a generic humanity. It is this kind of figuration that charges the dialectics of the shared account, to which we will return in the next chapter. For now, here is Diganta, quiescing, speciating, particularizing, and exhorting:

Forget it (*bad diya*), Sean Da. We know about problems in all of India [here in Mayong]. We watch on television the floods in Kashmir and other places. We are Indians, right? It makes us sad to see all this destruction. But no one in Delhi knows anything of Assam’s floods. It’s ironic (*bobrokti*) because Mayong is “world famous” for magic (*jadu mantra*)....[laughs]...Think about it, if all India was covered by a flood, then we [in Assam] would be like *puthi mas* [minnows], and no one would notice us except when it is time to eat. It’s like this, isn’t it? . . .

But, we are not fish. We are people...citizens, no?...we are the same as Kashmiri people, but...they will not see our flood until they can see no difference between us and them, but that will not happen. . . .

[I] heard on television that the whole world will be a flood soon...and it will be because people [will cause it]. I suppose then everyone will want to live in the mountains [points to the Himalayas off in the distance]...no one will want to be a minnow in the big ocean. That’s when everyone will understand there are no differences between us. And when that happens, Sean Da, your *jati* will have to learn how to *jhum* [practice swidden agriculture]—but don’t worry, I will teach you. . . . So what will you teach me, *kela?* [laughs]

## CHAPTER 5

### “This is *Jukowa*”

#### Exhortation and the Ethics of Foreplay

*[In] the Indian philosophical tradition...you can be there at the beginning of action, but you can never be there at the end of action. This is what makes Gandhi say, “I will go on this salt march, even if there are only four people with me. And we will see if others will join or not join in—the matter is beyond me.” This is the point he would repeatedly say, “The matter is beyond me” . . . the world has a saying in that.*

– Veena Das ([2013] 2015: 33)

#### Filling in the Blanks

In Chapters 3 and 4, we outlined how the making and unmaking of shared accounts unfolds through processes of quiescence and speciation—both of which are immanent to acts of public reckoning and their prior condition of possibility. This chapter explores a third process: exhortation. This process is probably the most central to the Mayongian shared account, for it is the means by which new (or secret) information is publicly extracted. At any *raijmel* where shared accounts are being composed, the “analogic king” handling the drafting of the account will provoke or incite *melkie* (= *meluoi*, “meeting participants”) of the *raij* to argue, speculate, or simply verbally participate. In this way, decision making takes the appearance of a dialogic and public forum while at the same time being a way for the inciting authority to manage the affect of the often unruly *raij* and collect and mold the shared account into a “mnemotechnical” archive. Yet, in the very same measure, if the act of exhortation is a processual way to establish the appearance of a participatory *demos*, it also triggers something else: a sense of

incompleteness in that the voices of the *raij* are not in sync. We shall return to this point shortly. First, we must specify what exhortation looks like in the context of the shared account.

If the shared account has an “economic” purpose, this process usually takes the form of exhorting senior male members of the *raij* to reveal their sources of income and to verify amounts that they can contribute for public works. These kinds of audits are rare, but do occasionally happen. For example, when the Karbi *raij* in Burha Mayong was building their *deka chang* (“boy’s dormitory”) or when Nath Maj *khel* in Roja Mayong needed to repair their *namghor*, funds were solicited in this manner. This solicitation is known as *xohai*, which literally means “help,” but its significance is one of a demanded gift that cannot be refused. No one asks about cash or informal sources of money, but only what can be gathered from bank statements (or “passbooks”) that family heads (*murobi*) have on hand. The poorest cultivators are hardly ever solicited in this regard, and generally it only concerns those who have displayed their wealth or largesse in such a way as to either be “big men” themselves, or are not big men and seem to be neglecting contribution to the *raij* or to Mayong’s political society at large. Thus the information found in bank statements acts as a “proof” (*proman*) on top of an already demonstrated wealth; it then sets the moral bar for how much *xohai* one is willing to give.

Most of the time, however, exhortation in shared accounts takes the form of inciting others to show whether a fine due to a breached taboo or some other form of transgression should be paid and accounted for or not. Here, though, exhortation only has a “secondary” economic characteristic. First and foremost, it is a means for extracting a publicly laid claim over what happened in a given incident, what one’s intentions were, and what is to be done about it (see Preface); in other words, it is a method to provoke members of the *raij* to “fill in the blanks” of their exterior and interior worlds.

Consider the following paradigmatic example. In very late 2014, a few days after the Bodoland agitation on Christmas day (which led to 76 people being killed in acts of ethno-nationalist violence), an incident happened in Burha Mayong. Sometime late at night, a Karbi villager (Mr. P.) snuck into a “Miyān” (Bangladeshi Muslim) household in Ximalguri Suburi and attacked the *murobi*, Mr. Ali, with a *dao* (a machete-like knife). Mr. Ali immediately woke up, bloodied and confused, and was rushed to the hospital with the help of Dipon Kathar (the quintessential “big man” in Chapter 3), who had hired him to work in his rock-crushing mill and gave him land to build his house there. Later Mr. Ali was able to purchase more land with the money he made and began to farm several plots for rice cultivation. One that night, Mr. P. simply attacked and ran back home. The next morning, after everyone in Ximaulguri had got wind of what had happened, Dipon Deuta called a *raijmel* and brought Mr. P. in to defend himself and set the record straight. At this particular *raijmel*, which was quite legalistic, the police were present and so was the *bor roja*, *bor bangthai* and *deka bangthai*. Attempting to kill someone is an extremely rare occurrence in Mayong, but when it does occur, it is a matter that every figure of authority involves themselves in. Dipon Deuta presided over this *raijmel* and began his questioning by asking Mr. P. what happened. Here I reproduce the final portion of the *raijmel* (DK = Dipon Kathar; BB = Bor Bangthai; MP = Mr. P.; Bor Roja=BR):

DK: You came out from your house late last night. What did you think you would do?

MP: I watched the news [about Bodoland]. We have a foreigner problem (*bidexi problem tú asile*) in Assam, isn't it true? I knew that these Miyān here do not have documents and papers (*kagoz sagoz nai*); they came here to eat our land (*matti tú khaise amar*). So I wanted to chase them away.

DK: So you were Ø weren't you? [*Tuk heri lagise, neki?*]

MP: I was drunk.

DK: After that? You wanted to Ø him? [*Toi tekhetok heri...eito koribo bisarili?*]

MP: I wanted...to help our society (*xomaj*).

DK: Are you ULFA? No. You are of our *raij* (*amar rajor manuh*). Ø to him?  
[*Tekhetok...?*]

MP: I wanted...I mean...I was forced to do this for our country (*amar dexor karone eitú koribo logia hol*)....He has all this land now. What of our land?

DK: Nonsense (*Nonsins!*) We know that you sold 3 *bhiga* [1.2 acres] of land to Ali *bhaiti*. We know that you were angry because you did not get the price that you wanted. We know that you have been complaining about this. Say it, [what did you want to do] to him? [*Ko...tekhetok...?*]

MP: (*silence*)

BB: This is a simple matter, he must atone for his sin and give money to the family for their medical expenses.

DK: Yes. But, he also says he is doing something good; actually he is angry because he sold his land and could not bargain for a better price. Is this true [Mr. P.]?

MP: No, no...I was angry about *Miyan* living here. I did my duty.

BB: What duty? You tried to kill him because you were drunk and angry!!! Yes or no? (*Ki dayito? Toi moribo sesta korili karone nisa lagisile aru khong uthili, hoi ba na hoi?!?*)

...babble from the *raij*...

DK: Listen, listen, here is the matter. You must atone and pay the fine [of medical fees]. That is enough. Will you pay? Tell us, tell us, what will you do? Eh, eh? What will you do?

MP: I will pay, but [Mr. Ali] is not our people. He is an outsider (*teo bahiror manuh*). I do not think he should have the right to own land.

DK: You bought the land, didn't you? How much did you take for each *bigha*? You received...?

MP: I received 2 *lakh* [200,000 or approx. \$3,000 USD] for each.

DK: And, what will you do [with the money]? And what will you say to us? And, and?!

MP: (*silence*)

DK: Our venerable *bangthai* and *roja* are here. Only they have duty to banish [someone]. Your duty is to speak within the account (*Tur dayito je hisapot kotha path*). If you will say something else, say it...will you say it?

MP: I...I will pay.

BR: There is no disagreement here. He will pay the medical fees; he will also pay Rs. 500 and a vessel of alcohol as *ortho-dondo* to the Karbi *raij* for atonement. *Bangthai*, please note this in your *hisap*. Now we will close this matter.

With the king's injunction, the *raijmel* was closed. Notice, though, how the legalistic mode of Dipon Kathar's questioning turns on the capacity of the addressee [Mr. P.] to "fill in the blanks," much like a courtroom arena where legal representatives exhort witnesses through various affective, logical, and deceptive means. One thus might be tempted to see this interaction as a way of extracting a "confession" from Mr. P. Yet the moral sense here is something quite different. First of all, Dipon was using a common grammatical form in Oxomiya where transitive verbs and copula are dropped from speech, or replaced with the filler word "*heri*," and meant to be inferred from context.<sup>1</sup> What was being exhorted was not a statement of guilt, but the particular details of Mr. P.'s activity and what the *intentions* were behind them. Second, note that Mr. P. never verbally stated that he had harmed Mr. Ali. What was sufficient for the *raijmel* was that he agree to pay the fees and fines required of him. In fact, it did not even matter what Mr. P.'s ultimate intentions were with respect to guilt or innocence. Dipon acted as if he already knew what they were anyway. What ultimately mattered was that Mr. P. *respond* to Dipon egging him on by publicly laying claim to some motivation or intention (cf. Keane 2016: 128–30). In other words, what was vital here is that Mr. P. open up his interiority in some form or another, providing an account of and taking responsibility for his own *secret* thoughts. Whether

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<sup>1</sup> Oxomiya is most often a "zero copula" language, but it can also be "zero transitive verb" language. I haven't been able to find a reference to any other "zero transitive verb" language in linguistics literature, but it does occur in colloquial Oxomiya quite often, especially during symmetrical pair-part conversation.

the utterances were lies or some form of deception didn't matter—what mattered was that Mr. P. “speak within the account.” In other words, he had to bring what is *so'rong*—i.e., in disagreement with common understanding—into the commons, the *raij*, the site of performative agreement.

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In order to understand how the logic of speciation works in Mayong (Chapter 4), we had to attend to critical events beyond shared accounts, namely annual flooding. The species management during flooding allowed us to see how certain ethnicized *qua* speciated relations make their way into the shared account. It also gave us a “*goroka* register” wherein the mythopoeic politics of Mayong became patterned across various social domains. To understand how the logic of exhortation works, we must also go beyond the shared account. This time, however, we will not attend to humorless critical events, but to “ex-citational” (see Mazzarella 2017/Forthcoming) micro-events in ordinary life—to energetic moments that function “to relax tensions; a live-and-let-live that gives respite from deportment that is too stiff” (Mauss [1928] 2013: 327). In other words, we must turn to jokes and play in the interactional order.

The interactional order in Mayong is rife with *exhortatory speech*, though not always *exhortatory narratives*. Favret-Saada (2015: Chapter 2) has explored the latter with respect to processes of “dewitching” among family farms in France’s Bocage region. Her discovery of these kinds of narratives—which she opposes to “exemplary narratives”—involve a bewitched family provoking a dewitcher to prove or demonstrate her/his capacity to counteract witchcraft. The process of extracting information here, however, results from the failure of a previous dewitcher to fix the problem. Effectively, a new dewitcher’s performative efficacy depends upon hearing stories about what other dewitchers tried and failed to do before. Upon being exhorted,

the new dewitcher then goes about showing what went wrong and tries to display more “force” to reveal a bigger picture of what is going on (like walking around the farm and then locating and *demonstrating* signs of more subtle and dangerous witchcraft). Good responses to an exhortation, in this context, could be understood through what I referred to in the Preface as “downstream transvaluations,” which build on events from a previous context in order to draw matters into issues of larger and more general concern (though not by any denuding of the new context in which significance is fleshed out). And, crucially in the dewitching process, the reason why exhortatory narratives thrive is because the “dewitchment” is *incomplete*: the crisis is still ongoing (ibid.: 21).

I wish to underline this connection Favret-Saada makes between exhortation and incompleteness, for it allows us to see the arena where *exhortatory speech* and *exhortatory narrative* combine in Mayong. This arena is what I pointed to in the Preface as *jukowa* (literally: “foreplay”): a genre of play where one incites or exhorts another person into a humorous or thoughtful response, and who in turn incites with further excess. And this is not just a situation of pragmatic speech, but one where the overall narrative construed underscores a necessary sense of incompleteness. To be clear, *jukowa* is not a “model” for the kind of exhortation found in the shared account, but it does exist as a “*goroka* register”—a patterned or analogic site of affinity for the necessary labor of keeping shared accounts both exhortatory and incomplete in their openness. For the remainder of this chapter, we shall explore *jukowa* in its myriad qualities and then turn to the ethical dimension it entails, which I will argue is precisely the “hook” that makes exhortation the crucial element of irresistibility in the shared account.

### “This is (not) *Jukowa*”

*Jukowa* is a genre built of jokes without punchlines, verbal play without conclusion, and this without contradistinction to everyday life. In social structural terms, and like the famed “joking relationships” among kin (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195), it is based on symmetrical pair-parts (both parties “tease” or “exhort” each other) and involves a mix of “social conjunction and social disjunction.” *Jukowa* pairs align themselves intimately, but the form their verbal play takes is of one-upmanship. In this balance, social superiority is both acknowledged and effaced, leading to the dominant sense of what *jukowa* is: a quotidian incitement to further action rather than a consummate action in and of itself. Literally meaning “foreplay,” *jukowa* is all about the conditional, the deferred, a playful communication that oscillates, peaks, slumps, but never fulfills or finalizes. As such, it draws participants into the “who,” “when,” and “how” of eliciting a future action—and what the entailments of that future action might be.

In linguistic terms, the utterances of *jukowa* are explicit performatives, or illocutionary speech acts, meaning that they do not just say or describe, but rather *do* something...and what they do is change the social reality in which they are uttered. Yet, their felicity—if we may even call it that—is fitful and almost footless, hanging precariously on the capacity of the “receiver” of *jukowa* to act in response with incremental incitement: in other words, inciting with more provocation than was initially received. If there is never a provocative response then there is no *jukowa*. Yet, in the same logic, even if one responds with excess to an initial *jukowa* a lifetime later, then there is *jukowa* and it still remains open-ended until the next counter-response.<sup>2</sup> Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> This temporal logic of *jukowa* was explained to me by an informant from Xoti Bheti and is as follows: “If two people have good memory, then one can *jukai* [in return] many, many years later.” Logically, this statement makes sense but neither my informant nor anyone else I inquired about this temporal gap could provide an example of a *jukowa* that unfolded more than a year or two after the first incitement. The question remains as to how such a long-interval *jukowa* would work unless the parties recreated the initial *jukowa* set-up, prompting the memory of what remained un-responded to (although see the section below on “The *Mon Jai* Incident”). Yet, my informant’s logic was not meant to exemplify but to underscore the point that there can be gaps between incitement and counter-

with action never being fully consummated, we might instead say that *jukowa* does not depend on conditions of felicity or infelicity at all, but is rather entirely oriented toward the uncertainty of a future action, a future provocation that may or may not unfold.

In the spirit of ethnographic theory, I want to showcase the semiotic and pragmatic dimensions of *jukowa* in order to ground—indeed, *demonstrate*—a two-sided sub-argument in this chapter about the role of exhortatory play and inconsummate action; not only in Mayong, but in comparable forms of social interaction elsewhere. The argument is as follows:

(1) On one hand, analyzing the place and dynamism of *jukowa* in the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual world of Mayong (in particular) and in Assam (more generally) reveals something rather profound about what open-ended and exhortatory play does for a people who self-diagnose their region as suffering from a “durable disorder” (Baruah 2005; cf. Chapter 1, this thesis). We will call this the ethnographic side of the argument. This argument is partially, yet unabashedly, Durkheimian, for it reveals contemporary events of *jukowa* as a means to create or potentiate social and cosmic order out of the detritus of political segmentation, state violence, “natural” disasters (see Chapter 4), and a host of other historically given maladies. *Jukowa*, with its exhortatory form, is thus an interactional method for eliciting the same kind of cosmographic unity that the shared account sets out to create. Yet, I also make a clear break from the Durkheimian tradition in that the potential solidarity intimated by *jukowa* neither presupposes an existing social whole nor does it promise an experience or actualization of the same. Rather, the

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incitement. This time-lag also raises the question of how reciprocity is implied in *jukowa*. As Bourdieu ([1980] 1990: 6) notes of the distinction between giving and gift-exchange, “the interval between gift and counter-gift is what allows a relation of exchange that is always liable to appear as irreversible, that is, both forced and self-interested, to be seen as reversible.” For Bourdieu, “reciprocity” that is forced and self-interested is the objective truth of the gift, whereas the time lag between gift and counter-gift masks that truth in a socially necessary misrecognition of “disinterested and voluntary” free-gifts. In *jukowa*, a time-lag functions not so much as a veil to cover reciprocity (since a counter-incitement is necessary for *jukowa* to be intelligible as such), but as a resource for lived experiences that can make a *jukowa* more enjoyable. Again, see section below, “The *Mon Jai* Incident.”

order intimated by *jukowa* is explicitly “cosmogonic”—like the processes of speciation described in Chapter 4, it is only a beginning for collective experience, and never an end. It thus performs a very real wish for relatedness that recent political and economic troubles have rendered tenuous, and the shared account makes real in its cosmographic archive. And yet, in the very performance of this wish—its optative mood—the grounds for a shared cosmology shift and turn, provoking new possibilities for mutual belonging, and decomposing or recomposing others. Thus the kinds of exhortations we see in *jukowa* can unmake the world as much as they potentiate a shared experience of a shared whole.

(2) Accordingly, an analysis of *jukowa* takes us right into the heart of “speech act” theory and the performative turn in anthropological linguistics. With a performative thrust that resists consummation, *jukowa* demonstrates something rather problematic with a casual acceptance of “felicity” and “infelicity” as the states that performatives must necessarily result in. We’ll call this the theoretical side of the argument. *Jukowa* provides a lens for rethinking how assumptions about “felicity” and what actually counts as a “speech act” have been smuggled into philosophies of language and linguistic anthropology. Here, what we can learn from *jukowa* is that our world, too, is filled with acts that are neither felicitous nor infelicitous—not only because they have no clear conclusion, but because *open-ended incitement* and *mutual engagement*, the “stuff” of *jukowa*, may be the most opportune way people orient themselves toward an “ethical” dimension in everyday “second person” alignments (see Darwall 2006; Keane 2016). This “ethical” dimension is nothing more and nothing less than allowing ourselves to be surprised, shocked, and motivated by others’ provocations made in the “first person.” In Oxomiya, these states and their reciprocal subject perspectives are synthesized in the adjective *asorit*. In what I will call “*asorit* ethics” in the concluding reflections in this chapter, we shall explore how intention

revelation and exhortatory communication creates an irresistible attachment to the other—and to the shared account at large—because of the uncertainty of what the other will say and do.

In sum, this chapter reveals the benefits of an ethnographic and linguistic analysis that turns our attention to the open-ended entailments of performative acts, to their contradictions and ambivalent temporalities, and to the communicative labor we put into changing our social realities by exhorting others. But *jukowa* is not oriented explicitly to this end...or really to *any* end. Accordingly, “a shared experience of a shared whole” is not something articulated in language in or about *jukowa*. What does appear are indices of that *potential* experience. That is to say, *jukowa* points toward the possibility of a “durable order” by cultivating it through its own poetic forms, but never making it explicit in content or in metadiscourse on the act itself. To understand this point, we also need to understand what acts of *jukowa* metacommunicate.

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In Gregory Bateson’s (1972) famous essay on “play” and “fantasy,” he outlines how the utterance “this is play” is quite special in human communication. It is a performative utterance to be sure—meaning it changes the social situation at hand—but Bateson points out that this particular speech act also metacommunicates a secondary cognitive frame: namely, that of “not-play” (cf. Hamayon 2016). Consider “play fighting” among children—for example, what kids in the Midwest call “wrestling.” Play fighting not only indexes the act of *real* fighting, it mimics it. To “wrestle” means punching, kicking, body-slamming...that is, applying the real physical contact of actual wrestling or drunken brawls. Even with no intention to do harm, such is often inevitable. And, indeed, there are kinds of play fighting that are hard to distinguish from actual fighting: for example, WWE wrestling, which continues to create scandals for children who insist it isn’t fantasy. Play, in general, has this paradoxical element to it.

So does *jukowa*. In cultivating a kind “durable order” in poetic form, those who *jukai* (*jukai* being the verb form of the noun *jukowa*) with each other, mimic the very same offensive and argumentative language of “durable disorder.” In other words, it is verbal play that indexes the kind of inter-ethnic hostility and bellicosity that, under other conditions, might manifest as real enmity and war. Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 196) makes a very similar point with respect what is classically known as “joking relationships,” and points out that accordingly any theory of joking relationships must necessarily account for this dual frame:

The joking relationship is a peculiar combination and antagonism. The behaviour is such that in any other social context it would express and arouse hostility; but it is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is a pretence of hostility and a real friendliness. To put it in another way, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect. Thus any complete theory of it must be a part of, or consistent with, a theory of the place of respect in social relations and in social life more generally.

We will explore the question of respect and disrespect below, but both Bateson and Radcliffe-Brown reveal that there is a fine line between “joking” (or “play”) and the “real thing” it is mimicking. Although rare, it does occasionally happen that *jukowa* itself collapses into hostility. Because the genre is often structured around turn-taking of insult and offense, a real event of *jukowa* sometimes cannot take hold—especially between strangers. This doesn’t mean that it fails in such contexts, *per se*, but that its setup and flow risk being disrupted by latent anger and hostility—so what *could have been jukowa* (even if someone makes it explicitly clear what is going on by using the performative utterance “this is *jukowa*”) becomes a *kajiya*, a “hostile confrontation,” or quite blatantly *not jukowa*.

We will unpack the concrete linguistic and performative elements of *jukowa* in ethnographic examples further below, but for now it is helpful to illuminate how latent hostility can cause a *jukowa* to end abruptly. Consider the following “disrupted *jukowa*” that collapsed into *kajiya* during an event of meat distribution among the Karbi *raij*. One late winter morning, a

wild boar came charging out of the forest near Gaonor Mur *suburi* in Burha Mayong and then huddled in the water of a rice paddy field. With a quickness I have only elsewhere observed when a fire needs to be put out, men from Gaonor Mur and nearby Ximalguri *suburi* grabbed their hunting spears and chased the boar out to the flood plains. About an hour later, they returned from the hunt with a successful kill. The boar was taken to the *deka bangthai*'s courtyard and boys from the *deka raij* were called in to do the butchering and meat distribution (see Figure 5.1).



**Figure 5.1.** The Karbi *deka raij* butchering the meat of a wild boar killed in a collective hunt.

A successful hunt like this is a cause for great celebration as all Karbi households in the village will receive a portion (*bhag*, here meaning 500 grams) of the meat. All, that is, except for those households that have a broken taboo “stuck” to them (*napai logai diyar ghor*). Accordingly, the duty of the *deka bangthai* and his “youth public” on this occasion is not only to butcher the meat, but to compose a shared account that tallies up all the households listed by their patriarch’s (*murobi*) name and assign them a “full *bhag*” (500 grams), “half *bhag*” (250 grams), or nothing at all depending on how the broken taboo was dealt with (more on this below; see also Chapter 6 for comparative reflections). On this day, the *deka bangthai* put one of members of the *deka rajj*, Mr. G., in charge of writing all the household patriarchs’ names down. To recall who are marred by taboos and who were not, the *deka bangthai* needed to collect the ledgers from previous meat distributions. So, he went into his house to find them. While the *deka bangthai* was busy searching for the ledgers, Mr. G. stood up, called out to the *deka rajj* for a *rajmel* and then began to playfully mimic the “chiefly speech” of the *deka bangthai* whenever he runs a public meeting. Folding his hands for a formal greeting, he addressed everyone:

*Nomoskar rajj, moi phokotiya service! Ko, Ko. Kiman khabo sun?*<sup>3</sup>

[“Hello dear public, I am the bullshit service! Tell me, tell me, please. How much will you eat/drink?”]

Overlapping laughter and shouts of “*asorit!*” (“shocking!”) followed. In the chaos of the congregation, someone shouted “*Moi half!*” meaning “I will eat [or drink a] half!” It was an infectious and clever response, which—like all good jokes—turned on two simultaneous frames

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<sup>3</sup> As in Bengali, Oxomiya only has one verb form for “eating,” “drinking,” “smoking,” or really *consuming* anything—including emotions like *fear* or *joy* or engaging in sexual activity or spending money. This is the verb *kha*. Because of North Indian verbal repertoires that link the verbal suffix *kha* to “eating” only—and because of the increasing familiarity with other North Indian languages like Hindi and Urdu—“eating” has now become the primary referent for *kha* in contemporary Oxomiya; all other activities are metaphorical extensions of “eating” rather than “eating” being one particular kind of consumption.

of meaning: “half” meaning  $\frac{1}{2}$  *bagh* of meat due to a taboo being “stuck” to his household and “half” meaning the colloquial reference to a half-liter of alcohol. Others played along:

*Moiu half!*

[“I also (will eat or drink a) half!”]

*Moi full!*

[“I (will eat or drink a) full!”]

*Poisa nai, moi eta puwali!*

[“I have no money, I (will eat or drink a) baby (= ‘quarter liter of alcohol’)!”]

Before anyone could reciprocate the exhortation to Mr. G. with an incremental incitement, my friend Mr. D. (who will we see engaged in a different kind of *jukowa* below), stood up among the *deka raij*, raised his blood-covered hands, and quieted everyone down. Just like Mr. G. he began performing the role of the *deka bangthai*, using the “analogic king style” of exhortation found in *raijmel* during the creation of shared accounts (see Chapter 3). In anticipation, everyone knew this would be some kind of explicit provocation as Mr. D. is known for being particularly scatological or sexually vulgar when he cracks wise. As he raised his hands and quieted everyone down, he addressed the *raij* in an almost perfect kingly register, but with his own idiomatic incitement:

*Munnoniya Xabapati Mahoday. Nomoskar, raij. Moi Setok...!*

[“Salutations gentlemen and ladies. Hello dear public, I  $\emptyset$  the penis!”]

Laughter roared and cries of “*asorit!*” rang out from the *raij*. But this was no ordinary “dick joke.” Like we saw above in Dipon Kathar’s *raijmel*, Mr. D.’s utterance lacked a transitive verb (here implied by the affix “-ok”). This was the exhortatory framing mechanism immanent to the joke. Like all *jukowa*, he was inciting others to “fill in the blank” (ambiguously so). If he was using a zero copula, then he could have meant that his name was “Setok” (literally “to the penis”),

which is funny but certainly not provocative. Or, if following Mr. G.'s incitement to fill in the blank data in the *raijor hisap*, he could have meant “will eat”—as in “I will eat the [boar’s] penis.” This would have been a great joke, but it would have been a self-contained one that broke with the previous *jukowa* incitement. Or, finally, being a replication of Mr. G.’s *melkie*-style greeting, it was mostly likely an incitement itself—that is to say, a true act of *jukowa*—for any other person to fill in an absent transitive (and most likely future tense) verb and carry the incitement further. What will he do (or what did he do, or what does he do) with or to this unspecified penis?

A drunk onlooker from a nearby village, who was in Burha Mayong for some work, had been observing the *jukowa* building up from the sidelines. This man was familiar to the Karbi *raij* and would often join locals in afternoon drinking when he was around. On this particular day, he was doing just that at a nearby house. During all the commotion, he walked up to the *deka rajj*, who were still laughing and butchering the boar. Getting everyone’s attention, he took up Mr. D.’s exhortation as a “fill-in-the-blank” *jukowa* incitement, and tried his hand at taking the incitement further (as customary *jukowa* goes). Drunk and stammering in broken Hindi smattered with Oxomiya, he barely uttered an incremental provocation:

*Namaste, kela...main photo ki service. T-t-toi setok khayega, hai ki ni? Mere set se shuru sakegaaaa. Ek photo...kinch...loi lom? Sob Facebook mein dekhegaaaa! Tribal hero tu ban jayegaaaa!*

[Hello, *kela*, I’m a photographer. Y-y-you will eat the penis, won’t you? You can beegiinn with my penis. May I...take...a photo? Everyone will see it on Facebook! You will become the tribal heroooo!”]

Mr. D. looked puzzled and no one laughed. Another young member of the *deka rajj*, however, was not puzzled at all. He did not take this exhortation as a sub-par and humorless counter-provocation (or counter-*jukowa*), but rather as an insult to the Karbi people. He shouted

at the outsider angrily, claiming that his “useless Hindi” was a serious lack of respect to Tribal people, and then ordered him to leave the village before he gets bashed up. The outsider, who was visibly drunk, shouted back, “*Eituuu jukowa ne kiii?*” (“This *iiiiis jukowa*, isn’t *iiiiit?!!!*”). However, his slurred metacommunicative explication did not work—in fact, it seemed disingenuous given his inebriated state—and the two began to argue violently about why he addressed Mr. D. explicitly as a “Tribal hero.” Soon other young men got involved. A fight was about to break out when the *deka bangthai* came running out of his house and broke everything up. The outsider walked back to his friends who were still drinking, and the *deka bangthai* demanded that the *deka raij* get to work on the accounting.

Yet the exhortations were not over. The *deka bangthai* was unable to produce the ledgers from the previous event of meat distribution and thus needed the *deka raij* to start recalling by memory all households marked by an as-yet unpaid *ortho-dondo* or “misbehavior fine” (see the section in Chapter 3, “Voice and Solicitude”). Those households would get no *bhag* of the boar meat. Those marked by the fine, but who have paid their penalty, would receive  $\frac{1}{2}$  *bhag* (250 grams). Those households without any *ortho-dondo* transgressions would get a full *bhag* (500 grams). Thus the *deka bangthai* stood up, his hands folded, and addressed his *raijs* as follows:

Today, *raijs*, we are fortunate to have this meat which we are now chopping. It is the loving duty of the *deka raij* to cut and distribute this meat to our people. But instead you fight and laugh. That man [points to outsider walking away] is your “elder brother” (*kokai*) and your guest (*alohi*). You must give him honor even if he spits in your face. This is our custom (*oitijyo*). What he said was disrespectful and we have sent him away. But we must also respect/honor our traditions (*Kintu, amar paramaparak xonman tu dibo logia hobo*). So we must now gather together as the *hisap* cannot be made without your work (*kam-sam, kaj-saj*). This is also our custom (*otijyo*). Please tell me who will take half and who will take none. You surely remember who has sinned and who hasn’t...who has paid *ortho-dondo* and who hasn’t. I am the chief of the *deka raij*, so you must tell me...tell me, how much will your house eat?

I began to laugh, because the *deka bangthai*'s exhortation was almost identical to Mr. G.'s mimicked voicing of the former, but no one else seemed to think it was funny. Instead, the *deka raij* acquiesced and several boys sat down with Mr. G. to begin composing the account. First, a list of all household heads were written down and then names were called out one by one. The work was quick and, in the end, the *rai*j was able to portion out the meat adequately and reserved the rest for a collective feast that they enjoyed when the distribution was over.

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As one can see, the iconicity of inter-ethnic violence (what I am calling “durable disorder,” from Sanjib Baruah) is nothing so direct or explicit in the content *jukowa*. When scalar homology does happen, it hangs on the mobilization of implicit (yet thoroughly concrete) signs that “call to mind” political life. Here, it was not only the signifier “Tribal,” but the awkward code-switching into broken Hindi by an outsider that set off the argument which almost led to fist-a-cuffs. At the feast held after the meat distribution, Mr. D. explained the *kajiya* as follows: “He [the outsider] tried to act like a big man when he tried to *jukai* me, speaking Hindi and such, but he is just a drunk [*modahi*] who thinks Tribal people are ignorant.”

This lack of explicit iconicity, moreover, has much to do with the way *jukowa* metacommunicates yet another cognitive frame—a *temporal* one, to be exact. Recall that *jukowa* literally means “foreplay,” and in this crucially *optative* mood. It signals that the actions of *jukowa* are really “prep-work”—they are stimulants for situations not yet manifest, acts of encouragement, provocation, and, exhortation...you get the point. As in Georg Simmel's ([1923] 1984) marvelous essay on “flirtation,”<sup>4</sup> provocation and exhortation here works hand in hand

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<sup>4</sup> My sincere thanks to Constantine Nakassis for directing me to this article and the resonance of “flirting” with *jukowa* pragmatics.

with semi-concealment, allowing *jukowa* to exist in a “state of *perhaps*” where real future possibilities are laid out. And, the moment any decision on what to do is made, *jukowa* (like flirting) simply evaporates and becomes something else. In other words: if flirting turns into what it figurates (a sexual relationship) then it is negated; if *jukowa* turns into what it figurates (violence and hostility) then it is negated.

Put simply, *jukowa* does not consummate, it only incites and it *must* incite. If *jukowa* concludes, it is no longer *jukowa*. If *jukowa* trails off into a *real* violent encounter, it isn’t *jukowa* anymore; and, since *jukowa* necessarily exists in a “state of perhaps,” any sudden interjection of mutually understood and very real enmity suggests that the exchange was probably not *jukowa* to begin with. This will become clearer as I proceed, but we might sum up this initial exegesis by remarking in more precise terms: *jukowa* communicates a conditional voice alongside the optative mood, as in the following: “If we were to start doing something, then how would we go about doing it?” (see Table 5.1).<sup>5</sup>

**Table 5.1.** The metacommunicative frames of play and *jukowa*.

“This is Play”	“This is <i>jukowa</i> ”
Metacommunicates the cognitive frame “this is not play”	Metacommunicates the cognitive frame “this is not <i>jukowa</i> ”
E.g. “play fighting” indexes <i>real</i> fighting, indeed it is <i>fighting</i> while <i>not fighting</i> at the same time. Play is thus paradoxical.	E.g. <i>jukowa</i> indexes <i>real</i> “durable disorder,” indeed its <i>order</i> takes the form of <i>disorder</i> . <i>Jukowa</i> is thus paradoxical.

<sup>5</sup> Compare here with Eleanor Ochs’ (1973) description of *kabary*, a kind of ceremonial speech in Madagascar, where the actual ritual is metapragmatic: It involves participants discussing, “If we were to do the ritual, then this is how we would go about doing it.”

Table 5.1, continued.

	<p><i>Jukowa</i> also metacommunicates a <i>temporal</i> frame. As “foreplay,” the frame signifies an action that is incomplete and only a <i>precedent</i> for further action;</p>
	<p>thus implying the second-order cognitive frame: “If we were to start doing something, then how would we go about doing it?”</p>

### Foreplay and Unmoored Kinship

The comparison to Simmel’s notion of “flirtation” is useful here in that “foreplay” has a literal— if largely repressed—dimension in *jukowa* acts. Violence is not the only potential effect of *jukowa*; in fact, violence is only one domain that explicitly *jukowa* indexes. There is another. Only certain kinds of people can *jukai* with each other because of what it might lead to. As far as the explicitly commented upon situation goes, people will happily enumerate a list of who can and cannot be *jukowa* partners. For those one cannot *jukowa* with, reference is made to blunt concepts like “honor/respect” (*xonman*) or “my own” (*nijor*). For those one can *jukowa* with, no explicit reason is given. Yet, once enumerated, it becomes clear that the implicit reasoning is that *jukowa* is allowed with someone with whom you can share intimacy without the risk of breaking sexual or social taboos. The sexual taboo implied here turns on the over-solicitude of intimacy; the social taboo implied here turns on the over-solicitude of a “safe distance.” Consider the following list of permitted *jukowa* partners and what the shape of their *jukowa* relationship normatively should be:

- 1.) Young men who are friends, consociates, or strangers (symmetrical)
- 2.) Young women who are friends, consociates, or strangers (symmetrical)
- 3.) Same generations among non-kin and affines (symmetrical)
- 4.) Alternating generations among non-kin and affines (symmetrical, but rare)
- 5.) Lovers (symmetrical, but risky if *jukowa* mimics too much hostility)
- 6.) Post-Menopausal Women (*ai*) with Unmarried Men (*deka*) (largely asymmetrical)

7.) Uterine Nephew (*bhagin*) with Maternal Uncle (*mama*) (largely asymmetrical)<sup>6</sup>

Here, then, is a list of what we might call “partners in avoidance” (Stasch 2002: 336; Graeber 1997: 696) who invariably *cannot jukai* with each other and on what locally explicated basis:

ADJACENT GENERATIONS AMONG KIN

- 1.) Children and parents (*xonman*, “honor”)
- 2.) Nephews/nieces with paternal aunts/uncles (*xonman*, “honor”)

ADJACENT GENERATIONS AMONG NON-KIN

- 1.) Juniors and seniors who refer to each other in alternating kin terms (*xonman*, “honor”)
- 2.) Juniors and seniors in a relationship of *adhi potyo* or “ownership” (*xohai*, “solicited help”)

OTHER RELATIONS

- 1.) Spouses (potential *kajiya*, “hostility”)
- 2.) Siblings (*logor aru nijor*, “connected and one’s own” = too intimate)
- 3.) Patrilineal cross-cousins (*logor aru nijor*, “connected and one’s own” = too intimate)
- 4.) Parallel cousins (*logor aru nijor*, “connected and one’s own” = too intimate)

We may notice that the only relations that index the risk of taking “foreplay” so far that it might turn into *the actual thing* are those relations in which sexual taboos are the most probable and intimacy is explicitly avoided (*logor aru nijor*). The others relating to adjacent generations have a similar logic in that their relation of avoidance is socially *extimate* (to borrow a term William Mazzarella [2013: 157]), expressing a double-relation between the external (distance of rank) and the intimate (close kin). This extimate relationship thus “blocks the full potential of an integrated performative dispensation” (ibid.) that *jukowa* aims to unlock.

All this means that *jukowa* is largely homosocial, largely performed within the same or alternating generations, and never performed among adjacent generational kin, except, and this is

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<sup>6</sup> The avuncular relationship is understood as an affinal one between adjacent generations, and is the only exception for adjacent generational *jukai*. It is often used metonymically to describe any type of *jukowa*. Note, however, that only the uterine nephew should incite the *jukowa* in the first instance, otherwise it could be confused with actual aggression on the part of the maternal uncle.

central to understanding the logic of *jukowa*, from a sister's son to a mother's brother. Indeed, in many contexts, I've heard acts of *jukai* referred to as "*mamar eituk dhemali*" ("having fun at the maternal uncle's expense") or "*mama-bhagin kore*" ("doing the mother's brother / sister's son thing"). This, like a *jukowa* happening between a post-menopausal woman and an unmarried man (which I will discuss below), is largely asymmetrical—and by this I mean that incitement flows "down" in rank: from the sister's son to the mother's brother, and from the post-menopausal woman to the unmarried man. The lower-ranked *jukowa* partners can and should incite back with an excessive exhortation, but with a lesser degree of insult and vulgarity.

This deserves more discussion, for what I would like to suggest is that these two "permitted" yet largely asymmetrical *jukowa* partners are actually connected—and part of what might be called the "cosmic family romance" in Mayong.

At least since the 1920s, following H. A. Junod's ([1912] 1924) work on the BaThonga in Southern Africa, the "avuncular relationship" has been noted to be a particularly prevalent relation of the "joking" type in societies with patrilineal descent groups preferring matrilineal cross-cousin marriages, whereby the uterine nephew (UN) not only takes a license of abuse toward his maternal uncle (MU), but demands various favors and services from him almost shamelessly (Hocart 1915; Rattray 1923; Radcliffe-Brown 1924; Mauss [1928] 2013).<sup>7</sup> The special relationship between the MU and the UN has cognates all over the world, though not all are uniform in how their particular relationship unfolds. Nevertheless, a common theme can be distilled from those societies having an asymmetrical relationship between the MU and the UN. Citing Junod, Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 204) observes that the "in Tonga it is said that the sister's

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<sup>7</sup> "According to Radcliffe-Brown, the term 'avunculate' covers two antithetical systems of attitudes. In one case, the maternal uncle represents family authority; he is feared and obeyed, and possesses certain rights over his nephew. In the other case, the nephew holds privileges of familiarity in relation to his uncle and can treat him more or less as his victim." (Lévi-Strauss 1967b: 39)

son is a ‘chief’ (*eiki*) to his mother’s brother, and Junod quotes a Thonga native as saying ‘The uterine nephew is a chief! He takes any liberty he likes with his maternal uncle.’” Generally, there is a sense of hierarchical superiority on the part of the UN. Mauss ([1928] 2013: 329) suggests this might have to do with the “mythical position” each individual has in a clan, being *reincarnations* of previously senior generations. I’m not sure this argument is defensible cross-culturally, but what Mauss notes elsewhere as the ultimate “religious inequality” (ibid.: 330) to which asymmetrical relations correspond has marvelous resonance in Assam. I will return to this below.

In Mayong, as with elsewhere in central and upper Assam, a uterine nephew’s relationship to his mother’s brother is glossed as the “double-mother” (*mama = ma 2x*). The significance here is that the intimacy and externality is doubled. First, he is a double-affine: through the mother and potentially through his daughter. Second, if a mother is an “extimate” figure (avoided yet intimate), then the mother’s brother is twice that. He is the “male representative of the female principle” (Mauss [1928] 2013: 330; cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1924), creating an ambiguous situation in which one can demand more from a mother’s brother than they would ever risk demanding from a mother; at the same time, he is even more distant than the mother because he belongs to a different patriline (mothers, in most Assamese kin reckonings, are *incorporated* into their husband’s patrilines). And the “female principle” in Mayong is reckoned precisely in terms of being *the* divine source of all prosperity—the mother goddess—the hostess of Mayong who is to be “regularly plundered” (cf. Hocart 1915). Such plundering occurs through sacrifices (patronized by the king), sorcery (a risky collaboration), or oracles (see below). Yet, in a more fundamental sense, one can also access the prosperity of the

mother through the MU who ideally should give a daughter in marriage (even if that preferential ideal is slowly becoming a phenomenal impossibility these days).

Given Mayong's diversity when it comes to kinship organization (especially in terms of descent groups and preferential forms of alliance), there is nothing so simple as a general or hard-and-fast rule with regard to the avuncular relationship, let alone *jukowa* pairs. Yet, across ethnic and religious divisions in Mayong (and, indeed, across Assam), the *mama-bhagin* (MU-UN) relation is often characterized as being "*uddondo*"—something "unbound" or "unmoored" from the formality and restrictions that adhere more strictly in other relations of descent and affinity. Now, since it is asymmetrical, the avuncular relation cannot be some sort of "model" for all forms of *jukowa*. But since it is the only non-alternating kin relation (and, given most instances being patrilineal in structure with avoidance taboos around parallel cousins, really an affinal one) that licenses *jukowa*, it does illuminate—in light of the other permitted *jukowa* relations—that a degree of moral distance is necessary in order for *jukai-jukai* to unfold.

I refer to this moral distance as "unmoored kinship." Mutuality of being, in Sahlinsian shorthand, remains implied in *jukowa* encounters. As long as exhortation is going on in *jukowa*, the relation remains consubstantial in action and thus retains a sense of a united, if accidentally developed, destiny (see Chapter 6). Yet what is "unmoored" is the amity and avoidance implied in that relation of mutuality. Here we can see a resonance to Freud's ([1908] 1959) notion of the "family romance." Freud's sketching of this particular phenomenon concerns a period in childhood development when a child develops a "phantasy" that he or she may be adopted and that the parents who have nurtured him or her are phonies and objects of scorn. Seemingly a result of dwindling affection and care—a necessary stage in maturation—"the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has

such a low opinion and of replacing them by others, occupying, as a rule, a higher social station.” (ibid.: 76) In what concerns Mayong and the “unmoored kinship” of *jukowa*, something similar happens in the way the MU is cathected as a “double-mother,” or effectively an ersatz one. Yet, even if he is the male representation of the feminine principle, the license a UN takes with him does not reveal a transference to a mother of a “higher social station.” After all, UN are higher ranked than MU (largely because of a lingering ideology that wife-taking lineages must be superior to wife-giving ones). Rather, and this is where we can return to Mauss’ point about “religious inequality” being the corresponding sense of asymmetrical joking pairs, the MU is a permitted access point to the *cosmic* principle represented by the mother: the divine goddess, the mother of all, who’s station is the highest there can be.

Consider the second permitted and largely asymmetrical *jukowa* pair: post-menopausal women inciting young, unmarried men. The most ubiquitous versions of this kind of *jukowa* occur in two settings: (1) a nightly *jukowa* where young men come to purchase rice liquor from elder women in Burha Mayong who are responsible for its production and sale; and (2) during rituals where women are “feast givers” for the *deka raij*. Regarding the first, young men seeking to buy rice alcohol at night must engage in a slightly embarrassing request: they have to go to the house of a female elder and tell her what they want. Here is an example I recorded in my fieldnotes one evening while sitting in one of the female elder’s houses:

*A young man, Mr. H., from Loonmati arrived on his motorcycle, parking it outside the gate and switched the light off. It took him about two minutes to finally walk up to the verandah where we were sitting. He looked at Mrs. K. [the elder woman], who was busy cutting tamol [areca nut] and didn’t say a word. After an awkward silence, Mrs. K. looked up and said “What do you want?” Mr. H. said, “20.” [meaning Rs. 20 worth of alcohol]. Mrs. K. shouted at him, “20 what? 20 girls? 20 kisses? I am busy. What do you need, tell me kela!” Sheepishly, Mr. H. specified, “....mod [alcohol]...” The conversation then unfolded as follows:*

*Mrs. K.: What, What do you need?*

*Mr. H.: Alcohol...alcohol...[mod....mod]*

*Mrs. K.: Yes, which one?*

*Mr. H. (quietly): ...Pokka [distilled liquor]...*

*Mrs. K. What is that? I didn't hear you...say it louder...*

*Mr. H. (a little louder): ...Pokka...*

*Mrs. K (projecting voice loudly): OH! POKKA! YOU WANT TO GET GOOD AND DRUNK, EH? [goes inside and grabs a plastic bag of distilled rice liquor worth Rs. 20, hands it to Mr. H., then caresses his hand] Will you come back for more? I expect you soon...[laughs].*

This playful yet sexually explicit exhortation also shows up in feasts sponsored by the *burhi raij* (public of elder women). For example, during rice transplanting season (*ruj dise*), the *burhi raij* are responsible for taking the matured *boro* paddy out to the larger and distant fields in the flood plains. Mid-day during their work, they provide a feast—namely of alcohol and pork—for the *deka raij* (public of unmarried men) to be eaten in a dry spot next to the fields. As a member of Burha Mayong's *deka raij*, I was invited to attend these feasts two years in a row. Both times and upon my arrival with the *deka raij*, the elder women immediately began taunting us with explicit gestures and dances, laughing, insulting, and exhorting us with sexual provocations (see Figure 5.2).

The problem, however, is that unmarried men cannot act upon this sexual exhortation or reciprocate the gesture; such would be both a sexual and social taboo. Instead they can only counter-incite the *burhi raij* by transforming their advances into a request for blessings (if cheekily so). In turn, the status of elder women is reinforced and the attachment to the feminine principle of prosperity is doubly-secured. Before men are married, then, it is the *burhi raij*—an alternate generation—who become their ersatz mothers, closer in proximity to divine prosperity that will secure the former's maturation into married men. And to access that prosperity, one has to accept their taunts as signs of their cosmic status.



**Figure 5.2.** A staging of a *jukowa* incitement from a post-menopausal woman to the author, an unmarried man, during the *rui dise* feast.

That status, too, is by no means abstract. Post-menopausal women have a sacred status in Assamese villages, becoming closer in identity with the mother goddess as they age. Once they are incapable of having any more children, they assume the generic title of *Ai* (“mother”). Yet any mundane “mother” they are not; instead, they become household renunciants and ritual masters—unbound from mundane obligations to kin and bound to the sacred obligations of *everyone*. With a nod to Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995) notion of the “impure sacred,” the *jukowa* these women deliver to young men is indeed transgressive and dangerous (a quasi-sexualized incitement of a mother to a son), but completely sacred as well since the generic force they

embody is the source of all life and prosperity (see Chapter 2). The older they get, the more sacred they become—all the way until one becomes a literal vessel for the divine mother: an oracle (also, *ai*). In Chapter 3, I mentioned that “oracles” (*ai*) ambiguously fit the bill as analogic kings because they are the only other figures in Mayong who can solicit the divine by becoming “god-persons,” but they are also, in the structure of Mayongian ritual, high priestesses. Thus, being both an embodiment of the mother deity and the one who conducts sacrifices for her, she embodies the duality of king and priest.

In Burha Mayong, there is only one *ai*, the eldest woman in the village (Figure 5.3). At all major prosperity rites—whether a kingdom-wide sacrifice to the goddess herself (*jethuwa puja*) or clan-based sacrifices to the ancestors through the goddess (*bornam*)—the *ai* becomes the resonant cosmic center. After being absorbed in collective devotional prayer (*nam*) for 20-30 minutes with the *burhi rajj*, she undergoes divine possession (*ai jokhoni*) by the mother goddess. Locally, this is construed simply as “the mother is coming” (*ai ahi ase*).

The speech of the mother during *jokh* (possession) is not *ex cathedra*—as with the king’s or chief’s speech during *rajjmel* and shared accounting (see Chapter 3)—but *ex caelis mandatus*. It is often incomprehensible to anyone but her closest associates. Although, when a serious concern is causing consternation among the men’s *rajj*, the mother can be asked basic interrogative questions that require only a “yes” or “no” (*hobo ba nahobo*) answer, as in “Will my aging daughter be married this year?” or “Will the floods destroy the summer crops?” Otherwise, her speech is necessarily mediated by the *burhi rajj* who, in turn, “translate” her injunctions to the king or his analogues.



**Figure 5.3.** The *ai* in Burha Mayong (center, front) undergoing divine possession (*ai jokhoni*) during the Karbi *bornam* ritual. Photograph by Mohsin Hussain.

Consider the Karbi *bornam*, an annual clan-specific rite of purification/transformation, held prior to the turning of each new year. This ritual concerns women first and foremost, who must be ritually cleansed prior to men doing the same after the turn of the new year. I will not go deep into much detail except to show that the ritual sequence dramatizes and plays out the mother's role as ultimate check against kingly authority. If the *gor bhanga* ceremonial discussed in Chapter 1 demonstrates the triumph of the masculine principle over the feminine, then rites like *bornam* reverse that triumph and add insult to injury. Here is the ritual sequence:

- 1.) First, at a chosen household, all heirloom jewelry and shawls of the married women in the clan are brought out as offerings to the goddess, who in turn blesses them with an enduring potency of fertility. At the same time, the 12 *devata* associated with the goddess [different from the 5 patron deities of Mayong] are given offerings as well.
- 2.) Second, an elaborate boat<sup>8</sup> is constructed from a banana tree trunk and inside it are placed two doves (*paro*). Sins or other polluting substances accrued upon the women of the clan

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<sup>8</sup> I asked several villagers—priests, *bor bangthai*, and *ai* included, why a “boat” is used as the ritual vessel for a *bornam*. The answer I received was the same. Because their ancestors lived in the hills, streams and small rivers

during the previous year are then ritually transferred to the doves. Once the doves are placed in the boat, a male clan member, followed by the eldest unmarried woman in the clan and then several members of the *burhi raij*, carries the boat and trays of offerings out to a *beel* (marsh) in the distant rice fields. There, an attending priest (*deuri*) opens the hatch on the side of the makeshift boat, pulls out the doves, and instructs them to fly away. The unmarried girl then sinks the boat and sets afloat all of the various offerings. Everyone then returns to the household. At this point, the purification element of the rite is completed.

- 3.) Third, the *burhi raij* and the *ai* begin chanting *nam* (devotional Vaishnavite hymns, here chanted to invoke the goddess). The *ai* slowly enters possession. As she bounces and writhes in *jokh*, one or two members of the *burhi raij* whisper crude *jukowa* style incitements in her ear exhorting the mother to tell them *what they need to do*. These exhortations are literally referred to as *jukowa*, but here take less of a meaning of “foreplay” and instead one of “teasing”—a more subtle provocation. When the mother finally speaks after being egged on for some time, her consociates in the *burhi raij* take her words of advice and “translate” them for the male elders in attendance, including the *bor bangthai*. I have witnessed a *bornam* three times and at each of them, the *ai* exhorts the male *raijs* for larger sacrifices, more piety among the men, and to make sure all fines are properly collected and the corresponding sins annulled. She scolds the male *raijs* for neglecting her and promises abundance if they become pious. And all this is interspersed with a repeated warning: should they not do as she says, she will curse the *raijs*, spread sickness, and spread enmity among the people.
- 4.) Finally, after the oracular exhortation of the male *raijs* is over, the *ai* and the *burhi raijs* continue with *nam* and the occasional moment of *jokh* until around 2–3:00 am. During the late hours, the *burhi raijs*, provoked by the *ai*, began dancing and cracking wise among each other, pulling men in from the sidelines and humiliating them with sexual provocations—the same kind of *jukowa* we saw above. Men in attendance refer to this as the women “having fun” (*maiki manuh furti korise*). The *ai*, however, refers to it as “punishment” (*xasti*).

The *ai* thus takes up the position of being the great exhorter—the only figure who can rightfully usurp the king, his analogues, and the injunctions they make. The feminine principle is thus the ultimate auditing force behind the shared account; it is her will to make and unmake it, her incitements that activate its quiescence and dynamism.

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A whole cosmic drama thus unfolds behind asymmetrical *jukowa*, and it resonates across other registers of exhortation—whether they be in symmetrical *jukowa* or in the exhortatory processes

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were the best paths out of the locality. Accordingly, a boat is the best method for transferring inauspicious substance beyond the spaces of domesticity.

of the shared account. As it concerns the base meaning of “foreplay,” we can see how the dual sense of “preparation for action” combines with the “excitement” or “calling forth” of another into an intimate, if ambiguous situation. How, then, does this translate into the linguistic features of *jukowa* in the interactional order?

### **Pro-vocative Speech**

At this point, it would help to analyze a transcribed, real-time example of symmetrical *jukowa* in Oxomiya (Figure 5.5). The sample I have for you here is between two male consociates from Burha Mayong. This specific form of *jukowa* is sometimes called *gorokhiya jukowa* [“cowherder foreplay”] because it employs the kind of language cowherders use with their cattle: the use of the intimate/inferior register of second person pronouns (*toi*) and their verb stems, as well as the overuse of gruff vocatives and imperatives. It is also the language of explicit insults that spill from mouths stinking of rice liquor: “fighting words” as we might call them. Affinitive by means of aggression, it is a rather standard form of *jukowa* that one might come across in rural Assam, especially in Mayong. Being an example of “natural” discourse, there is a lot of overlapping speech that I have been unable to display schematically.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The original recording can be accessed here:  
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/057gennsagy84cl/GorokhiyaJukowa.m4a?dl=0>.

<b>Mr. X:</b> O,	give me that booze,		give	me the damn booze,	<i>kela!</i>
	Give			booze!	
<b>Mr. D:</b>					<i>Kela,</i>
	give me a minute,	I will	give	you the damn booze,	<i>kela!</i>
<b>Mr. X:</b> O,	Give,				
	Give!				
<b>Mr. D:</b>	Take!				
<b>Mr. X:</b>	Give!				
<b>Mr. D:</b>	Take!				
	Look!	(I am)	bringing	you a damn glass,	<i>kela!</i>
<b>Mr. X:</b> Eh?					
<b>Mr. D:</b>	Hold on!	(I am)	asking	you	<i>kela!</i>
<b>Mr. X:</b> So	Grab			a glass,	
<b>Mr. D:</b>	Hold on!				
	Grab			a glass,	<i>kela!</i>
	Give!				
<b>Mr. D:</b> Now,	wait!	(I) need to ask		you.....	
<b>Mr. X:</b> No,	Go to			the booze!	
	Grab			the booze,	<i>kela!</i>
		I need to drink.			
<b>Mr. D:</b> Now,	give			me some	booze!
No					glasses!
		(You) said to drink		one	glass,
		I only brought		one	bottle
		(how) can I	give		any more?
so		how will I	give		(any more) <i>kela?</i>
		how will I	drink		And
					and...
<b>Mr. D:</b> ( <i>What are you going to do about</i> )					<i>it?</i>

**Figure 5.4.** Schematic translation and transcription of a *gorokhiya jukowa* revealing a structure of parallelism and repetition.

This *gorokhiya jukowa* occurred while I was conducting an interview with my friend Mr. D., whom we saw before in the “disrupted *jukowa*” above. We were drinking rice liquor (*sulai*) and eating fried pork when a drunken village elder, Mr. X., walked up to our little party and wanted to drink. My tape recorder was already on and it captured this moment.

In Figure 5.5, I have schematized the pair-part interaction in order to show the poetic structure of the *gorokhiya jukowa*—its “code” if you will. In this typically rural style of *jukowa*, there is a lot of repetition, and utterances parallel each other as long as both parties are speaking. Even if overlapping, the form is incredibly ordered. Note, too, how almost each utterance ends or

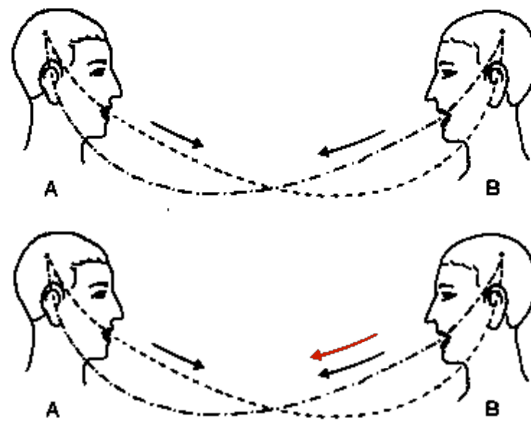
begins with the word “*kela*.” I will discuss the significance of this word below. For now, I want to illuminate two things that this *jukowa* reveals explicitly, which are in turn crucial features of any *jukowa*. (1) The first is that the content of the *dialogue* or the pair-part alignment (the beginning of the *jukowa*) shifts explicitly between what Roman Jakobson (1960) calls the “phatic” and “conative” functions of language. The “conative,” which engages the addressee directly is evident in the use of vocatives and imperatives (Give! Take! Look! Hold on!) and later in Mr. D.’s crucial interrogation at the end of the recording (and I’ll get to that in a moment). (2) Yet the “phatic” element itself restricted only to the pair-part interactions in the beginning of the exchange. We may call this an “alignment phase” of *jukowa*, where reciprocal turn-taking has a form and function not unlike a common greeting.<sup>10</sup> Even with gruff vocatives functioning conatively—the first two-thirds of this *jukowa* are really about what Malinowski (1936: 314–16) first called “phatic communion.”

As Malinowski first pointed out, this kind of communication is a balanced form of give and take, where social interaction, or the channel of communication itself in Jakobson’s terms, is the primary focus of the exchange. A kind of equivalence is assumed between both parties and, as one can see, the content is rather trite and uneventful—even if explicitly belligerent—right up until Mr. D. takes over the conversation. Like a very loud and potentially volatile form of small talk, the two men exchange *equivalent* demands and abuses, thereby “checking the circuit” in order to set up the eventual turn that all *jukowa* acts take. The argumentative form itself adds nothing to the fact that there is a lack of information being delivered on both sides, except to index (structurally and, perhaps, unconsciously...if at all) the potential violence of “durable disorder” lurking in the background.

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<sup>10</sup> My thanks again to C. Nakkasis on this point.

But then, the phatic element totally drops off when Mr. D. begins to incite Mr. X. with a host of questions, “holding the floor” so to speak, and challenging him with something more than just a back-and-forth argument / mutual alignment—here revealed by Mr. D’s repetition of the word “*aru*,” an additive conjunction meaning both “and” and “more.” Here, conversational overlap and formal (diagrammatic) equality terminate, with a monovocative and recursive syntax taking its place. Note, too, that Mr. D’s final utterance is the pronominal deictic *tekhet*, meaning “it” [in this context]. “It” is uttered as an interrogative in the pitch of uptalk, thereby provoking Mr. X. to fill in the blanks as to the actual question and subject matter at hand. Effectively, phatic communion and mutual alignment becomes incitement with excess, relative to the previous turn-taking (see Figure 5.5).



**Figure 5.5.** Normal phatic communication (above) and the excessive increment of *jukowa* (below). Figure adapted from Saussure’s *circuit de la parole* (Saussure 1915: Figure 4).

This is a second crucial feature of any *jukowa*. It is what gives the genre its own dynamism, an opening to incite further action. Becoming almost completely “conative” in function, with the “phatic” moment or “alignment phase” having either been dropped or having failed, *jukowa* depends on a carefully crafted surfeit, an increment, to put the addressee in a position to reciprocate...not only in kind, but with yet another excess so as to keep the *jukowa*

going, which should be followed by yet another higher-order excess, and so forth. All in all, it becomes an ordered trope of agonistic disorder, casually competitive...in other words, classic Batesonian symmetrical schismogenesis.

The directionality here, by the way, is remarkably similar to two comparative cultural forms. (1) The excess of *jukowa* signals to the recipient an almost competitive desire for a growth and continuation of *jukowa*—and, by extension, the growth of a relationship between the partners. Though the sought-after virtuosity of this competitive spirit is less a matter of command over language, *per se* (see Chapter 3), and rather a command over wit and exhortation (i.e., can the *jukowa* provoke, lest the recipient risk humiliation). In this way, it is quite similar to “the dozens”—the game of insult turn-taking, historically part of African American culture. Yet, “the dozens” is a rather codified and institutionalized genre, having the status of a full-fledged *game*. Its tempo is also much faster than *jukowa* and excessive wit in “the dozens” almost always leads to a conclusion (i.e., someone “winning the game” or the “calling of a tie”).

(2) Thus, a closer comparison would be with the logics of *moka* gift exchange in Highland Papua New Guinea where an incremental gift is given so an account between participants is never balanced (Strathern 1971). In *jukowa* a little extra is always uttered to provoke the receiver to respond with more wit, more imagination, more excess. In other words, equivalence is not just undesirable—it is actively evaded. There are no “ties,” so to speak. With a remainder hanging, even if communication stops, the account, so to speak, always remains open for the *jukowa* to continue indefinitely. It is precisely this logic of incremental incitement that makes processes of exhortation crucial to the making and unmaking of shared accounts.

The logic that unites *jukowa* to these other cultural forms, especially *moka* gift exchange, is beautifully captured in William Mazzarella’s (2017/Forthcoming) notion of *pro-vocation*. In

what I see as a further development of his casual reference to “incite-ful speech” (Mazzarella 2013: 135), which concerns the generative potentials immanent to public protests over the content of films, “pro-vocation” is “literally, a *calling forth*, an activation, a prompt to becoming.” (2017/Forthcoming [draft]: 8). The sense here is of something unexpected being triggered in the more prosaic act of provocation, which “mobilizes categories so that sameness and difference can be managed. . . . how do people deal with difference? Where do they put it? How do they ‘place’ unfamiliar things, making sense of them—even when they don’t quite fit—in terms of familiar things?” (ibid.). *Jukowa*, rooted in incremental incitement, is always *provocative* speech as much as it is a provocative encounter.

Now, to return to the structural features of *jukowa*, the failure or dropping off of the “phatic” function here is vital for the performative element of *jukowa* to take hold; that is to say, in order for the social reality of the situation to change. This happens in English, too; indeed it happens in our everyday discourse *all the time*. We might call instances like these “phatic blunders”—where small talk takes a turn toward something unexpected and uncertain. Consider Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2.** Normal phatic communion vs. “phatic blunders.”

Normal Phatic Communion	“Phatic Blunders”
Ms. A: “Thank you!” Mr. D: “You’re welcome!”	Ms. A: “Thank you!” Mr. D: “What do you <i>mean</i> ‘thank you’?”
Mr. D: “Hi, how are you?” Ms. A: “I’m fine, thanks for asking!” Mr. D: “You’re very much welcome!”	Mr. D: “Hi, how are you?” Ms. A: “I’m terrible. I just lost my job, I broke up with my partner, I’m depressed. Oh, what am I to do??”

In “phatic blunders,” as in *jukowa*, a sudden excess takes over and the directionality of communication becomes dependent on an addressee to deal with the sudden change in mood or tone, often in a delicate way. This requires creative labor on the part of the addressee since restoring phatic order may be a very sensitive undertaking, if even possible or desirable in such situations.

### **Footless Felicity**

If we were to analyze the performative element of *jukowa* in the terms provided by “speech act theory” in philosophy or anthropology, we would have to begin by charting the so-called “felicity conditions” that allow *jukowa* to hold, to do the work it sets out to do. J. L. Austin (1962) (or at least his interlocutors; see esp. Searle 1969) went so far as to treat this analytic move a “doctrine,” and here it is in distilled form:

*Performatives are neither “true” nor “false,” but can only be judged as to whether they are “felicitous” or “infelicitous.” Conditions for felicity vary according to different kinds of performative utterances. If conditions are met, then the act is “felicitous,” if the conditions are not met or interrupted or fail, then the act is “infelicitous.”*

Now, outlining the conditions of *jukowa* pragmatics, of what makes it performative, is precisely what I have been doing so far. Collectively, they are as follows: (1) incitement of a *jukowa* partner to respond, (2) an excess or increment added to the incitement in order to propel forward the dynamism of *jukowa*, (3) only people who share intimacy without the risk of breaking sexual or social taboos can perform *jukowa* together, and (4) a presupposition that the *jukowa* may continue on indefinitely as long as the partners are engaged...or, in other words, that *jukowa* as such can never be consummated. Even if communication stops or the channel is interrupted, the excess or remainder that makes *jukowa* what it is continues to hang until someone picks up on it for further incitement.

However, in the very same logic, if I had to locate “felicity” as the state that a *jukowa* performative results in, then where in the temporal unfolding would I find it? At the incitement with excess? In the response? In the response’s incitement with excess? Remember, we are dealing with something that literally means *foreplay*, so even though we are looking at real discursive action, the sense maintained throughout the act is most importantly framed as a *precedence* for future action. To repeat, ad nauseum, *jukowa* has no clear conclusion.

In classic examples of explicit performatives like “I know pronounce you man and wife” or “This court is adjourned,” felicity seems to be a rather valuable criteria for analysis. Indeed, the explicit finality—that is to say, the *ritual* finality—of these utterances makes it easy to see why a word that means both “happiness” and “appropriate ability” would be a good judge as to whether they succeed as performatives or not. But *jukowa* is different: it has no ritual finality and it cannot be limited to a single utterance. If it does “fail” then it is negated into becoming something else. Nevertheless it is obviously performative, even if implicitly so at times (in the *gorokhiya jukowa* where an utterance of “This is *jukowa*” [*Eito jukowa*] doesn’t happen, even retroactively; or in the “disrupted *jukowa*” during the distribution of wild boar meat where the metacommunicative utterance was made but did not effect the situation turning into a *kajiya*). *Jukowa*’s utterances and poetic mechanisms (like Mr. D’s “and...and...and...”) do as they say, and change the social reality at hand. Being in a state of *jukowa*, after all, is being in a state of play—a “state of perhaps” to use Simmel’s language.

**\*\*A brief parenthesis\*\***

I do not wish to overcook Austin here. Austin’s (1962) treatment of “felicity conditions” is, in the end, probably not as central to his treatment of performativity as many scholars would like us to think. Indeed, it might not be doctrinal at all (*pace* Searle). Yet, even if we consider Austin’s lectures non-synthetically (i.e., that he ends up leaving felicity conditions behind in favor of an adumbrative outline of the locutionary vs. illocutionary distinction, thus turning to uptake and

classes of utterance), I still find it rather curious that the dimensional contrast of “happiness/unhappiness” remains necessary for him to unpack what “illocutionary force” is (however adumbrated) and how a performative actually holds together. And even if we forget about Austin and felicity conditions altogether, we still have to confront our presuppositions about what “counts” as an act and what its conditions of possibility are. As analysts of linguistic performativity, we have to ask ourselves: *do we need better tools to deal with acts that have no circumscribed finality, or do we already have a sufficient toolkit on hand?*

As per Austin and the more general rubric of “uptake,” performatives can always be defeasible—i.e., revised or annulled—after their utterance. Thus, they always have temporality built into them. As I mentioned earlier, *jukowa* can slip into actual fighting (whether from a lack of understanding or latent hostility on the part of the recipient/addressee), thereby negating the fact that *jukowa* was really going on to begin with. It also might be defeasible through sheer indifference. In fact, the example of *gorokhiya jukowa* outlined above went no further than what was recorded and transcribed—at least on the day I recorded it. Although Mr. X. knew exactly what was going on—indeed he utters an affirmative “Oh!” after Mr. D.’s final provocation (...*tekhet*...?), showing that he understands the excessive incitement to be doing his work—he did not *jukai* back. Maybe because he was too drunk already (and didn’t want to risk humiliation) or maybe because he simply lacked his wits, he eventually stumbled off, getting no glass of booze and taking no chance to keep the *jukowa* going. What could have been *jukowa* turned out to be drunken banter...or simply an awkward interaction.

On one hand, the uptake (or literal lack thereof) in this instance satisfies mutual recognition that, whatever else might be at stake, the complete illocutionary act—turn-taking and then Mr. D. holding the floor and then Mr. X’s indifference—was *jukowa*, but only in its set-up. On the other hand, it really was only a *partial act*. As I keep saying, Mr. X could pick back up on Mr. D’s incitement anytime he wishes or feels appropriate, if it sticks in his memory and matters enough to do so. Accordingly, the *jukowa* here is *both retroactively negated and yet still ambiguously affirmed*. The key is in the temporal delay, the space of the return before the “counter *jukowa*” [to riff on Bourdieu ([1980] 1990) and Derrida (1992, 1995)]. Given time, Mr. X. might reignite the *jukowa* with a masterful flourish.

More to the point, *jukowa* incorporates this ambiguous temporality into its generic form. And participants reflexively play with this very performativity upon realizing they are engaged in a token of a generic type. A case in point: I once witnessed two of my friends in Mayong engaging in what I perceived to be a typical *jukowa* while they were building a *chang ghor* (an elevated sleeping hut built in the rice fields where cultivators stay during winter months to chase away animals from their crops at night). Midway through their exchange, which was getting quite heated in insults, I asked one of my friends if what they were doing was *jukowa*, as I was concerned they might come to blows. My friend’s response: “*Hoi jabo, sao.*” (“It will happen, let’s see.”)—and in not including the Assamese certainty affix “*dei*,” the ambiguity remains.

**\*\*End Parenthesis\*\***

So now comes the ethnographic theory. Given what we know about *jukowa*, what is wrong with our existing picture of “felicity conditions”? Better yet: what do we even mean by

“felicity”? Such a question is not as easily answered as we might think. Indeed, in going through the literature one quickly discovers that practically no one is in agreement on what “felicity” really signifies (see Table 5.3 for a brief overview of the field).

**Table 5.3.** What *felicity* is.

<u>Reference</u>	<u>Short Definition of Felicity</u>	<u>Long Definition of Felicity</u>
J. L. Austin (1962)	Conditional “Happiness”	Upon meeting conditions, was the utterance successful, i.e. a “good” one?
John Searle (1969)	Conditional Affectivity	Upon meeting conditions, did the utterance strike the addressee(e) successfully?
Erving Goffman (1983) Habermas (1981)	Conditional Normativity	Upon meeting conditions, did the utterance conform to tacit (socio-cultural) presuppositions of/in the interactional order?
Judith Butler (1997)	Conditional Efficaciousness	Upon meeting conditions, did the utterance have any effect (especially socio-political)? (Note: infelicity can be reconstituted as felicity in this definition; see Butler’s concept of “excitable speech.”)
Michael Lempert (2013)	Conditional Intersubjectivity	Upon meeting conditions, was the message mutually evident to participants so that the singular token and the conventional type are dissasociable?

Across the field of performance studies, what counts as “felicity” is quite varied. Notice, too, that the closer one gets to analyzing performative utterances in terms of “culture,” the more banal “felicity” becomes, so even “infelicitous” acts can be “felicitous” as long as the act is recognized (understood with at least minimal efficacy) as such. On top of that, linguistic anthropologists—for the most part—roundly reject treating performative utterances or any communicative acts in the interactional order as in need of having any sort of formal *criteria* of “felicity,” and rather have come to see performatives in terms of a recursive calibration where token utterances *are* the conventional type:

As linguistic anthropologists have shown, the explicit performative functions by its denotational content reflexively sketching the very event of its utterance, its reflexive calibration to the token-singularity of its use being ‘nominally’ calibrated to the social types, or institutions, which it involves. . . . On this analysis, the felicitous performative involves a particular configuration: one where the (material) token *is* the conventional type (Nakassis 2013b: 403; cf. Silverstein 2003).

Despite the multiple senses of what felicity is, we might notice that they all share a presupposition: to judge felicity, an act must necessarily have *finality*, even if retroactively typified as such. I risk a provocation here: this may be one of the many unspoken assumptions in our shared academic culture, perhaps an ideology in its own right. With apologies to Butler, feminist and queer theory are far ahead of linguistic anthropology and philosophy in this regard. Both have done excellent work to expose how ideologies of finality and conclusion seem “natural” only from a male, heteronormative perspective (see, e.g., on ideologies of orgasm: Koedt [1968] 1970; Greer 1970, 1984; Jagose 2012).

Now *jukowa*, much like phatic blunders, might entail any of these “modes” of felicity at a given moment. But with no clear finality, it becomes quite difficult to analyze them as speech acts in any single mode. Felicity is, in a word, footless. Even with very real (if ambivalent) “footing” (Goffman 1979) with regard to *jukowa*’s presuppositions and conditions, *jukowa* lacks temporal definitiveness, so its felicity is slippery at best. Certain single utterances in an ongoing *jukowa* might have felicity or infelicity—e.g., was an incitement “happy,” “understood,” “efficacious,” etc.—but this is by no means a way to understand whether a *jukowa* does what it sets out to do. One never one can never be certain as to where a *jukowa* partner will take a provocation and how they will, in turn, direct a new excessive incitement. It’s up to the *other*, the *receiver*, to take *jukowa* *somewhere*. And in no meaningful sense is the speaker in these acts conditioning felicity, conditioning some *end*, but merely opening up a space for the creative labor of wit, imagination, and incitement to unfold. Communicative labor (Lempert 2013) is thus

necessary. But, *doing work* is by no means the same thing as *finishing work*. And just as Judith Butler and linguistic anthropologists have shown, something that is presumably “infelicitous” can turn into something “felicitous” on the very grounds that the speech act is being mutually recognized as such (an illocution) and minimally efficacious. Hence, in Austin’s terms, we can have a rather “unhappy” *jukowa* that nonetheless excels in a very happy incitement.

So let’s take a look at a cinematic event of “unhappy” *jukowa* in a context beyond Mayong—but one Mayongians are quite familiar with—that failed spectacularly, so to speak, and this primarily because of the absence of a single, yet critical word.

### **The *Mon Jai* Incident**

*Mon Jai* is a politically charged Assamese film released in 2008, written, co-directed, and starring Zubeen Garg in the lead role. Zubeen, as he is known in short, is Assam’s pastoral bard—a musician and actor whose penchant for breaking taboos, smashing conservative definitions of “Assamese culture,” and yet reveling in the most kitschy and stereotypic of bucolic lifestyles, makes him equally hated and loved when it comes to all things “Assamese.” For Oxomiya speaking audiences, the film promised to be a revolution in realist storytelling. It was about four young boys from different ethnic groups caught up in “durable disorder,” so to speak, and finding no way out. They are mistaken for ethnic insurgents, they have to turn to the mafia for economic gain, and they suffer the slings and arrows of mutual mistrust...only to end up exactly where they started. And where they and the film starts is, appropriately, in a scene of *jukowa*.

I title this the “sala scene” because therein lies the problem. Zubeen (Manab) begins the *jukowa* by drunkenly addressing his friend (Akon) with the word “*sala*” a Hindi term of abuse, literally meaning “wife’s brother.” It has almost zero significance in Oxomiya, except that it

iconizes an “Indian” manner of insulting someone. An Assamese friend of mine who lives in Delhi, and who first turned me on to the “incident,” wrote the following to me in an email in 2015:

*Mon Jai*, man, that film was such a disappointment. It tried to show *jukowa*, but it ended up being just foolish. The way they used *sala* sounded so daft. Bro you know as much as anyone, no *uddondo* boys in Assam talk like that. It’s almost like a mockery of the Assamese. Typical Indian censors. They have no compass when it comes to Assamese life.

As it turns out, the film’s script had been censored and rewritten (with key terms euphemized) by the Indian Central Board of Film Certification (ICB)—especially given the supposed original content of the scene, which, according to Zubeen, was meant to be a pure *jukowa* in the style of *gorokhiya* that we heard earlier. Another friend of mine in Guwahati (whose family was originally from Mayong), elaborated on this censorship with reference to nothing less than “durable disorder”:

I think the ICB censored *Mon Jai* because they worried it might cause more [inter-ethnic] bombings. Zubeen’s character is obviously [upper] caste Hindu and that other guy, what’s his name, he is totally tribal! Mongoloid look. You know? If he was getting abuse from Zubeen, people might think it the wrong way, that he was talking down to a Tribal or something. Isn’t it? Some militant might see it and want to retaliate.

Needless to say, the expectations for a [transgressive/realist] revolution in the content of this film were, in a word, premature. I have translated and transcribed the “sala scene” here.<sup>11</sup> It is, for lack of a better word, simply *strange*. Kind of philosophical, kind of poetic, kind of playful, yet cheap and sophomoric all the way through:

***Mon Jai*: “Sala Scene” Transcript**

**M:** This “mind” is a very dangerous thing. Sometimes I wish I could be Mahatma Gandhi, or Napoleon. And sometimes, **SALA**, I wish I could be Ambani.

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<sup>11</sup> This scene can be viewed here: [https://www.dropbox.com/s/2sxwc1996w253ki/MonJai\\_SalaScene.mp4?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/2sxwc1996w253ki/MonJai_SalaScene.mp4?dl=0).

And, **SALA**, when I watch cricket, I wish I could be Tendulkar. And when I watch cinema, I wish I could be Amitabh Bacchan .... I feel like I could be anyone...everywhere I am.

**A:** Hey, dude, then you better not go to a zoo. If you do, then [if not already a dog] you'll wish you could be a jackal or some such wild thing.

**M:** Don't mock me, Akon. Cool it with the insults.

**A:** No no, dude. I'm insulting the jackals, not you.

**M:** Then alright! ... Well, I better go. If I don't, then I'll get a painful thrashing from my mom.

[To Tapan, who is sleeping] Tapan! Get up! Come on, let's go home. [Tapan not responding] Get up, dude! [... trailing off ...]

[comes to senses]

[To Akon] He's always falling asleep. [Pushing Tapan to wake up] Get up, come on, let's go!

[To Akon] Ok, you stay with him. I'm going home.

[Looks at pin up posters of sexy women, says to Akon] When I look at these two, **SALA**, I wish I could marry both of them at the same time!

**A:** [Laughs] What don't you wish you could do?

**M:** Oh, I wish....I wish to do so many things...

Now, give me a cigarette. Give me a cigarette!

**A:** There's just one.

**M:** Give it.

**A:** Take it.

...Hey, **SALA** if you wanted to leave so bad, then why didn't you split with Nayan when he left earlier? No need to leave now. Come, you can sleep here. It's better you stay.

**M:** Why should I do that? Why should I listen to you, **SALA**? Manab does what Manab wishes to do [= Manab is the master of his own life]!

....Who cares what tomorrow brings...

[Humming and singing first lines from Bishnu Proxad Rabha's Bihu song, *Nohor Phule Nuxuwai*]

*Hmmm....hmmm.....hmmm....the togor flower [gardenia] will beautify...*

[Turning to Akon] Understand this: sometimes I even wish I could be Bishnu Rabha. I wish...

Good night!

Now, with the inclusion of the word *sala*—an “unnatural” lexical item—alongside the strangely philosophical and misplaced poetic content (somehow meaning to be provocative by being thoughtful), Assamese audiences were not only pissed off and let down, but utterly confused. *Jukowa* was there in form, yet whereas it is supposed to be transgressive in content, this scene’s euphemized dialogue doubly *euthanized* the token *jukowa* and *de-youth-anized* the genre’s expectation of juvenile transgression. [Zubeen’s character really wants to “marry” the two pin up girls? This is supposed to be realist cinema!] Moreover, typical *jukowa* almost always includes a ubiquitous lexical item, the significance of which is thought to be purely Assamese/Oxomiya: this is the word “*kela*.” I will return to this below.

And yet, again, the *jukowa* was successful in a formal sense. Although the discursive content was, as my friend pointed out, utterly “daft” if not ludicrous, the form itself held to *jukowa* standards. Incitements with excess were there in the dialogue, as were the gruff vocatives of *gorokhiya* style (“Give!” “Take!” “Give!”). Moreover, the almost excessive absence of the word *kela* was itself a metacommunicative incitement to all Oxomiya speakers who saw the film.

With such a conventional form and an unconventional failure in content, Assamese youth began making their own “corrected” versions of the “sala scene” with de-euphemized *jukowa* dialogues that were meant to replace the original. These new versions were posted on the internet (especially on YouTube) since they were meant to be very public acts of representation. Although they created a rather provincial meme, these corrected versions quickly became a sensation among Oxomiya-speaking internet publics.

Below is a transcription of one of these “corrected” versions of the *Mon Jai jukowa*.<sup>12</sup> The re-write is actually titled “Kela Mon Jai” [“*Kela*, I wish”]. The language here is not just colorful, but supererogatively offensive. Yet, it is vital to the argument there that we compare it with what we saw before in the “sala scene”; among other things, this rewrite reveals what young, male Oxomiya speakers assume a *jukowa* should look like—and how young, male Oxomiya speakers should *really* act like. Indeed, its hyperbolic, highly vulgar, and directly transgressive content is an incitement in itself...directed not to censors or middle-class moralists, in the end, but to Zubeen himself: the subaltern bard who seemingly cannot speak (correctly).

***Kela Mon Jai* Transcript**

**M:** **KELA**, this “mind” is a very dangerous thing. **KELA**, sometimes I wish to f\*\*k women. Sometimes I wish to f\*\*k boys. Sometimes I wish to f\*\*k little girls. The “mind” is truly a dangerous thing. **KELA**...I wish to f\*\*k everyone...everything...any which way, everywhere I am.

**A:** Hey, dude, don’t say that, **KELA**. If you do, then you may end up wishing to f\*\*k a dog or a monkey.

**M:** Hey now...don’t say such a dirty thing.

**A:** No, no, dude...I’m saying those mother f\*\*king monkeys are the dirty ones.

**M:** OK, **KELA**! ..... Ugh....ok, I’m gonna go, **KELA**. This is bullshit (*bal, bal*).<sup>†</sup> I really gotta go home and sleep.

[Drunkenly to Tapan, who is sleeping] Get the f\*\*k up, Tapan...you sister f\*\*ker...get up, **KELA**! Time to go home...*bal, KELA, mother...bal, KELA, KELA*...[trailing off] .....

[comes back to senses]

Hey, **KELA**, you skinny f\*\*ker, are you going to get up or not? Get up, dude. I’m not f\*\*king around, get up. Dude, are you going to get up or not? Get up! **KELA**...*bal*...

[To Akon] OK, if he’s not going, then he can stay here, **KELA**.

[Looks at pin up posters of sexy women, says to Akon] **KE -- LAA**...I wish I could f\*\*k these two chicks at the same time.

**A:** [Laughs] **KELA**, who/what wouldn’t you wish to f\*\*k?

<sup>12</sup> The rewrite scene can be viewed here: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/0mkhado5wt29wqz/KelaMonJai.mp4?dl=0>.

**M:** I wish...I wish to do so many things...I wish ....

Give it! Give me a cigarette...

**A:** Take it.

**M:** Give it.

**A:** Hey, if you wanted to leave so bad, then why didn't you go with that **KELA** Nayan when he left earlier? Forget it dude, come back [stay here].

**M:** Eh? What kind of mother f\*\*ker would do that? Manab does whatever the hell Manab wants! ... **KELA**, who cares what tomorrow brings.....

[Drunkenly singing in Hindi, *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai* sung by Ila Arun]

... *What is beneath your blouse, beneath your blouse? What is under your veil?...*

[Turning to Akon] Understand this: sometimes I even wish I could be Ila Arun. **KELA**, I wish...

Good night, **KELA**!

<sup>†</sup> *Bal* (literally “pubic hair”; *bal* = “hair” in Hindi, *suli* = “hair” in Oxomiya) is a expression meant to show disgust or worthlessness.

Aside from the fact that the content is more conventional of a standard, *gorokhiya*-style *jukowa*, there are two ways this rewritten dialogue incites Zubeen (from a mediated distance) to *jukai* in response. (1) Inverting his overly-sensitive and kitschy singing of a Bishnu Proxad Rabha song in Oxomiya at the end of the original scene with an overly-sexualized and kitschy singing of Ila Arun's infamous Hindi song in its rewrite is *extremely* provocative. Note, here, that this is almost a counter-insult to Zubeen for originally using Hindi slurs instead of Oxomiya ones in the actual *Mon Jai* film. This “insult” not only feminizes Zubeen, but makes fun of his desire to be a renowned Oxomiya poet by referencing a silly Hindi song to point out his silly use of Hindi slurs. (2) On the matter of slurs, not only is the rewrite scene filled with the finest Oxomiya profanity, but attention is explicitly given to the word *kela*, a term of abuse, which is repeated 19 times.

So what is it about the word “*kela*” that makes all the difference? For one, the slur is so ubiquitous in Assam that, like the concept of the *raij*, it is one of those terms that any anthropologist working there must wrestle with. The “offensive” quality of *kela* is that “everybody knows” it signifies a phallus, but this is largely unconscious, and never talked about as such. It is a kind of public secret (Taussig 1999). No one would ever say “*Kela mane set*” (“Kela means penis”). Effectively, the slur has a kind of vicarious function: saying “penis” without saying “penis.” But there is more. Oxomiya etymologists, for example, have attempted to locate the origins of the word and have come up with two scenarios: (1) *Kela* means “banana” in Hindi; bananas are phallic, ergo *kela* signifies a phallus. Thus *kela* is a possible insult toward Hindi speakers, i.e. “outsiders.” (2) The Tai-Ahom word for “foreigner” or “caste Hindu” was “*kla*” in the medieval period. *Kla* was a local phoneticization of the word “kela” since most of the caste Hindus living in Assam during that period were merchants who sold, among other things, bananas in the weekly markets. They would shout “*Kela! Kela!*” thus drawing attention and affixing a object referent to a subject referent (Dr. Sanjib Sahu, pers. commun.). From there, we go back to number 1.

But the word *does* way more than it could ever *mean*. “*Kela*” is one of those rare lexemes—perhaps a “zero signifier” (Lévi-Strauss 1950, 1967a)—that makes a people possible as a people without really signifying anything. For Oxomiya speakers, it has the doubly political sense of being able to do this without reference to any particular caste, ethnicity, religion, or even language. One can use “kela” abusively in English, Dimasa, Nagamese, Karbi, Mizo, etc....even Hindi. Even then, a playfulness on the Hindi meaning of “banana” sometimes strikes a chord for a good joke. As my friend Mohsin Hussain once remarked, in English, after the 2016

state elections in which the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party swept the parliamentary seats, “Assam is the only true Banana Republic, because our *kela* actually vote.”

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For seven years, Zubeen remained silent about the public dissatisfaction with his daft *jukowa* in *Mon Jai*. Yet, he finally responded to all the counter-incitements (like the *Kela Mon Jai* above)—which were obviously directed at him—with a beautiful and almost covert counter-counter-*jukowa*. Zubeen’s incitement with excess took place in the film *Bokul* (2015, dir. Reema Bora), another film in the “realist” genre, and this in an unscripted scene set up to look like a bona-fide interview with a journalist. The realist frame was thus not only intentional, but allowed to happen in such a way as to incite surfeits of “natural discourse” (e.g., back-channeling). A translation and transcription is included below, schematized in a coded swatch to reveal patterned references to reveal patterns of parallelism, repetition, and nomicallly calibrated references to normative or oppositional contrasts in language, state, culture, indigeneity, etc.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that this mock interview “counts” as *jukowa*, although in form it is manifestly not like anything else presented in this chapter. Here is the translation and transcript in a coded swatch:

**Zubeen’s Continuation of the *Mon Jai Jukowa* (in *Bokul*, 2015)**

Z=Zubeen

I=Interviewer (unnamed)

**Z:** I have said a lot of shit before, but that’s *the* thing [the gaffe that ruined me].

**I:** Whatever you want to say, please say it.

**Z:** When I made the film *Mon Jai*...

**I:** Mm-hmmm...[*tone goes up, signaling Zubeen to continue*]

<sup>13</sup> The scene can be viewed here: [https://www.dropbox.com/s/306sspjj3exgxnr/Zubeen\\_Kela.mp4?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/306sspjj3exgxnr/Zubeen_Kela.mp4?dl=0).

**Z:** ... With the director, Moniram, we both made it...

**I:** Mm-hmmm...[*tone goes up, signaling Zubeen to continue*]

**Z:** ... That story was **our** story: four TYPICALLY LATCHKEY [UDDONDO] BOYS....

**I:** Mm-hmmm...[*tone goes down, signifying the interviewer “gets” the deeper significance*]

**Z:** ... **Anytime** they [we] open their [our] mouths, they [we] receive a lecture. So, **I said** to Moniram: “We must include THE WORD ‘KELA’ in the dialogue.”

**I:** Mm-hmmm...[*tone goes down, signifying the interviewer “gets” the deeper significance*]

**Z:** Until then, what director in **Assam** had ever done this in a film? I mean, ALL TYPICAL BOYS ... do they [we] “DO KELA” or do they [we] “NOT DO KELA”?

**I:** Mm-hmmm...[*agreement*]

**Z:** When they [we] are angry, **they [we] say** “Kela!” When they [we] like something, **they [we] say** “Kela!”

**I:** Mm-hmmm...[*agreement*]

**Z:** Yes, that’s what they/we do, right?

**I:** So **you said** “include the word”?

**Z:** **I said** that **we** should include it...because four...VILLAGE BOYS, if four VILLAGE BOYS are talking, then they [we] are **SAYING** “KELA” **everyday, anytime**. If [the words] “madarchod” (motherfucker) and “bahenchod” (sisterfucker) can be included in **Hindi cinema**, then why can’t **we** “DO KELA” in **Assam’s cinema**? **I mean**, if you search by script...

The they/we ambiguity, the continuous references to ordinary life (everyday, anytime), the references to village contexts and typically “unmoored” (latchkey, *uddondo*) boys, the reported speech (giving an air of authenticity and clarifying intentions), oppositional contrasts—all these are part and parcel of Zubeen’s communicative labor that is building to an excessive incitement of telling everyone (i.e., the Oxomiya-speaking public) to search Hindi cinema scripts and get mad because **they** have been able to smuggle their profanities into films, while **we** haven’t. And **we should** because that is the way speech—real, rural, authentic speech—is in Assam.

This is the text-internal excess: Zubeen is iconizing “Assamese-ness” through particular signs of solidarity and not by iconizing “durable disorder” explicitly. Moreover, he and the interviewer are discussing an act of *jukowa*, itself an emblem of Assameseness. There is also a text-external excess here. Note how Zubeen only uses the word “*kela*” vicariously, always saying “the word *kela*” (*kela xobdo*) or referencing it as reported speech or action, and never using it as a direct term of address. Effectively Zubeen was able to smuggle the word “*kela*” into a film script after all!

In a word, Zubeen *shocked* everyone with his counter-*jukowa*. It took seven years for him to say anything in response. The video clip I just showed had over 1000 comments when it was first posted on Facebook by Zubeen—many of them discussions about how anyone could ever top Zubeen’s performance. Several of them just had a one word response: “*Asorit!*” (“surprising/shocking”). But there was also a lot of consternation about whether Zubeen *really* did this, or whether it was a cinematic trick (cf. Pandian 2015). Footless felicity, as it were...and where the *jukowa* might go from here is anybody’s guess.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the ambiguity is further

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<sup>14</sup> One recent further incitement in Zubeen’s ongoing *jukowa* occurred in March 2017, during a Rongali Bihu concert performance in Noonmati (Guwahati). Zubeen began singing one of his standard Hindi songs when an irate V.I.P. (a sponsor of the show) climbed up on the stage and exhorted Zubeen to sing Bihu songs in Oxomiya only. After listening to the hyper-politicized speech about the need to preserve the boundaries of cultural expression, Zubeen upped the ante from his mock-interview *jukowa* in *Bokul* by responding to the V.I.P. as follows, “Let me say one thing, just one thing. I am a completely straight/morally upright man. I also don’t give a shit about any of these people...but I love all of you. Thank you, good night.” [*Eta kotha kom, eta kotha. Moi ekdum sidha manuh. Moi kaku ghenta khatir nokoru....but I love you all...moi apunak bhal pau...apunak bohut bhal pau. Thank you, good night.*] With that, he ended the show abruptly to cheers and laughter that roared across the stadium. What made this yet another *jukowa* incitement—no doubt in response to those who exhorted him to reveal his authenticity in *Bokul*—once again depended on one excessive word: *ghenta*. This is an Oxomiya variation on the Hindi slang *ghanta* [literally, “temple bell”], which has come to mean something like the English interjection “Balls!” It can also mean something like “not giving a shit,” “jackshit,” or simply “not caring for formality or convention.” Typically, the Assam News Media picked it up as a controversy (“Should Hindi songs be sung at Bihu Concerts?” “Did Zubeen insult the Noonmati concert sponsor with a bad word?”). A couple journalists held interviews with Zubeen asking him to clarify if he was using profanity or not. Zubeen denied that the term was profane, saying that it was “just slang used by kids in Tezpur” where he grew up; it was “*just* an Oxomiya variation on a Mumbai slang.” Note the carefully indigenized reference to locality and externality in the same breath. After the interviews, Zubeen posted a photo on his Facebook page of him sitting in one among dozens of empty V.I.P. seats for an upcoming Bihu concert. The post was accompanied by the following text: “I love everyone. #ghenta.”

pronounced in that, although it obvious he is addressing the public, the Oxomiya-speaking *raij*, through the figure of the journalist, it isn't clear whether he is actually targeting the public with *jukowa* or speaking on their behalf by making the Indian nation-state (iconized by Hindi cinema) as the real target of incitement, thereby indexing "durable disorder" and real fighting words. Yet, he's doing all of it in Oxomiya language in an emblematic Assamese genre talking about the very same Assamese genre. So the only recipient who can really continue the *jukowa* is the Assamese public itself. In the end, whether the intention is meant to cultivate (potential) solidarity, agonism, or a necessary mix of the two is *pure jukowa* in its very ambivalence and open-endedness.

### ***Asorit* Ethics**

I wish to conclude with some final reflections on the ethical implications of *jukowa* and return to the place of exhortation in the shared account. Despite its conventionalizing effects, there is a tacit ethical entailment of this ludic genre. It has to do with the public interjection mentioned above: "*asorit*" ("surprising, shocking"). The best "public" *jukowa* almost always follow with interjections by addressees or bystanders of "*asorit!*" In Oxomiya, *asorit* is not a "state of being," but a description of an event of incitement that is meant to, well, *exhort* others even more. Describing something as *asorit* creates an almost irresistible counter-provocation: "What is so surprising!" "Why is it so shocking!" It is the pro-vocational cognate of "Tell me more!"

I am tempted to make a detour into psychoanalysis here, into the fateful attractiveness of transgressions, but I will save that for Chapter 6. Instead, I want to underscore a very subtle ethical dimension of the utterance of "*asorit.*" The dynamic "*goroka* feature" of *jukowa* depends on a performative element of surprise or shock—of seeing something develop in the labor of communication and "uptaking" it, as linguistic anthropologists would say. Minimally, if a

*jukowa* cannot capture the attention of an addressee in a way that makes him want to *engage* the addressor on her own terms (or at least with respect to her own utterance) and then counter-engage her, then it most certainly can never become *jukowa* proper. Again, at *minimum*, “*asorit*” acknowledges the exhortatory excess and, at least temporarily, keeps the play open. It is the sign that the communicative labor of the addressee is working. To say it otherwise, the *asorit* utterance works in that realm where first- and second-person perspectives are exchanged. As Keane (2016: 253) remarks, “these perspectives depend on a degree of self-distancing: I must have some ability to see myself as you do. . . . In other words, the way in which selves [first-person perspectives] come to have ethical standing on an everyday, ongoing basis depends in part on the mutual regard, or disregard, that transpires in the second-person address between them.” For moral philosopher Stephen Darwell (2006), the “second person standpoint” is the key to understanding how moral communities are formed. For him, the crux is that the “you” of any moral relationship is an object of demand: “I demand respect or dignity from *you*.” “I demand that *you* account for your actions.” “I demand that *you* listen to me.” For Darwell, this is the royal road to any notion of human rights. Yet, I am not so sure human rights, or any ethical dispensation, should necessarily proceed from the crushing logic of demand. Recall the interaction between Mr. P. and Dipon Kathar in the beginning of this chapter. Demand is less important than exhortation here. To force someone to open up or act is not the same as giving someone the space to open up or act.

An *asorit* utterance, at least in Mayongian *jukowa*, simply acknowledges that one is “moving within the account.” But it also contains an element of excessive incitement. Not to be blunt, but just as in foreplay (proper), a pleasurable or painful acknowledgment that some

exhortation is working or not is often sufficient as a counter-exhortation. As such it allows the agency of the other to respond on their own first-person premises.

So here we come to the ethical crux. To be exhorted is a particular ethical standing. It means finding oneself in a situation where one not only has to speak on behalf of his self and take responsibility for an action or utterance, but acknowledge that one is *with* another in a situation not entirely of his own making. To be exhorted (or provoked, incited, excited) is to be given the agency of self-representation. Similarly, to be shocked, surprised, or motivated in any way by that situation is to engage the other on terms immanent to that situation. To ground this argument, let's turn to a concrete example, my very first *jukowa*, which was flooded with elements of *asorit*.

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My very first *jukowa* occurred in the late hours of a wedding feast in Burha Mayong during my first year of fieldwork. The sun was setting and a couple of my pals and I had left the feast to purchase some cigarettes at a roadside stall. Standing around, half-drunk, tired and dazed, we lit up and embraced the cool of the evening. Suddenly, a crowd emerged. Another mutual friend from the village sauntered up to our little group, and got right into my face. With tremendous gravitas, he asked me point-blank: *O Sean Da, theng'ot gu na gu't theng? Ko*. (“Do you shit on your legs, or do your legs shit on you? Tell me.”)

Silence fell. No one smiled or laughed, but everyone was glaring at me as if their anticipation was audible: *How would he answer?* Indeed, how was I to answer this question? At first blush, it seemed to be either a riddle or paradox. Or perhaps a test to see how much I knew about body logics. Somewhat tired and frustrated, I gave up trying to figure it out and responded

as follows: “*Kela, Theng’ot gu nai...eko gu nai. Aji gadhilu, kela...aru toi?*” (“*Kela*, there is no shit on my legs...there is no shit anywhere; I bathed today, *kela*...did you?”)

Laughter roared out. The *deka bangthai* walked over and touched my legs and feet in a standard, if hierarchically inverted, sign of respect. Those with glasses of rice beer raised a toast to “bathing” and to the “legs with no shit.” It was a successful *jukowa*, although I had no idea at the time. My counter-exhortation was merely coincidental, but because I was able to respond in the *gorokhiya* style of the *deka rajj*, it worked. Notice too, even if I was totally unaware of what *jukowa* was, I gave space for the first- and second-person perspectives to be interchanged while ending in (slightly) excessive incitement.

We all horsed around for a bit until the friend who asked me the question held everyone back and counter-counter-exhorted, “*Tar pisot?*” (“After that?”). Thinking his initial utterance was just a joke without a punchline, I dismissed his second incitement and muttered, “*Oi, eko nai. Bad diya, dei.*” (“Eh, nothing. Just forget it.”) My friend smirked and we all parted ways.

A couple weeks later I was conducting an interview in Guwahati with a friend of mine, and I thought I would try the same joke/paradox on him. With the same “out-of-the-blue” gravitas as my village friend, I exhorted him: “*Theng’ot gu na gu’t theng? Ko.*” With a bored look on his face, he chortled a response: “Thank you.”

“Huh? What do you mean ‘thank you?’” I asked sharply. He responded:

That’s the answer to the riddle...or you could say “good thing,” too. Do you hear it? How English sounds in Oxomiya?...*Theng’ot gu* is *thenkoo* and *gu’t theng* is *goodthing*. But if you say “thank you” there will be no *jukai jukai*; if you say ‘good thing’ it means you will *jukai*. But you have to see it both ways, English and Assamese, to know why it is funny. *Theng’ot gu* is normal. We all shit on ourselves sometimes. Saying thank you is like a friend telling you to go wash. But *gu’t theng* is strange...why would it be a good thing that your legs might shit on you? *Asorit neki?!* [“Shocking, isn’t it!?”]

We laughed, but I was intrigued and pushed on. “What’s this *jukai*? What does it mean?” My friend responded:

*Jukowa*...means like foreplay...teasing. You try to surprise your friends and get your friends to surprise you. Who can take abuse [and] who can give it back is what. What matters is: can you get a response? Can you respond but better? Can you keep your friends laughing and thinking? This is *jukowa*. . . . Welcome to Assam, *kela*.

So I finally “got the joke,” which depended upon four different frames: one in Oxomiya, one in the way English *sounds* in Oxomiya, and two that integrate the two previous frames into questions about whether one should take the joke forward or not:

**Frame 1:** *Theng’ot gu na gu’t theng?* [“Do you shit on your legs or do your legs shit on you?”]

**Frame 2:** *Thenkoo no Goodthing?* [or, “Thank you or good thing?”]

**Frame 3:** Shitting on your legs = Thank you! = Normal = No *Jukowa*

**Frame 4:** Legs shitting on you = Good thing! = Shocking = *Jukowa*

Intersubjective “felicity” and competence would suggest that one needs to keep all these frames in sight (or in play) at the same time, not only for the joke to succeed but to grasp its aesthetic quality and make judgments about it (Geertz 1973). Yet, just as my experience in Burha Mayong proved, one need not even “get the joke” in order to *jukai* successfully. As with Mr. P. at the *raijmel* in the beginning of this chapter, all that was needed was that I “move within the account,” so to speak. *Jukowa* requires the minimal skill of responding with even a small increment of incitement—something as simple as taking the exhortation in a new direction or performing a sense of surprise.

When I returned to Mayong, I ran into my friend, the one who engaged me in my first *jukowa*, at a *raijmel*. After some phatic back-and-forth, I attempted to reciprocate his counter-counter-*jukowa*. Out-of-the-blue I asked him, “So, did you bathe today?” He looked at me for a second and then caught on and asked, “Why, do I smell bad? I bathed twice. And...and...why do

you even want to know?” I responded, “Oh! That’s a *gu’t theng!*” Leaning back with a cackle, he exhorted masterfully, “So you understand?! Listen, I bathe everyday, but there is this one thing that I do not understand. People are always worrying if they smell bad. When we scratch our balls, we always smell them afterwards [mimics the action]. All people do it. Even monkeys do this. Why?” Completely shocked and surprised—and definitely incited—by his counter-*jukowa*, I could do nothing but say: “*Hoi, eito asorit neki?*” [“Yes, it’s surprising isn’t it?”].

Everytime I return to Mayong, my friend and I keep our *jukowa* going. As of the time I am writing this, our *jukowa* relation has become one built around finding funnier and more provocative ways of talking about the weird looking mouths of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Baba Ramdev (I would rather you Google him than write a footnote), and what this morphological feature might signify about their politics. Who knows where the *jukowa* will go from here—but needless to say, from a presentist perspective, it will always be surprising.

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Retrospectively, but also immanently, such are the surprises of exhortations like *jukowa*. Not only do we not know where it will take us, but *it is entirely up to another to take us there*. In *jukowa* one must wait and listen to the other just as another is invited to engage. Even in restricted jokes like the “leg shitting gag” above, which only has four frames and two formally possible answers, “surprise” lurks in the background. Yet, and this is crucial, this kind of surprise is an anticipated one. In effect, it’s never really *pure* surprise based on some psychological state of awe, but a performed one. It is more or less what Keane (2016) calls an “ethical affordance”: that potentializing phase where we can start moving to the third-person and talking about matters beyond a pair-part alignment—in other words, to the uncertainties of another’s mind and their surprising entailments. And such uncertainty is not just an effect of the stranger or the

ethnographer, who learns how to socialize on the basis of blunders, misfires, and failures. It is a surprise common to modes of everyday interaction—of laboring to keep something going, to keep something moving, without ever reaching a conclusion and without ever settling on a finished product.

In the shared account, *asorit* ethics turns at a slightly different angle. If one is exhorted to take responsibility for one's own intentions or economic life, then the most common effect of doing so is to enter a state of quiescence. And yet, in the moment of revelation, the *raij* is left with more information than the authoritative account acknowledges or enters in their books. A surfeit is lodged in the memory of the *raij*, and people pick up on this with an almost irresistible curiosity: "Why would he want to do that?" "Who would benefit?" "What does he really mean?"

Ethical events are precarious (Lempert 2013: 371), and thus require a lot of communicative labor to make them unfold into something that can "stick" or provide a semiotic "hook" to hang one's virtuous hat on. If the small acts of *jukowa* or a *raijmel* composing a shared account have any "ethical affordance" (Keane 2016), then it has to do with the uncertainty that one cannot predict where an exhortation will lead. This speaks to a persistent theme in Indian philosophy as much as being an idea immanent to *jukowa*. Veena Das ([2013] 2015: 33) elaborates this exact point in a reflection on Indic ethics and Gandhi, which graces the epigraph of this chapter:

[In] the Indian philosophical tradition...you can be there at the beginning of action, but you can never be there at the end of action. This is what makes Gandhi say, "I will go on this salt march, even if there are only four people with me. And we will see if others will join or not join in—the matter is beyond me." This is the point he would repeatedly say, "The matter is beyond me" . . . the world has a saying in that.

In all moments of exhortation, one has to deal with the issue that one cannot control where a linguistic utterance will ultimately "go," or unfold. In *jukowa* this is central to the genre itself—

an incompleteness of an action leaves the matter of directionality up to another as opposed to oneself, or opposed to a generic moral obligation. Gandhi is, of course, doing communicative labor. In saying that he will act no matter what comes about is itself way to get a point across. It is just not labor oriented toward a clear end of felicity, even in the sense of being efficacious and intersubjectively evident. Felicity is beyond the Mahatma. In *jukowa* or any other exhortatory register in Mayong, the world has a say in what will ultimately happen. In the shared account, even if its composition inevitably decomposes under the weight of uncertain exhortations, it is a matter beyond the king or analogic kings coordinating the *raij*.

So, if there is indeed a path to “durable order” in Assam, then *jukowa* and the exhortatory logics of Mayongian shared accounting might be one of the most, dare I say it, *felicitous*. As far as the second-person perspective goes, it cannot be a matter of cultivating the will to be “otherwise” as Elizabeth Povinelli (2012) might say. Rather it is in being open to the ways others can surprise us, shock us, motivate us...in a word, exhort us, and this without an expectation of finality. Sometimes we are caught in relationships that we are not the authors of. But this is no place for disparaging. It may lead us to places we never thought we would go. As Gandhi would say, the matter is ultimately beyond us.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Reflections on a Shared Name

#### Taboo, Destiny, and Particulate Facts

*[A] single word (and only a word) can tie or untie a fate...*

– Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words* (1980: 9)

#### Cutting the Name

“W-w-w-what is his name, again?” Mukunda Da asked me with stuttered urgency, his eyes wide and freckled by the lamplight dancing across the room.

It was a late winter night in Burha Mayong village. My laptop battery was dead once again, drained from a few hours without electrical current. Earlier, Mukunda Da and I had been passing the time watching a film, *She’s so Lovely* (Nick Cassavetes 1997). While doing triple-duty of viewer, translator, and cultural interpreter, I was having a difficult time explaining the film’s narrative arc. Here was a dark love story that was about as rough as a Bukowski novel in its exploration of addiction, sickness, violence, and longing. Needless to say, our conversation digressed.

“His name is Sean Penn...He is a famous actor in America.” I tried to recount everything I knew about Sean Penn, but before I could cook up a good story worthy of the cult of celebrity, Mukunda Da leaned in and scolded me with a half-sarcastic, half-terrified riposte.

“O Sean *bhaiti* (younger brother)...you cannot speak his name. You must call him *mita* (friend)...You share his name, and it is dishonorable to call him ‘Sean’; just speak ‘*mita*’ to him. Let’s forget it...[laughs] now pay a fine!”

“Why?” I asked as I rummaged through my bag to remove my digital recorder and turn it on. “I have never met him and he is not my friend. He is an actor in Hollywood.”

“He is your *mita* and you are his...honor him (*xonman di dibo*). It is bad practice (*beya kam*) to speak his name...this rule of *mita-mita*...this rule of ‘cutting the name’ (*nam to kati ase*)...is to give honor; we do not call our *mita* by name. Such is forbidden (*nixiddho*) in Assam.”

The deed was done; I broke a taboo, albeit a seemingly minor one. But it was a taboo so rare that, before then, it was hidden in plain sight. As Mukunda Da explained, individuals who share personal names are forbidden from addressing or referring to each other by name, and instead must verbally interpellate each other as *mita*, meaning “friend.”

Flushed with an ethnographer’s vanity, I quickly rejoined, “I don’t understand...for example, if *my* name is Mukunda and I say to *you*, ‘O Mukunda, how are you?’ then why is that forbidden? What would happen if we share the same name?”

Ever the moralist, Mukunda Da responded in an increasingly solemn tone, ending with a short list of obligations I have to Mr. Penn and our shared name:

There is no problem if you do not recognize me (*muk sini na pai je digdar na hobo*), but you are my brother now, you are a man of Mayong, so you will be shamed (*las lagibo*)....[and] I will be frightened...[because I will then think] why does my *mita* speak my name? Maybe you have bad thoughts of me, maybe you want to harm me; nobody addresses his *mita* by name. Names are powerful, and you know what a sorcerer (*bej*) can do with someone’s name. The name must be honored,...protected,...[and so] you must honor your *mita* always.

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Transgressive action leading to contemplative revelation: the trope is familiar enough. One may recall, for example, Alfred Gell’s (1979: 134–35) taboo-breaking experience among the Umeda of New Guinea. Upon cutting his finger and unconsciously sucking at the blood from the wound,

Gell breached a fundamental—and thus unmentionable—taboo: auto-cannibalism.<sup>1</sup> Yet, only in light of his transgression was Gell able to articulate the structural features and congeners of Umeda selfhood that were otherwise inarticulable in ordinary, reflexive language use. As it is for the clueless ethnographer, so it is too for the Umeda hunter who “lapses” into unreflective carnal action, and is in turn put into place by taboo—the contemplative position that restores his ego and renews him for future activity in the world.

In this chapter, I proceed from the dialectic of transgression and containment observed by Gell to reflect on my own lapse into tabooed speech, and on name sharing and shared accounts in Mayong more generally. In what follows, I analyze the place of personal names in acts of sorcery and magic, a baptism ceremonial, shared account ledgers, and nominal modes of address in Mayong to present some first steps toward an ethnographic theory of what a shared name is and what its taboo implies for relations of conspecificity. In doing so, I elaborate the culture of “particularity” in the cosmographics of the Mayongian shared account—why “particulate facts” are not only crucial in the process of making and unmaking shared accounts, but why they find their meaning and function in cosmographic situations (rather than in intellectual or discourse-driven genealogies), thus allowing us to disassociate their current theoretical status as mere conditions of possibility for “the modern fact” (Poovey 1998; Hacking 2004: 12-14). Particularization, as it were, is the third process involved in making and unmaking the shared account that this dissertation attempts to situate, describe, and analyze. The concern especially with particulars like *names* (and to a lesser extent, numbers), takes us to the heart of why a

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<sup>1</sup> As per Gell’s analysis, his transgression revealed a connection between general food taboos and a specific taboo on eating self-killed game among the Umeda. It also brought into sharp focus the absence of a familiar repertoire of bodily techniques: “With opened eyes, I was enabled to see the significance of the entire absence of auto-cannibalistic habits among the adult population, the absence of such things as nail-biting, moustache-chewing, the swallowing of dried nasal mucus, etc.—practices which among ourselves vary in degree of niceness without ever attaining the status of major sins” (Gell 1979: 135).

shared cosmology might be an ever-receding destiny of the shared account, blocked at several turns by the necessity of minute differences and brute singularities, which speak much louder for independent, rather than mutual, destinies.

So how does this essential element of shared accounts relate to a taboo on bespeaking a name sharer's name? My argument is that, in Mayong, confronting a person with the same personal name is tantamount to confronting one's own singular destiny in another body *and* another time. Names and persons here are meant to have a telic identity. Or better stated, Mayongians *wish* that names and the persons who bear them will become one and the same over a lifetime. This wish is partly normative aspiration and partly a result of the cosmological pre-determination of personal names. Thus, when a subject transgresses the taboo on shared name utterances, she bespeaks her own past or future—*her own life*—in a body beyond her control. For Mayongians, this presents a philosophical and moral puzzle animated in the shared account: is the “self” confronted in the “other” a result of independent actions and intentions, or a shared, cosmologically determined destiny?

Name sharers seem to solve this puzzle in practice by following what Mukunda Da referred to as the “rule of *mita-mita*,” or using “friend” (*mita*, or sometimes *sakhi*) as a euphemistic term of address. This solution, however, raises another puzzle for anthropologists. If taboo containment is generally understood as a method for creating distance from *threatening* substances (see below), then why does correcting this taboo seem to move closer in intimacy and permissiveness to the bearer of the taboo? After all, friendship is, ostensibly, a rather intimate and flexible social bond. To attempt an answer, I propose that the name sharing taboo clarifies what friendship actually is in Mayong. But it does so somewhat obliquely in that its transgression—addressing my name sharer by name—implies a kind of mutual destiny more

closely aligned with the logics and practices of kinship. Hence, this taboo containment further clarifies the limits of that gray area—a bane of anthropologists—where kinship bleeds into friendship and vice versa. Ultimately, the taboo sets a boundary via negative definition: kinship is what friendship is not.

At least potentially so. For it is not so much that the rule of *mita-mita* ultimately solves the philosophical puzzle described above. Rather, it reframes it more concretely by prompting a code for action: that is my name, but that is not my body—what obligations do I have with that person, what do I enjoin and what do I cut? Such a code for action is vital for understanding the ultimate socio-cosmic ends for making and unmaking the shared account. In many ways, the shared account begins where kinship ends. It is the life of friendship, of publicity, of the kingdom’s supralocality—in so many words, the life of the *Mayong Raij*—where bonds of mutual destiny are desired and cultivated, but less certain than the bonds of kinship. Indeed, in cosmographic terms, mutual destiny at any level is a potentially *dangerous* idea, and what reflections on a shared name reveal is that while the shared account might be an emergent practice for cultivating mutuality, the implied destiny of being connected to others *and* their appurtenances is sometimes too risky to avow. Here, “moving within the account” might compel a retreat from a “shared commitment”

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This puzzle between nominal identity and bodily difference takes us to the heart of taboo theory, but also to the content of shared accounts and the dangers entailed therein. Sharing a name and sharing an account are analogous, and the most important “particulate” data included in shared accounts is a name—it is the anchor for publicity in that it once organizes and represents a

subject. I will return to this matter below, but the gesture here is that taboo theory will give us a valuable toolkit to unpack what it is that names, especially, do for the shared account.

On one hand, as far as current anthropological and psychoanalytic theories would have it, the enforcement of taboos is a means of constituting an *embodied subject*—a corporeally whole, self-aware person. By creating a safe distance between a body and a symbolically threatening external object or action, taboos protect the integrity of the subject by preventing the disintegration of the body in which it necessarily must be located.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, a sometimes explicit addendum to this theoretical closure is that taboos cease to be operative when subjects are figured *transcendent*—as Kant or Christian theologians might have it—*i.e.*, disembodied, referenced in speech or name alone, and thereby distanced from the external dangers (especially other bodies) that would otherwise put the subject at risk (Valeri 2000: 113). Of course, this in turn begs an ethnographic rejoinder: whence name utterance taboos? And serious ones at that? For Mukunda Da, my verbal transgression implied a very real threat of physical harm, a fear of the unknown intentions of other bodies lurking behind a name. While it is obvious that speech is always an embodied action, the question of why a name avoidance taboo would have implications on the integrity of one's body is worth investigating further.

Thus, before returning to the ethnography at hand, it is useful to clear some conceptual ground. Although a distinction between unmentionable and untouchable things might not make much difference to Mukunda Da—or matter at all when it comes to the logics and practices of Mayongian naming or shared accounting in general—it certainly has made a difference in anthropological theory.

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough survey of this literature, see Valeri (2000: Chapter 2).

## The Unmentionable and the Untouchable

An irony of the subject of name avoidance taboos in anthropological theory is that they are both everywhere and nowhere. At the foundation of anthropology as a comparative social science—a science that non-anthropologists were actually interested in—name avoidance practices were a rich source of theoretical insight and debate (Benveniste 1971, Durkheim [1912] 1995, Frazer 1996, Freud 1913 [1990], Haddon 1935, Wittgenstein 1993). It is only recently that name taboos have reappeared in the literature as phenomena of theoretical concern, prompting useful insights into the (meta)pragmatic efficacy of speech avoidance in general (Fleming 2011, Fleming and Lempert 2011, Lempert and Silverstein 2013, Stasch 2011). Among other things, this literature demonstrates that, as a token of the verbal taboo type, name avoidance taboos are curiously inflexible. They have an almost crushing logic of referential and performative fixity, allowing for their transgression and containment to accrue more power to the proscription itself, making it socially productive.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, it is not surprising that name avoidance taboos populate the comparative ethnographic record. But this makes it all the more ironic that their elaboration has not contributed explicitly to *a general theory of taboo*. Major, pathbreaking works on taboo theory in the twentieth century—Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1969), Gell (1979), Douglas (1966), Leach (1964),

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<sup>3</sup> The logic of this double-sided rigidity is as follows. On one hand, as in Saul Kripke's (1980) famous formulation, proper names are "rigid designators" because the baptismal events that usher them into use necessarily fix their reference once and for all—across all subsequent moments of use in context and in all "possible" (read: hypothetical or counterfactual) worlds. In one of his examples, if there is a hypothetical world where Hitler was never born, we can still imagine a baptismal speech event where someone could say "Hitler is the person who was never born in our world," and the name "Hitler" would still refer inflexibly to itself (a non-existent person). On the other hand, verbal taboos evince what Fleming (2011: 151–53, *passim*) calls "rigid performativity," meaning that the ability for tabooed words to do things in their explicit utterance "does not depend upon contextual factors or 'felicity conditions,' like the speaker's intentions or the appropriateness of the social context, to have its effectiveness. It requires only the occurrence of the taboo form" (*ibid.*: 160). For example, to report that so-and-so said "I now pronounce you man and wife" does not accidentally marry anyone whereas its ceremonial utterance—a felicity condition—allows the statement to *do* exactly what it says. Yet, to verbally report that so-and-so said the word "fuck"—or to articulate it as I do here—transgresses the same taboo on uttering the "f-word" as when so-and-so originally uttered it.

Valeri (2000), Kristeva (1982)—all focus rather exclusively on the particularities of the untouchable rather than the unmentionable. My question here is: can we bring the particularities of the unmentionable back into a general theory of taboo, but this time with one that has embodiment as an integrative feature?

In anthropology, one has to go back to Frazer, for better or worse, to begin carving out an answer. Frazer's original hypothesis as to why name utterances are widely prohibited centers on the threat of injury by magic: "[name taboos] originate in a reluctance to utter the real names of persons addressed or directly referred to. That reluctance is probably based on a dread of revealing the name to sorcerers, who would thereby obtain a handle for injuring the owner of a name" (Frazer 1996: 334). Personal names, for Frazer, act as a kind of mimetic or sympathetic label, an indexical icon that a sorcerer can use for transmitting lethal or harmful magic in a situation where there may or may not be co-presence. We might call this, following Fleming and Lempert (2011: 7), a "hazard of addressivity." For mentioning an unmentionable name is not simply a matter of saying too much, but of ushering an addressee—an embodied subject—into existence (and, moreover, if not the inevitable death of that subject,<sup>4</sup> then at least its vulnerability). In this sense, physical co-presence need not be direct or immanent to an interaction—or to what Goffman (1981) refers to as a "participation framework"—for this hazard to unfold.

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<sup>4</sup> Veena Das (2015) argues that names can foreshadow death in subdued ways. Her two examples show how this can occur through both intentional utterances and intentional silences beyond formal systems of naming. In the first example, Das' informant describes how she intentionally breaks a name avoidance taboo by speaking the name of her deadbeat husband—in verbal interactions with others—so as "to wish him a bit of death everyday by taking his name" [*cf.* Trawick 1992: 95 and Das 1968 on spousal name utterance taboos in South India and Bengal, respectively]. In the second example, an informant named Sheela reveals to Das that she is unable to utter the name of a man who once violated her, even silently to herself: "I cannot even say it aloud to myself. It is like I am holding something in me, tight as a fist, a coiled snake, and if that came out, the world would be thrown into chaos (*duniya utthal putthal ho jayegi*)."

In this light, we might also reconsider “untouchability” via Freud’s ([1913] 1990: 33) rather valuable insights into what taboos against “touching” actually imply:

As in the case of taboo the nucleus of the neurotic prohibition is the act of touching, whence we derive the name touching phobia, or *délire de toucher*. The prohibition extends not only to direct contact with the body but also to the figurative use of the phrase as “to come into contact,” or “be in touch with some one or something.” Anything that leads the thoughts to what is prohibited and thus calls forth mental contact is just as much prohibited as immediate bodily contact; this same extension is also found in taboo.

On one hand, Freud’s psychoanalytic argument is useful for figuring embodiment richly, as a matter of vicarious *contact* (even mental or spoken). On the other hand, for Freud, speaking and thinking are essentially metaphors for touching. It is ultimately bodily contact, in its promise of immediacy, of *participation* in Lévy-Bruhl’s sense, that grounds taboo. I would propose, on the contrary, that we can locate embodiment as a defining feature of unmentionable taboos in the ethnographically salient ways that bodies, names, and speech are all integrative elements of a richly defined subjectivity. A good place to start—as it was with Frazer—is in sorcery and magic as an ethnographic explicans.

### *The Depth of Magic*

As outlined in Chapter 2, sorcery is something Mayong is, coincidentally or not, most famous for. To the point, Mayongians are quick to remark that whether or not one *believes* in sorcery, it nevertheless *exists* as a social-cum-economic reality: efficacious, frustrating, and easily caught up in (cf. Bubandt 2013). Indeed, throughout Assam, healing and harming through so-called “preternatural” means is one the fastest growing industries around.

For our purposes here, it is important to recall Mukunda Da’s lesson to me: “you know what a sorcerer (*bej*) can do with a name.” Sorcerers in Mayong, and throughout Northeast India, use names much like they use bodily substances—hair, fingernails, saliva, etc. All are sympathetic vehicles that are especially good for directing assault sorcery (*ban*, lit. “arrows”)

toward an intended victim or, alternatively, curing someone suffering from a chronic illness. The phonemes-cum-lexemes of one's name are not innocent particulars; they are *particulate* bits of cosmological data that serve as a guidemap for a sorcerer who then can access and interpret parts of a person's destiny (*bhagyō*) and bio-moral composition simply by reading them.<sup>5</sup> For acts of assault sorcery, once that data is accessed it is not only an individual who becomes a victim, but indirectly anyone who is a conspecific in terms of shared substance, like the blood of kin, the food of feasts, the rice beer of the ancestors, the title of a patriclan, or the name of a name sharer. The threat of contagion (*khoti*) is, among other things, why Mayongians take care not to become caught up in sorcery logic and practice, keep secret accounts, and take precautions to contain and manage substances that a sorcerer—or any other precarious being—might find of use (see Chapter 2).

Early on in my fieldwork, I decided to consult a local sorcerer and noted astrologer, Shri Prabin Saikia, about a chronic sleeping problem I have suffered from throughout my life. During the consultation, Prabin Da only asked me three questions: first, when the sleeping problem began; second, if I would write out the letters of my entire name (in English and Assamese); and third, if I would write the date, day, and time of my birth. I began by saying that my parasomnia started when I was a young teenager, probably 12 or 13 years old. Uncertain how to properly transliterate my name phoneme by phoneme at the time, I wrote the following:

SEAN DOWDY  
শআন দওদই

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<sup>5</sup> See Guenzi (2012) for an ethnographically informed discussion of the Indic concept of *bhagya*, which she felicitously translates as “allotted share.” The correlation between “part” (*bhag*) and “share” here is useful for it reveals cosmological composition of destiny can be further particularized while still sharing in the sense of a whole. Moreover, the connection of cosmological fate to one's personal name is not without comparative instances. Julian Pitt-Rivers describes of first names in Andalusia: “A person's first name is sometimes called his *gracia* [grace]” (1992: 226), which is more or less a free gift from God. Cf. the examples of nominal personhood and shield names collected in vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (2006).

Before I could write the details of my birth, Prabin Da looked at the phonemes of my name and remarked quite casually that I have been bothered and manipulated by an aggressive, headless *bhut* (ghost, spirit)—called a *murkondh* (a.k.a. *kon*)—most of my life. He said I must have disturbed his home, a tree on the eastern side of my house, sometime in my childhood. Stealing my sensory faculties that night, the *murkondh* heard someone call out my name (“*Tur kan tú sur korile jate tur nam tú xunisile*”) and then became “stuck” to it (“*gotike namot logai hole*”). Yet, only being able to perceive the world through my minimal senses when I slept (ears, closed eyes, and nose), the *murkondh* developed evil eye (*beya soku*).<sup>6</sup> Single-mindedly, it followed me across the world causing fits of sleeplessness and terror wherever and whenever I dozed off.

When the consultation was over and a remedy for removing the *murkondh* was applied, I asked Prabin Da how he had come to know all of this from my name. Knowing a little about how names are selected in Mayong at that point (see below), I told him that my mother chose my name arbitrarily without ritual divination or astrological consultation. He said it didn’t matter, that it was built into my *bhagyo*. I learned that my name contains phonemes associated with general divinity (*deo*) and the planet/god Saturn (Xoni [Shani])—hence forces (both positive and negative) easily “magnetize” (*okorxon kore*) to me. I was, in so many words, a vulnerable name/body. The forces I attract, and thus the parasitical bond with the *murkondh*, were all created independently of anyone’s intentions, wishes, or potential divinations.

In Mayong, at least, there is some ethnographic evidence to support Frazer’s hypothesis. Not only sorcerers but hostile *bhut* can access a life through a revealed name. For the *murkondh*, however, the attachment to my name was not intentional. It was only through using *my body* that it could actually hear my name. (Being headless, *murkondh* have no sense of sound.) Effectively,

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<sup>6</sup> Being headless, and thus lacking what we might call “cephalic personhood,” *murkondh* are violently jealous beings who need the mouths, eyes, ears, and noses of others to satisfy their passions.

the *murkondh* was as much a victim of my name's phonetic magnetism as I will always be. Here we have this almost subjectless, flatly tactile being who is only able to sense the world through my body yet doubly trapped by (1) only being able to access it when I sleep and, (2) being perpetually "stuck" to my name—not by its own choice, but by forces that, although immanent in my name, were transcendent and stronger than either of our bodies or intentions. Unintentional magic built this bond, and intentional magic broke it.

This image articulates exactly what is at stake for a more general theory of taboo that can bridge the unmentionable and untouchable divide. The locus of the event is an integrative subject, of which body, speech, and name are parts of a whole *and* contain the whole within them. As stated before, name utterance ushers in a vulnerable, embodied subject as an unavoidable "hazard of addressivity." But there are more entailments. It also ushers in the forces that constitute that subject, and also other bodies (like the *murkondh* or crafty sorcerers) that can put it at risk or set it straight. We could say, then, that taboo ultimately constitutes not just embodied, but *cosmological* subjects.

We would do well, then, to counter Frazer's hypothesis by asking not just what a name and its utterance *does*, but what they *mean* in an entire cosmology of other forces, bodies, and signs. Unfortunately, what a name actually means for Frazer is only implied in his statement that a person is an "owner" of a name. The assumption that names are properties (something owned and something distinguishing) is also shared by Wittgenstein whose challenge to Frazer was, characteristically, to make the connection between magic and naming taboos universally logical: "Why should it not be possible for a person to regard his own name as sacred? It is certainly, on the one hand, the most important instrument which is given to him, and, on the other, like a piece of jewelry hung around his neck at birth" (Wittgenstein [1971] 1993: 126–27).

Sacred, instrumental, precious, emblematic, inciteful of jealousy? Of course. Names can have all these values, in Mayong and elsewhere. But I would press Wittgenstein further on his related position that “the depth of magic must be preserved” (*ibid.*: 116). Magic not only “expresses a wish” (*ibid.*: 126), it also acts as an access point into deep cosmological possibilities, into forces bigger and beyond ourselves—and this independent of our wishes. One of these possibilities—let’s call it a cosmologic of transivity—is that rather than a name belonging to me, I might actually “belong to a name.”<sup>7</sup>

Mayongians embrace this cosmologic of nominal precedence and mobilize it most explicitly in the ritual contexts where personal names are selected and given. Accordingly, I turn now to describe a baptismal ceremonial, or *oxus*, in which personal names are given and shared accounts relating to taboo violations are made in Burha Mayong village. Since it was in conversation with a Plains Karbi elder (Mukunda Da) that I first encountered the name sharing taboo, I will focus only on the *oxus* of this community, but I should also note that the rituals of name-giving ceremonials in Assam (and throughout Mayong) are as diverse as the surfeit of ethnic groups that enact them.

### **The Plains Karbi *Oxus* and the Cosmological Singularity of Personal Names**

For the Plains Karbi community in Burha Mayong, *oxus* (*oxusiya nam*; *xusikoron*) refers doubly to a given condition of impurity (*suwa*) and the ritual actions that transform this condition: protection, purification, and name-giving (*namokoron*). Infants are the predominant subject of this ceremonial (usually conducted twelve weeks after birth), but they are not the only ones who undergo it. Anyone who wishes (or is fated) to enter the society (*i.e.*, to become Karbi)—due to

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<sup>7</sup> This same cosmologic of nominal precedence is what makes Iñupiat and Inuit kinship a function of name giving and name sharing rather than of parenting and birth (Sahlins 2013d: 3).

marriage, birth, or ethnic conversion—must complete most, if not all, the rites of the *oxus* ceremonial. In effect, *oxus* accomplish something radical. As Philippe Ramirez (2013: 65) brilliantly notes,

In several Northeastern cultures, “purification” should be understood as “transformation.” . . . The forms taken by this purification evokes that of classical Hinduism, as well as the universal concerns about social pollution. Its function, however, is the opposite of Hindu purifications . . . whereas Hindu purification re-establishes a limit after removing the external agent, here it enables [the foreign agent] to move into the group.

The implication for childhood *oxus* is that the infant is like a stranger, to be incorporated into local society/public (*raij*) through transformative rites of purification and name-giving. *Oxus* are thus baptismal in a rather literal sense. This will become clearer as I proceed. In what follows, I outline some ritual features for childhood *oxus* that sufficiently ground what I will call the “cosmological singularity” of a personal name.

#### *Witch Distraction, Circuits, and Composing the Oxusiya Shared Account*

The first rite of the ceremonial involves a bit of trickery on the part of the Karbi *raij*. Male elders of the patriclan performing the ceremony begin the ritual by fashioning two child-like dolls out of straw in the family’s courtyard (see Figure 6.1). The dolls are fashioned to be ersatz host bodies for *daini* (witches, evil spirits) who would otherwise harm the child by attaching themselves to the real child’s body in its vulnerable state. While these dolls are being constructed, female elders of the patriclan prepare an elaborate display of areca nut (*tamol*), pan leaves, tumeric, incense, and cut cloth to drape the dolls in—a feast and presentation to entice the *daini* to possess the dolls instead of the child.

Concurrently, the mother, father, and infant initiate are led to the edge of the forested hills at the rear boundary of the village where the fresh water streams emerge from the jungle. There, the Karbi high priest (*rongbong kathar*), erects an arch (*bir*) made from two young

bamboo stalks, and places each stalk on opposing banks of a stream (Figure 6.2). A small basket, also made from bamboo, is hung from the cross-section of the arch, and an egg from a hen (from the household belonging to the infant undergoing the ceremony) is placed inside of it. The mother, father, and child (held by the mother) collectively pass through the arch (*bir kilut* in Karbi, *kath kore* in Oxomiya) clockwise, father first and wife/child second, thus stepping in and out of the water each time. All the while, the *rongbong kathar* recites mantras of purification and anoints the family with basil water (*tuloxi pani*) from a short container of bamboo (to be used later on in the ritual) each time they cross under the arch.



**Figure 6.1.** Men of a Plains Karbi patriclan fashion straw dolls as host bodies for *daini* (witches, evil spirits) who might harm the child in its pre-named state, or, worse, use the vulnerable child’s body as a host out of jealousy for wanting of a name. *Daini* are nameless spirits, evil in intention, and jealous in rapport. Throughout Assam—especially among the Bodo community—they are considered to be female in gender.

This circuit is completed, ideally, nine times—a cosmo-numerical constant in most Karbi rites. As the *bor bangthai* informed me, rather matter of factly I might add, the number 9 represents everything in the universe for the Plains Karbi people in all rituals: “No need to count all things as long as one counts to 9.” However, no one was able to elaborate why this is so except with an occasional reference to a common Hindu ideology of *nau gun* (“the nine qualities” that all things have). Even if the number 9 is a particulate fact for Plains Karbi rituals, it nevertheless has no mathematical significance in shared accounts or in the actual arithmetic of the rites. As the *rongbong kathar* pointed out to me after officiating a *bir kilut* rite for a Nepali family who was “converting to Karbi,” and who only passed under the arch six times: “It doesn’t matter if they cross 6, 7, or 10 times. As long as *I* count to 9, then the rite is correctly completed.” The performance of cosmic counting, which intimates infinity (see Mimica 1988), is thus more important than the counting itself. And what the performance reveals in childhood *oxus* is that the “passing under the arch” serves two purposes: (1) to remove all pollution (*suwa*) from the child and her parents (thus protecting the patriclan and tribe from potential transmission of inauspiciousness or dangerous substances associated with childbirth), and (2) to prepare the child for the socio-cosmic transformation into a Karbi person.

A quick note: before the completion of an *oxus*, the child lacks *jati*.<sup>8</sup> While it is most commonly the case that a child is a reincarnated ancestor from the same patriclan, there are dozens of instances where this has not been the case. Either way, the origin of the child’s *atma* (here signifying “life substance”) remains indeterminate until divination rites are completed—usually one year after the *oxus*—to determine who this child previously was (see Chapter 3). In this sense, the infant initiate is rather like Georg Simmel’s ([1909] 1971) “stranger”—in but not

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<sup>8</sup> See Dowdy 2016 (Chapter 4, this thesis) for reflections on what *jati* is in Mayong.

of the society, socially distant yet physically close. In Burha Mayong, she fits (at least temporarily) into the class that unites wives, the line of kings, uxorilocal male sorcerers, and converted Karbi—all outsiders who have come to stay, yet keep one foot in the society and one outside of it.



**Figure 6.2.** The *rongbong kathar*, Nilesbur Ingti, prepares the *bir* (bamboo arch) for the purification rite of “passing through the arch.”

Once the circuit is complete, the *rongbong kathar* breaks down the bamboo arch, removes the egg from its basket, and after constructing a ritual space on the ground (a nine point mandala made of *pitha guri* [rice flour]), he proceeds to break the egg with a knife, “cutting” it and pouring its contents over the mandala. This rite is understood as a sanctioned sacrifice:

“cutting in the name of god” (*bhagabhanor nam loi katise*). Before cutting the egg, the *rongbong kathar* recites a *shlok* (“verse/prayer”), asking the egg for forgiveness. Using the intimate *toi* form of address, he announces: “O little egg! Please do not take this slaughter as an injustice. You need not think of your sacrifice as death [as a life that has been ‘cut’]. God has given this sacrifice his blessing in the past so another might live now.” He then recites the name of the household god (Hemphu in Karbi; Mahadeu in Assamese) to nullify the sinful transgression (*mahapap*) of egg sacrifice.<sup>9</sup>

A short divination rite concerning the family’s collective destiny follows, which involves the following: first, the *rongbong kathar* prostrates in the four cardinal directions; second, he places nine strips of *tamol* (areca nut) bark, nine drops of *lau pani* (rice beer) from a *lau* gourd (*horbong*) tied nine times with white thread, and nine (inauspicious and inedible) tips of *pan* leaf onto the rice flour mandala (and over the broken egg); and third, he cuts the bamboo container used during the *bir kilut* rite in half (from top to bottom), spilling its water onto the mandala, and then rubs the halves together before dropping them three times onto the mandala. The way the bamboo halves fall (outside or inside up, crossed, not touching, etc.) is supposed to divine the collective destiny of the patriclan now that the child is becoming a part of it (will it stay the same, fall apart, grow or decline in power, etc.)

Meanwhile, the *raij* gathers in a circle at the house of the child to drink rice liquor (*sulai*), hold a *raijmel*, and compose the *oxusiya raijor hisap* (“the shared account of the *oxus*”). As soon as the *rongbong kathar* returns, he ceremoniously places the *lau* gourd (*horbong* in Karbi, see Figure 6.3), which held the rice beer (*lau pani*) from the previous rite, at the center of the

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<sup>9</sup> In Karbi cosmogony—as detailed in the oratorical *Mosera* rite—humans were born from fowl eggs. The sin of egg sacrifice, here, unfolds from a proscription against killing the congeners of one’s own tribe, and not from killing or sacrificing any living being. There is, however, some overlap here with the anti-sacrificial tenets of Assamese Vaishnavism, the rituals of which the Plains Karbi of Burha Mayong also partake in.

*raijmel*. Shared accounts are composed at many life ritual events (see Chapter 3) and an *oxus* is no exception. The ledgers created for the *oxus* involve the collection of fines from the patrician observing the ritual. These fines are collected on two bases: minor taboos broken during marriage ceremonies (*biya*, or “marriage fines”) and major taboos broken during marriage ceremonies (*bhoj*, or “feast fines”).



**Figure 6.3.** *Horbong* (lau gourd).

That these fines, which both relate to marriage, are reckoned during an *oxus* instead of a marriage ceremony has to do with two facts: (1) marriages have a different status in the shared account. Marriage shared accounts are basically public liabilities (a kind of “accounts payable” treated and named as a “debit” [*namei/koroj*] to the *raij*), whereas the *oxus* account is a public asset (a kind of “accounts receivable” treated and named as a “credit” [*joma*] to the *raij*); (2) *Oxusiya* shared accounts follow the larger ritual thematic of *oxus*—protection, purification,

naming, and transformation. Names added for fine collection during *oxus* change socio-ritual transgressors into benefactors of the *raij*, and by purifying their broken taboos (at least temporarily) by means of payment, the child or person undergoing the *oxus* is protected and does not inherit the effects of the transgression. All this will become clearer once we understand the distinction between accounts of *biya* and accounts of *bhoj* when it comes to fines assessed during an *oxus*.

*Biya* fines mark a mandatory Rs. 20 fine (*fa'in to*) to be paid to the purse of the *raij* on the occasion of any *oxus*. This fine signifies that a minor taboo had been broken during the nuptial arrangements of any married couple in a patriclan. The fine is booked as a credit paid by the groom transgressor, thus decreasing the asset value of the *raij*'s treasury (specifically the *oxus* shared account, which functions as "accounts receivable"). Later, the sum of all *biya* fines collected during an *oxus* will be debited from the "marriage shared account" (*biya raijor hisap*) increasing the liability value so that the amount can be paid out later as public expenses for the next marriage in that patriclan (usually for ritual materials, rice beer, and non-meat food items the *raij* needs for marriages). Most of the time the fine is assessed because a certain ritual was not followed properly or that a marriage arrangement was not properly sanctified by the *bor bangthai*, *rongbong kathar*, and parents of the bride and groom. Throughout much of India, non-arranged or non-planned marriages like these are often called "love marriages" or "elopement"; they usually refer to any unsanctioned, non-arranged marriage (even if arrangements are done post-elopement). In Mayongian politesse, they are referred to as *polai juwar biya*, or simply *case-ei biya* ("marriage by case"), meaning that the marriage is marred by a legal "case" (the English term is used) that demands settlement by fine. But this politesse is also hyperbolic in that a *biya* fine can be assessed if any single courtship ritual is ignored. For example, among the

Plains Karbi *raij*, if permission was not taken from all parties involved or if the groom's father neglected to gift a *lau* gourd of rice beer to the bride's father, then the marriage is a "case" and requires a fine to be paid. Still and all, in unspoken reality, and especially in the current cosmographic situation, a *biya* fine almost always means the couple was engaged in sexual activity before the marriage, often leading to a "night capture" where the two run off to the city for a tryst and then quietly make their way back to the village for penance and a traditional marriage ceremony.

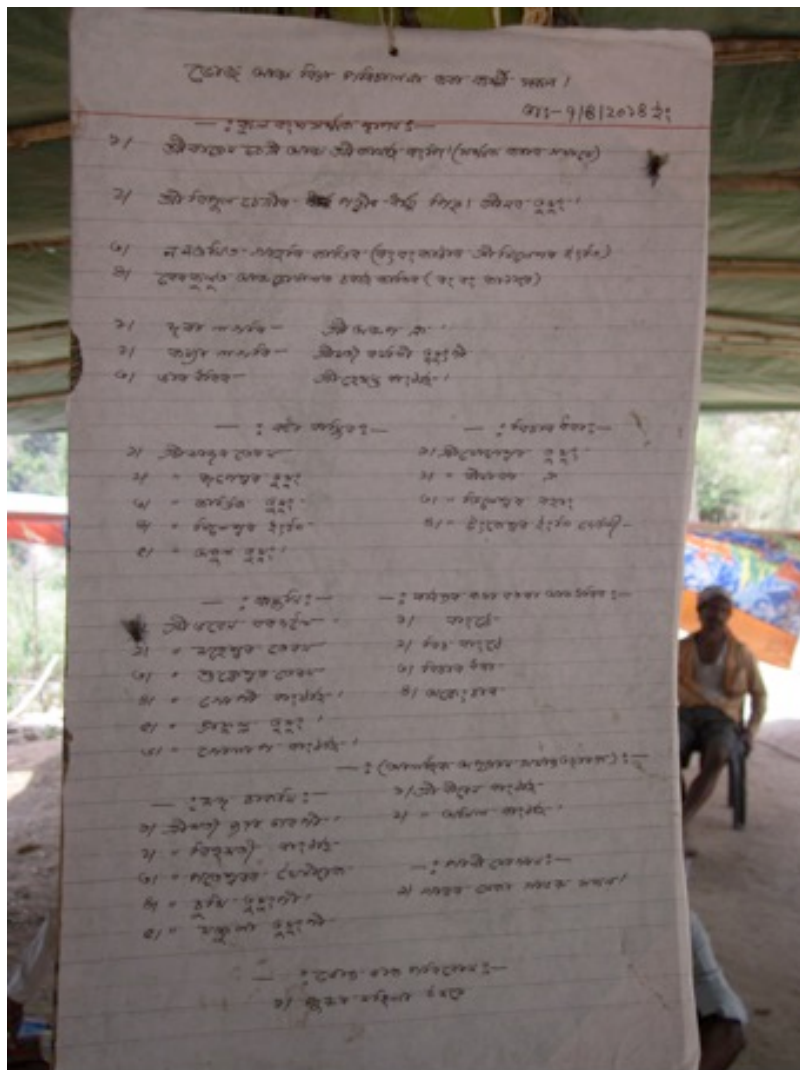
In the same ledger, a second category of fines are assessed and collected under an account that is called a *bhoj* ("feast") fine. *Bhoj* fines entail a payment of Rs. 10 from any married male whose marriage was marred by the breaking of a major endogamy or exogamy taboo. More on this below. The 10 Rs. is marked as a credit in the same *biya* fine ledger as an "account receivable," and debited from the marriage liability account in the same way. These are collectively added up with the *biya* fines and will eventually be expensed for the same items as *biya* fines in a future marriage ceremony. *Bhoj* fines also have a separate patriclan ledger that marks the eventual contribution of a pig for any future wedding feast in a given patriclan. The pig can only be used for a wedding feast and must be butchered in a ritual fashion, doubling as a sacrifice. The "fine" here is that the *raij* must be fed at a marriage ceremony, but the meat must be distributed as *khaji* (entrails, organs, face meats, feet, genitals, etc.) first and foremost. The logic here is that the marriage transgression affects everyone, so everyone first must eat the less-commonly consumed parts of the animal. The breakdown of distribution is as follows:

**Table 6.1.** Distribution of *khaji* in marriage ceremonies.

<b>Recipient</b>	<b>Khaji Cut of Meat</b>
12 Male and Female Deities of the Karbi <i>Raij</i>	Head
<i>Bor Bangthai</i> (Senior Chief)	Lips and Ears (after the deities), 9 pieces of the stomach, 4 pieces of the knee joint
<i>Rongbong Kathar</i> (High Priest)	Lips and Ears (after the deities), 9 pieces of the stomach, 4 pieces of the knee joint
<i>Deka Bangthai</i> (Junior Chief)	Cheeks, Snout (after the deities)
Lower ranked priests	Tail, Genitals
<i>Oklengsar, Rajbarika, Bisar Dhora, Kaliyai</i> (Various Ritual Officials in the Karbi <i>rai</i> )	Feet/Trotters
<i>Raij</i> (Public)	First: <i>Naribhu</i> (Intestines, Heart, Kidneys, Liver) Second: Bones, minimal muscle, <i>domu</i> leaves

Thus anyone who pays a *bhoj* fine of Rs. 10 must have his name written down in the separate *bhoj* ledger that accounts for pig I.O.U.s. Once a pig is reared and eventually used during a wedding feast, the *bor bangthai* marks a tally next to the name of the pig provider in the *oxusiya* shared account. This information from this ledger is usually copied into a “statement” along with *biya* fines assessed from previous *oxus* and displayed publicly at every forthcoming wedding feast so the *rai* knows who has paid the fine of pigs and who hasn’t (see Figure 6.4). There is no limit to how many pigs one will have to pay in one’s life, and the decision of who among the taboo-breakers will have to provide a pig and at which wedding feast is usually made by the *bor bangthai* who takes into account general behavior. If one works hard for the *rai* in other capacities or is destitute and cannot afford to rear a sow, then the *bor bangthai* might turn a blind eye to the pig I.O.U. Regardless, one will always be on the hook as no payment can settle this debt of taboo. The pig, accordingly, has no monetary value in the shared account. Rather, it is reckoned as a “part” (*bhag*): so-and-so has paid 2 pigs/*bhag*, so-and-so has paid none. Due to the small population of Burha Mayong—and the increasing reality that exogamous marriages are the norm—most marriages nowadays are marked as requiring a *bhoj* fine.

As mentioned above, if *biya* fines are about ritual neglect, then *bhoj* fines are about taking endogamy or exogamy too far. This means marrying someone either outside of one's *jati* or marrying someone within one's own patriclan (*phoid/kur*). The first infraction is extremely common in Burha Mayong since traditionally sanctioned marriages based on generalized exchange (matrilateral cross-cousin marriages) are being replaced by "open" forms of marriage where endogamy rules can be as lax and vague as "if you belong to a Hindu tribe, then you must marry a Hindu tribal person."



**Figure 6.4.** A statement of *biya* and *bhoj* fines collected from previous *oxusiya* shared accounts put on display at a patriclan's marriage ceremony.

So, here, *jati* no longer means minute sub-speciation, but any “Hindu Tribe.” If a local tribal boy marries a caste Hindu girl (which is the most common form of transgressive marriage today), then the *bhoj* fine is assessed. The second infraction is extremely rare. In the few cases that have happened in recent years, the couple must also undergo a period of social ostracization known as *alog kora*, where they cannot intermingle with the Karbi *raij* for 9 days. In the near distant past, those who took endogamy too far were banished to live at Bangthai Bheti in the hills for the remainder of their lives (see Chapter 1).

During a childhood *oxus* I witnessed in 2013, the *bor bangthai* was able to collect a total of Rs. 335 for *biya* and *bhoj* fines from 25 male patriclan members who broke either minor or major taboos during their own marriages. At each *oxus*, the *bor bangthai* brings with him the books related to the life-cycle rituals of that particular patriclan to “check” which marriages had ritual transgressions and which ones did not.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned before, shared accounts are not only kept for and by the Karbi *raij*, but for each patriclan who has the responsibility of patronizing different annual rituals for the *raij*. A patriclan’s marriage ledgers contain detailed, prosaic accounts of the circumstances of each marriage and a general “running” statement is usually kept as to who will have to pay fines at all *oxus* rituals. During this particular *oxus*, the *bor bangthai* managed to collect the names of 23 persons who violated either *biya* or *bhoj* taboos. But this was eventually contested.

Most of the time, the *raij* does not double-check the *bor bangthai*’s research into the patriclan’s ledgers. Rather, they wait until he has compiled a list of transgressive grooms and

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<sup>10</sup> The *bor bangthai* only reviews and assesses fines from patriclan ledgers kept under his tenure as an analogic king, so the books concerned here go back at least to the late 1990s when Jadab Teron (the current *bor bangthai*) took over the office following the death of his father, Xoniram Teron (see Appendix, entry for Ghanakanta Singha). There are only 5 Karbi patriclans, so only 5 sets of patriclan ledgers are kept. The *bor bangthai* usually relies on elders and big men from each patriclan to help maintain these books.

when the names are called out, individuals can object and declare absences or mistaken presences of names listed. At this particular *oxus*, a non-patriclan member of the *raij* stood up and made a loud verbal complaint that two members of the patriclan were not listed in the *oxusiya* shared account. One, he was certain, had to pay a *biya* fine, and the other, he was certain, had to pay both *biya* and *bhoj* fines. The *bor bangthai* was furious in his response: “I write the *hisap* at every *oxus*, every marriage, and every mortuary rite (*xokum*). I know who has to pay the fines. You know nothing!” The dissenter walked over to the *bor bangthai* and demanded to see the *biya/bhoj* fine ledger. A brief tussle ensued and the dissenter eventually was able to tear the page out of the ledger (see Figure 6.5). After looking it over and reciting all the names again, he doubled down at the end and exclaimed loudly: “Toroni Tumung: 1 *biya*; Pun Tumung: 1 *biya* and 1 *bhoj*!” Everyone nodded in agreement and the *bor bangthai* acquiesced. The dissenter handed over a blue colored pen to the *bor bangthai* who added in the names, amounts, and redid the final calculation, thus adding Rs. 50 and two names to the account. He then placed the torn page back into the ledger in its space and began to collect the money owed.

I asked the *bor bangthai* why he acquiesced if he was so certain about his reckoning before the dissenter raised the objection. He responded, “He spoke the names during the *oxus*; they must now be written down and payment collected. Later on, I will know if it was a mistake or not. But he *spoke* the names at an *oxus*, so the fines must be collected according to our law.” Speaking the names of patriclan members who are accused of breaking taboos is part of the performative element of the *oxus* rites; simply saying their names places their bio-moral being into question. Whether or not they are guilty is beside the point. They will have to pay the fines and the *bor bangthai* can later decide if they should be refunded and the account edited to remove their names.

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Figure 6.5. A page torn from an *oxusiya* shared account ledger that accounts for incoming fines assessed, collected, and then redistributed from male members of a patriline during an *oxus*.

We might notice that, so far, numbers and names (of course) are incredibly important for the rites of the *oxus*. When mobilized in the shared account, both names and numbers (especially monetary amounts) are referred to simply as *bhag* (“parts”), thus resonating quite beautifully with Poovey (1998) and Hacking (2004) in their discussions of the role of “particulate” or

“particular” facts that emerged from double-entry bookkeeping. Here, however, the method is more deuteronomic than “double-entry” (see Introduction) in that the credit entry (*joma*) is reckoned on a cash basis in one journal, while the debit entry (*namei* or *koroj*) is reckoned on cash basis in another journal. Still and all, they are “particulates.” Especially names. The writing and oral recitation of a name included in a *oxusiya* shared account is a minor aspect of the entire ritual but speaks loudly to the ritual themes of protection, purification, naming, and ultimately socio-cosmic transformation that are immanent to the entire ceremonial. Reciting names of taboo transgressors makes the patriclan vulnerable to bio-moral-cosmic forces that might harm or take advantage of the period here where the society is “opened” to allow a new being to emerge. *Daini*, for example, might latch on to these names and fuel themselves on the “weak links” of the patriclan thus leading to social dissolution. Names thus ultimately expose the vulnerability of the patriclan and the *raij*. Payment solves this—at least temporarily, since all *oxus* must reckon with all transgressors during the current *bor bangthai*’s tenure—by transforming the transgressor into a benefactor of the *raij*.

Now, we must return to the *oxus*, for we need to see how a name’s origin is also “particulate” and is conceived as a cosmological singularity.

### *The Particulate Name*

After the finalization of the *oxusiya* shared account and the collection of all monetary fines (and booking of pig I.O.U.s), the *rongbong kathar* prepares for another sacrifice: this time a red-colored cock. Grabbing the rooster by its neck, he sits in the center of the *raij*, picks up the *horbong*, and then bathes the cock with ablutions of rice beer before sacrificing it to the household deity (*Hemphu/Mahadeu*). The cock’s blood is spilled over a set of sacred objects contained in a banana leaf, and arranged around another cosmic map made of rice flour (another

nine point mandala, notably with the *horbong* at the zenith, holding the rice beer necessary to complete all rituals and, in turn, symbolizing the “containment” of Karbi society as a whole).

The *rongbong kathar* then “reads” the grooves and color of the cock’s intestines to find auspicious letters (phonemes-cum-lexemes) that should compose the child’s name and determine her life course (Figure 6.6). The *rongbong kathar* refers to this act as “acquiring the child’s destiny” (*puwalir bhagyo to paise*).



**Figure 6.6.** The *rongbong kathar* divines phonemes/lexemes for the child’s name from the grooves and color of the cock’s removed intestines.

Immediately following the divination, the intestines are placed before the child-like dolls, now clothed and placed on a tray with the other objects of display laid around them (tumeric,

*tamol*, etc.). The dolls—now inhabited by the *daini*—are then carried by the elder women of the patriclan out to the rice fields or into the forest, beyond the village settlement. While carrying the dolls away, the women sweep the ground ahead of them and beat sticks against fences, tree trunks, and the external walls of the house, shouting at the *daini*: “Go! Eat! Away from the house!” (Figure 6.7). Once the *daini* have been chased away, the child is then taken indoors in order to finalize what name she will receive.

With purifications complete and protections in place, the *bor bangthai* now consults with family members about the date and time of birth, and other astrological events relating to the child’s conception, birth, development, etc. The chiefly act of choosing the *right* name is a delicate process. Most of the time, the parents have already picked out a name, but the chief can only approve if the name meets a minimal set of requirements: (1) that the name contains the phonemes divined from the shape and color of the sacrificed cock’s intestines and from other cosmic events coincidental with birth—the name has to “fit” *singularly* in this sense because its contents (phonemes) are cosmologically pre-determined; (2) that the name has significance in either Oxomiya or Karbi languages—a meaning that serves as a moral model for a normative aspiration, expressing a wish that persons and names should become the same, singular thing over time (this also allows for some flexibility in arranging the pieces of a name already available); (3) that the name is not shared by any living person in the local Karbi community and in the village as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As a testament to the senior chief’s acumen and memory: among the living in Burha Mayong, I know of only two instances of a shared name: (1) Rupeshor Kro and Rupeshor Timung—which is an exception that proves the rule, since the latter is the junior chief (*deka bangthai*) and is always addressed by that title and never by name; (2) Rupali Kathar and Rupali Kathar—another exception that proves the rule in that Rupali Kathar #1 was born before Rupali Kathar #2 (née: Pator) married Dipon Kathar and moved to Burha Mayong from Morigaon.



**Figure 6.7.** With the dolls now possessed by the *daini* (witches, evil spirits), the women of the patriclan take them out to the rice paddy field behind the home of the family hosting the *oxus*. Dogs eagerly await to feast on the cock entrails.

This portion of the ceremonial is never taken lightly. Arguments often ensue between patriclan members and the *bor bangthai*, who has the unenviable duty of balancing the multiple criteria needed to select the “right name.” I recall at one *oxus*—for the newborn daughter of my host sister—my own mother’s name, Maureen, was proposed as a namesake for the newborn girl. But the *bor bangthai* immediately shot it down: “No English names this time! Besides, it doesn’t fit!” After that, the child’s paternal grandmother intervened and suggested a Hindi name: Sangamitra (meaning: socially graceful, a friend who unites others). The *bor bangthai* and *rongbong kathar* agreed that the name fit the criteria, but the *bor bangthai* further interjected that

the name must be pronounced in *khati Oxomiya* [pure Assamese] as “Xongomitrɔ.” In another *oxus* (for the child in Figure 6.8), an English name, Tina, was suggested and agreed upon, but the *bor bangthai* interjected again saying that the name needed a locally meaningful suffix to match another cosmologically pre-determined phoneme (“*mo*”). The name finally chosen was “Tinamoni,” only a partial exonym.

Once a name is finally chosen, an unmarried boy from the child’s patriclan brings in a young hen anointed with a couple drops of rice beer. The hen “kisses” the child, thus sanctifying membership in the patriclan through physical transmission,<sup>12</sup> while the chief addresses the child by her newly given personal name and clanic patronym. The *rongbong kathar*, in turn, addresses the child by both names and then proceeds to tie a string around the child’s wrist and then one around the foot of the hen (Figure 6.8), mimicking a marriage rite in the sense that the child is now “bound” to the patriclan and the tribe. Patrilineal men give collective toasts of rice beer and guzzle away. The child is now *of* a patronym and thus belongs to the house, the patriclan, and to the Karbi *raij* (*i.e.*, to a particular *jati*) as a fully transformed person. Mutual destiny is inaugurated as such. But she is also now *of* her personal name—of a singular destiny that is much more precarious, dependent upon individual action and intention as much as cosmological predetermination.

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The entire *oxus* ceremonial is meant to enact a transformation in the child—from an indeterminate vessel to a person socially and cosmologically constituted through acts of cutting, binding, containing, and naming. In that the society, in all its features, has to be “opened up” for

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<sup>12</sup> Kissing here is analogous to touching (Gregory 2011), a form of transmitting positive or negative substances. In this case, the transmission is almost certainly one of positive kinship substance. First, there is the anointing of rice beer (the quintessential clanic substance). Second is the kiss itself, vicariously given by the unmarried boy from the child’s patriclan who holds the hen. Almost an inverted mirror image of the name sharing taboo, this rite reveals the corporeal sharing and transmission of what unites kin independently of anyone’s wishes or sentiments.

this to happen, protective rites are followed. They prevent jealous witches, pollution (immanent to childbirth and necessary sacrifices), and inauspicious effects of taboo transgressions (immanent in the *oxusiya* shared account) from coming in through the same door, so to speak. Purification, through the rite of *bir kilut* and sacrificial appeasement of the household deity, further enforces the protection of all socio-cosmic domains (bodies, house, patriclan, *raij*, village, tribe).



**Figure 6.8.** The *rongbong kathar* ties a string around the wrist of a child and is proceeding to tie a string around the foot of a hen after the child's name is given.

Name-giving, then, is the ultimate moment of transformation. It transubstantiates the child in two ways. First, the address of a clanic patronym—in conjunction with the kiss of a hen annointed by rice beer, and the strings that bind the child to the hen—transmits what we might

call, following Sahlins (2013d), “mutual being.” The code of that mutuality is a collective fate (*bhagyo*), originally divined by the *rongbong kathar* after the *bir kilut* rite, which then flows cross-substantially through the rice beer that grounds clanic affiliation.

Second, the address of a personal name transmits to the child a singular destiny. Recall the rather circuitous path that the name travels along until it unites with the child’s body. For the *bor bangthai*, a personal name is a puzzle. The particulate pieces of the puzzle—a given collection of cosmologically charged phonemes—are already there, predetermined by impersonal forces beyond human control. But he has to arrange them syntagmatically in such a way that the paradigmatic result is a locally nonexistent name that is also a meaningful model for the child to aspire to. Exonyms are one solution (see above), but they do not always have an intuitively local meaning. Non-existing endonyms are another, but they are hard to come by as Burha Mayong’s population grows and death rates decline.

It is an arduous arbitration that leads to the conclusion that, being unique and so carefully chosen, personal names are “cosmological singularities.” Predetermined from impersonal forces (lexemes hidden in the phonemes), the contents of a name are *a priori*. Being phonetically fixed, a name always retains its connection to the impersonal forces that constituted it (recall Prabin Da’s divination of forces from my own name). It is a fate one cannot escape.

However, this does not mean that one’s singular fate is sealed in perpetuity. Indeed, the code and substance built into personal name is entirely amenable to individual experiences and practices in real time. What one does in response to the impersonal forces immanent in a name can change the course of that singular destiny. Here we are on solid ground for the karmic theory that all lives are a combination of predestination and individual actions and intentions—and for

Marcel Mauss' ([1924] 1979) insistence that names are socially grounded categories of human understanding.

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This brings us back to Mukunda Da. His fear of not knowing why his *mita* would speak his name is, in this context, a rather practical one: not being able to control another body's actions and intentions when the same configuration of impersonal, cosmological forces are present in each other. If his *mita* was gauche enough to break a taboo, then who knows what he is capable of doing; their shared name might become disgraced and stigmatized, a *badnam* so to speak (see Bharadwaj 2015).

The cosmologic here turns on implications of *consppecificity*. Similar to the *xará* (namesakes) of Southern Mozambique and Brazil (Pina-Cabral 2010), actions of name sharers are substantially fused; they are *like* kin who are co-responsible for the well-being of their shared name and thus each other. But there is a major difference in Mayong; and the difference has to do with the notion of substance name sharers share. Name sharers are indeed conspecifics, but their consubstantiality is not—or rather, should not be—the same as that of kin.

### **The Kith and the Kin, One More Time: Conspecificity and Destiny**

To return to the puzzle of the name sharing taboo, we are still left with the question of why an interpellation of “friendship” serves as a euphemistic substitution to uttering a namer sharer's name. To understand what an idiom of friendship means in this context, we also must reckon what kinship is.

Kinship and friendship are tricky to delimit in Mayong, just as they are anywhere. Even as current anthropological theory proposes that kinship is just as constructed as friendship (that is, not necessarily a given of birth and biological relatedness), there nevertheless remains a

tendency to keep the two conceptually distinct (see: Bell and Coleman 1999, Desai and Killick 2010, Schneider 1980: 53, Testart 1999: 40–1). Perhaps in its most simplistic formulation: *kinship = systematic, jural obligations* while *friendship = unsystematic, non-jural sentiment*. Yet I would contend that any attempt to define kinship over-against friendship without exploring how the boundaries between the two are defined and altered in practice—in the wake of embodied, critical events (cf. Das 1997) like taboo transgression and containment—will always come up short.

Julian Pitt-Rivers (1973) goes to some length to illuminate an event-centric mediation of kith and kin that I encourage here, first by posing a counterpoint to Meyer Fortes' (1969) restriction of the axiom of *amity* to kinship. By extending (indeed, *returning*) the meaning of amity to one that includes “friendship,” he makes a case quite similar to Sahlins (2013d): *viz.*, birth and biology have no bearing on what kinship really is.<sup>13</sup> For Pitt-Rivers, friendship and kinship are both modes of amiable conspecificity worked out in practice (cf. Pitt-Rivers 1992: 232).

But, there are also two particular paradoxes of friendship that this amiable conspecificity reveals. The first is:

though the favours of friends must be free, they must still be reciprocated if the moral status quo is to be maintained....[moreover] the disillusioned friend who complains that his favours have not been reciprocated destroys his own reputation by implying that he expected they should be, that he gave them only out of calculation in expectation of a return...[revealing] that the sentiment is not mutual. (Pitt-Rivers 1973: 97)

The second is that

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<sup>13</sup> For Sahlins (2013d: 24), however, the “mutuality of being” that sufficiently defines kinship need not be amiable in practice. If I read him correctly, Sahlins would hesitate lumping “friendship” in with “kinship”—first owing to the fact that not all societies around the world have a concept of friendship, and second because “mutuality of being” allows for the possibility of kin to be both friends *and* enemies. To rephrase satirist Robert Benchley: all friendship is relative, although all relatives are not friends.

moral equality is essential between unequals, for the only admissible reciprocity is in sentiments. It must be accepted that *my* sentiments are of the same value as *yours* even though I cannot demonstrate them by material equivalence. (ibid.: 98)

For our purposes here, we can unite these two and state them more simply: friends are conspecifics from the perspective of mutual and reciprocal sentiment, but by the same token, this conspecificity fails in tautology because there are no grounds for measuring equivalence in sentiment. Friends are thus like the primordial beings in Aristophanes’ discourse on love who, having been cut into two by Zeus, spend their lives searching for the unity in another that they once lost. All this is another way of saying that friends both *do* and *do not* have mutuality of being.

How, then, does this paradox play out for distinguishing kith and kin in Burha Mayong? Names of address are an excellent place to explore this paradox, since they (1) imply different notions of substance,<sup>14</sup> and thus different kinds of conspecificity; and (2) constitute micro-events that provide a code for normative action and obligation. Consider the following table:

**Table 6.2.** Names of address and their corresponding notions of substance in Burha Mayong.

<u>Names of Address</u>	<u>Notion of Substance</u>
Personal Name	Impersonal Force (Cosmological Singularity)
Nickname	Love ( <i>morom</i> )
Kin Terms as Address	Honor ( <i>xonman</i> )
Title ( <i>uppathi</i> )	Fame/Recognition ( <i>xunam/bikhat</i> )
Clanic Patronym	Rice Beer (Cosmological Mutuality)

Let’s start with the middle three. Nicknames (*moromiyal nam*) are some of the most widely used forms of address, especially in co-present interaction. They express sentiment in its rawest form. In contexts of both kinship and friendship, they are given and used out of love and affection. They are usually terms for “beauty” (*dhunu, moina, mamunu, majoni, aitu*, etc.).

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<sup>14</sup> By “substance” here I am referring to a kind of essence (*xar* in Oxomiya), which may or may not be concretely material.

Although they can be used sarcastically, they mostly express a sweet, relaxed, and playful sentiment, and are used so often that addressors sometimes forget what the addressee's *real* name actually is.

Moving to the second: as with most societies throughout South Asia, one can make kin out of anyone by addressing them in the terms of kinship. In Assam, one can address a stranger as *dada/kokai* (elder brother), *bhaiti* (younger brother), *baideu/bhonti* (elder/younger sister), *deuta/ai* (father/mother), *khura* (father's brother), *mama* (mother's brother), etc., depending on context and what expectations of obligation are implied. All of these kin terms of address involve a notion of substance in honor and rank. (Note that the kin terms for many seniors are also terms for divinity: *deo/deu* [god], *ai* [goddess].) While one may use them casually, each moment of address ushers in a specific way of acting with the addressee that is also specific to kinship relations. No metaphorical extension here—addressing someone as *kokai* means that he *is* one's elder brother in terms of honor and rank, and that is how one should act with him. (The Mayong king is always referred to as *deuta*, for example, and he is thus a literal father for everyone.) The key point here is that addressing someone as kin is an attempt to build mutual being through honorifics or ranked relations, even if there are no prior grounds for it.

A title (*uppathi*) is essentially the surname that one *writes*. (To find out what a stranger's title is, one asks “*Ki likhe?*” [“What do you write?”].) It is a minimal index of tribe/caste/religious affiliation and functions most often as a means for grasping what rules to follow with guests and strangers. If a person writes “Hussain,” you shouldn't feed her pork. If a person writes “Nath,” you shouldn't serve him alcohol. Moreover, in Burha Mayong it is often the case that if one, for example, writes “Bangthai” or “Kathar”—the hierarchically superior terms for “chief” and “priest” in Karbi society—one is not necessarily indexing affiliation to a

chiefly or priestly clan (*kur* in Karbi, *phoid* in Oxomiya). Clanic patronyms, which I will describe below, are conceptually distinct from titles. Titles that are not clanic patronyms are often given by someone else, but in either case they are a sign of fame and public recognition (*xunam*, *bikhat*), emphasizing a particular feature of a person that should be inherited by contemporaneous and future generations. For example, one of my main informants is a member of the Timung clan, and from childhood he wrote his clanic patronym as his title. However, because of the fame and recognition he accrued with the Karbi Students Union, he was given a new title—a chiefly one, “Bangthai”—which he then passed on to his wife, siblings, and children as a new patronym. Most Karbi titles in Burha Mayong are also a recent invention. Prior to the twentieth century, almost all Karbi people in Mayong wrote their title as “Mikir” (see Appendix), which was a colonial ethnonym for the Karbi people now avoided as politically incorrect.

None of these three names of address (nicknames, kin terms, titles) are marked. They are the basis of the ordinary, unmarked interactional order among kith and kin. The notions of substance they entail (love, honor, fame/recognition) are all *personal forces* not specific to either domain. The other two names of address in the table above, however, belong to a marked form of address known as *namkari*. And this is something very personal.

If I address someone by his personal name, I engage in an act similar to the devotional practice of reciting the name(s) of God in Assamese neo-Vaishnavism, or *Ek Xorona Nam Dhormo* (“Taking Shelter in the Name of One”). Naming calls forth the *person* into existence in a cosmologically singular way, much like devotees call forth each and every aspect of Krishna through his myriad names. As I demonstrated in the previous section, the notion of substance called forth in a personal name is an amalgam of impersonal forces that unite in a name that is locally non-existent and a unique moral model for a person to live up to. Friends address each

other by personal name quite casually. Kin, on the other hand, tend to avoid using them, preferring nicknames instead.

A personal name stands in opposition to the name that indexes lineal kinship: a clanic patronym. As I mentioned above, a title may or may not be used as a generic patronym, but among the Karbi of Burha Mayong a clanic patronym—whether used as a title or not—is something very static. It really only appears as a term of address among kin and between potential affines in contexts of marriage, when proscriptions about who can and should marry whom become salient. For example, when my host sister eloped with her future husband, clanic patronyms became a common term of address between their two families. My sister is of the “Ronghang” clan and her husband is of the “Timung” (or, as locally pronounced, “Tumung”) clan.<sup>15</sup> Although this marriage is not taboo, in my host father’s eyes, his daughter was “marrying down” in rank. At first, he was unwilling to consent to the marriage. To appease my host father, my host sister’s father-in-law brought a *lau* gourd (*horbong*) filled with rice beer to my host parents and entreated my host father as follows: “Please take this, Ronghang; your daughter will be Timung.” One could see this act, now reified as a “custom,” as a gift of peace-making between two clans teetering between friendship and enmity. But the act was more. It preserved the integrity of the clans, as well as an openness in a request for alliance and commensalism. Rice beer is, indeed, the notion of substance that a clanic patronym calls forth. It is bio-moral and references containment, surplus, and the heirloom strands of rice grain used by families for generations. It links ancestors in a patriclan, binding them together as *one substantial being*, just as it reaches out in commensal openness to potential affines (who, upon becoming actual affines,

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<sup>15</sup> To further substantiate my argument that titles are conceptually distinct from clanic patronyms, my host family uses (“writes”) the title “Kathar” (referencing a priestly affiliation) while their actual clanic patronym, “Ronghang,” references a kingly affiliation. I was often told that since I am now part of their family, I am of the clan of kings. The point is that clanic patronyms can be used as titles, but not all titles are clanic patronyms.

are addressed as “guests” [*alohi*]). Rice beer thus expresses cosmological mutuality in which a particular collectivity came, comes, and will come into being.

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Returning to the paradox of friendship, we can now note what kind of substances both kith and kin truck in. Nicknames are common among friends. If their relationships are really intimate but strained in rank, they might choose to use a kin term (or append a kin term to a nickname). If they are stroking their friend’s ego, they might use a title. But in using any of these they nevertheless stay in that gray area where friendship and kinship bleed into one another, where substances of love, honor, and fame circulate. Yet, friends never use clanic patronyms and kin avoid using personal names. Correspondingly, *namkari* carves out two tentatively discreet zones for interactional address: a zone of independent and singular beings (reserved mainly for friends) and a zone of interdependent and mutual beings (reserved mainly for kin). Thus, in this context, the paradox of friendship is disentangled—friends may indeed be conspecific in sentiment/love, honor, and recognition, but they share these substances as independent rather than mutual beings.

Of course, people who share personal names throw this formula out of whack. As William Mazzarella (pers. commun.) points out, “the *aura* of singularity [in a personal name] . . . depends on all the practices that protect that singularity from being called into question or undermined.” Uttering a name sharer’s name does just that: it undermines the distinctive aura of a name, its cosmological singularity, by implying a *mutual being* through the *sharing of impersonal forces*. Containment, through proscription and the euphemistic utterance of *mita*, protects that aura by returning the name sharers to a zone of independent singularities.

Still, something is amiss here. Name sharers share names despite the fact that they can mitigate it by claiming to be friends. Their conspecificity in shared/impersonal forces does not

subside. Moreover, taboo containment only reinforces this fact since it is the ground for there being a taboo in the first place.

### *Fate and Togetherness*

At this point we might ask: are name sharers in Mayong actually *friends*? As I mentioned above, there are hardly any name sharers in Burha Mayong. They do, however, exist in the Mayong kingdom as a supralocality. These name sharers, in general, do not like each other. This dislike is not expressed as enmity, but as envy and petty rivalry with entailments of casual competition, one-upmanship, and riposte—the building blocks of “big man” (*dangor manuh*) politics throughout Northeast India (see Chapter 3). To the point, in the only reference to the name sharing taboo I have been able to find in regional ethnographic literature—an article about Garo (Mande) naming practices in nearby Meghalaya (Hvenekilde *et al.* 2000)—the authors reveal a similar phenomenon of schismogenesis. They draw on oral historical narratives that interpret the origins of this taboo in pre-colonial ripostes between warriors of neighboring villages who happened to discover that they shared a name and felt the need to challenge each other’s mettle.<sup>16</sup>

Speculative or not, such an account emphasizes that the containing act of addressing a name

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<sup>16</sup> Meghalaya, interestingly, has its own regional fame as a place with a hyper-eclectic naming repertoire, where—among the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian Khasi people, especially—one finds personal names as idiomatic, singular, and referentially foreign as “Latrine,” “Submarine,” “Fiction,” “Helpme,” “Underwear,” etc. (see: <http://namasutra.blogspot.in/2014/04/mirth-in-meghalaya.html>, accessed February 6, 2015). We might see this as an alternative solution to having to confront name sharers, a kind of “creative refusal” (Graeber 2013) that consciously rejects the cosmological determinism of naming practices in neighboring areas like Mayong. Yet, folklorist Margaret Lyngdoh (pers. commun.) pointed out to me that, although this trend may prevent the unhappy coincidence of meeting a name sharer, these names are nevertheless “cosomologically determined” and may have deep roots in pre-Christian Khasi ritual life. Per Lyngdoh, the eclectic names often reference a place, a contextual word read in a newspaper or seen in a dream, or especially an utterance that coincides with the birth of a child (given the cosmic significance attached to the spoken word). She sees this phenomenon as a recent adaptation of the *Jer Khun* (naming) ceremony in which the *Muit Kyrteŋ* (or “coming of the name”) was spontaneously divined, often through a single utterance of a ritual adept. Lyngdoh sent me an example of this kind of spontaneous divination in the context of the current naming repertoire: “My girlfriend in Shillong has a brother who is a Pastor in the Presbyterian Church. This pastor had a baby boy. When his wife was pregnant the second time, he really hoped that it would be a girl child. But, it was another boy. So, in the hospital, holding his newborn son, this Pastor exclaimed, and I quote, ‘What can we do? This is all His Programme.’ The child was then christened ‘His Programme.’” (Margaret Lyngdoh, pers. comm.).

sharer as “friend” is not to be presumed to be true in both word and deed. Addressing someone as *mita* need not imply mutual sentiment and reciprocity in action *at all*, even if it does provide a code for how the relationship should be handled.

Here we might take further insight from the analogous phenomena of “ritual friendship” (or “ritual brotherhood,” “fictive kinship,” etc.), dominant in Central India and Nepal. The term used in Nepal for such relationships is *miteri* (Messerschmidt 1982); among the Gabada of southern Orissa, the term is *moitr* (Pfeffer 2001); and in Chattisgarh, *phul-phulwari* (Desai 2010). In these phenomena, bonds are intentionally created—most often with people belonging to different castes or places—and both sentiment and reciprocity are actively cultivated. So much so that ritual friends start acting as if they were siblings, and then pass that relation on to their own next of kin.

There is, however, an exception in this literature that is neatly apropos of our discussion. In north-west Orissa there is a phenomenon of ritual friendship called, well, *mita*—almost identical to the “rule of *mita-mita*” in Mayong.<sup>17</sup> Although the literature does not indicate anything as strong as a taboo on shared names, the phenomenon of *mita* is strikingly similar enough to warrant a full description:

This form of friendship is generally restricted to people having the same name by birth. People believe that there is a special link between those who share a name. However, the common name is also abandoned in favour of *mita* “friend.” A Brahman might perform a little ritual to underline the friendship, but in other cases people regard each other as *mita* just because of their common name. They may also address each other as *mita*, with or without a ritual...[and] *mita* must belong to different communities. The *mita* friendship constitutes a relationship between equals comparable to brothers. However, unlike genealogical brothers

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<sup>17</sup> Oriya and Oxomiya are linguistically related, but it is uncertain what historical or cultural connection the two phenomena share. It seems that they both belong to a permutational continuum of cultural practices concerning friendship, identity, and nominal substance. Current research into historical affinities that stretch from South India, up to the Himalaya, and east into Burma reveal that the stark cultural differences often attributed to Northeast Indian peoples are very much a contemporary phenomenon (see Chatterjee 2013).

any difference of age does not matter: there is no distinction between elder and younger brother with all its consequences (Skoda 2004: 171).

Here I want to extract two points from *mita* friendship in Orissa that help us to clarify what friendship actually is in Mayong, or at least what it tries to be. The first is a similarity. This is that *mita* inevitably belong to different communities. Given that so much work is put into preventing village-based consociates from having the same personal name in Burha Mayong, the event of discovering someone who shares your name is a contingent one that most often occurs beyond the sectors of residence and close kinship. Effectively, name sharers are socially distant strangers, brought together in coincidence. The second is a major difference. In Orissa, *mita* friendship is comparable to brotherhood but disregards distinctions of age and rank. But in Mayong, name sharers cannot avoid age due to the fact that a name also has a temporal unfolding, a particular fate built into it. The wish for telic identity between a name and a person, grounded in the non-aspirational fact that cosmologically pre-determined forces constitute a name, makes a name's temporality visible in a very real way. And since my name sharer is unavoidably either my junior or senior, by ushering him into existence *viva voce* I also usher in what I could be or could have been.

Name sharers thus have something very much in common with kin. They cannot escape the fact that they are bound by something proximal and largely pre-determined, independent of their wishes. This sheer proximity of fate, in turn, creates an obligation to care for a name, and this on the sole basis of being stuck together in an ambiguous situation (cf. Das 2013). Even if Mayongian name sharers see their relationship as one of competition, they must at least acknowledge the fear that Mukunda Da spoke of. If my name sharer is doing bad things, then that may very well affect me and what I think of as my singular fate. Better to cut the name. As a consequence, if euphemistic friendship does anything, it sets a record straight: friendship is a

way to escape the ties that kinship binds. Kinship is unambiguous mutual destiny; friendship is not. Addressing a name sharer as “friend” ultimately might be a socially necessary act of misrecognition (Bourdieu 1980), but the taboo and its containment nevertheless mitigate the uncanny feeling that occurs when one has an occasion to say: there is my name, but there is not my body.

### **An Untying that Binds**

Effectively, the taboo I broke wasn’t so minor after all. It boils down to the fact that my future is something I am not exclusively responsible for. Nor is it clear that my life is uniquely my own. It is, in fact, a real cosmological possibility that Sean Penn and I share something important. Calling him by name ushers a potential shared destiny into being, implying that his bad and good deeds are potentially my own and vice versa. My future might be his present and his past might be my present.

Ostensibly, had I “cut the name” and addressed him as my friend, I would have created between us a kind of “close distance” (see Mazzarella 2003: 256–57, 2006: 496). In other words, I would have also introduced a nominal, but very real and substantial, difference: even though our embodied destinies might be intertwined, I should treat him otherwise. His embodied actions and intentions are of his own lifeworld, which may be *dizzily close* to my own, but nevertheless remain independent—just distant enough. A word, a single word, thus unties a fate.

Still, this is an untying that binds together all the Seans of the world. Every time I write Sean Penn’s name in this chapter, I repeat the transgression and raise the stakes. I can’t escape him; I can’t laugh him off as “my other brother Sean.” Something of our mutuality forever remains in that aspects of me are unfolding in him and vice versa. For my part, it remains uncertain whether this is good fortune or bad luck.

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For shared accounts—which seek to create cosmological mutuality through the media of communicative ledgers, rhetorical speeches, and processes of speciation, exhortation, and particularization—a name is at the beginning and end of all reckoning. Names make shared accounts possible in that all members of the *raij* can participate in them, but their socio-cosmic precarity—rooted in their particularity, singularity, and implied destinies—can also lead to their unmaking. What begins as a way to unite differences under a meaningful and functioning totality based not upon kinship but upon a nascent state of belonging, ultimately risks radical individuation, secrecy, and a tendency to keep mutuality locked into *kinship* rather than *friendship*. We have seen how this works with personal names, but names that index ethnic belonging (e.g. titles, clanic patronyms) are another matter altogether. Kinship drives segmentary belonging (see Chapter 1), but it can only do so because the particularization of naming cannot disassociate itself from that kind of mutuality. After all, the shared account must particularize, it must make the case that such-and-such a person can only participate in a shared cosmology because she has a particular part in the whole.

Given the cosmographic situation described in Chapter 1—i.e., that the historical tendency toward segmentation in Mayong now fuels political realignments beyond the multi-ethnic supralocalities—something as seemingly “small, dry, and uninteresting” as a name (see Hacking 2004: 12) is actually one of the kernels that leads to the unraveling of the shared account. A name hailed in speech or marked in a ledger carries with it particular obligations to a larger community, but that community need not be the Mayong *raij*; it can bespeak a destiny for the “Karbi people,” the “Koch people,” or for this or that particular patriclan. It all depends upon where the obligation ultimately settles; and for the Plains Karbi in Burha Mayong, the

Mayongian destiny looks less fruitful than a pan-Karbi one. At least for the time being. Today, being Mayongian seems to afford less for the people in Burha Mayong than being Karbi. After all, the latter have an autonomous district and protections/reservations that promise a safer future for their children. The former seems more or less a relic of a past that was topographically and mythopoeically rather than ethnically derived. For the Karbi in Burha Mayong, the questions remain: What do I enjoy and what do I cut? To whom is my destiny linked? What do I *share* with them?

### **Epilogue: Booze and Ethnogenesis**

If a personal name and an embodied subject are meant to have an identical destiny, then what about the proper names of substances and other non-human entities? Here, I would like to make a risky, yet brief and comparative conjecture to carry us into the conclusion of this thesis, which carries with concerns over comparison and scale with respect to the Mayongian shared account and its cosmographic methods and underpinnings. What I wish to think through here is if the quasi-nominalism of personhood described above finds a parallel in Northeast India's politics of ethnogenesis—a socio-political phenomenon that acquires some of its energy from the different names of what we might think of as the same substances. I do not take this comparison lightly, so I must be clear: regardless of its historical origins or current motives, ethnic segmentation is viral in Northeast India. During my fieldwork in Mayong, at least six groups in the area were in the process of sub-dividing and claiming status as distinct tribes. And this was not merely a cynical function of the politics of constitutional scheduling or the now sexy allure of obtaining “ST” status. Indeed, despite the effects of political discourse, there is a rather common, almost centrifugal, tendency to make claims of discreet cultural autonomy, claims often justified by the

display of idiosyncratic *names* as much as by the idiosyncrasies of language and ritual form or practice (cf. Ramirez 2014; Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2017).

There is no better place to grasp this tendency via naming than in the ubiquitous “ethnic food festivals” that pop up at fairs in city centers across Assam. Visiting the food stands set up by various tribal organizations at these events is very much like moving from “state to state” among the food stalls in Dilli Haat in Delhi. But the phenomenology of the matter is rather different: practically every “tribe” at an ethnic food fair serves pretty much the same food in *almost* identical styles—with names often provided in generic Oxomiya or English. And these, I should add, are *sanctioned* foods—primarily meat dishes that are meant to be iconically “pan-tribal” or “ethnic,” yet inoffensive to the Assamese Hindu majority. So one can taste smoked pork, fermented fish, roasted silkworms, snails, etc.—really anything that isn’t blatantly taboo to Assamese caste Hindus or other Hindu populations (e.g., elephant, beef, dog, bat, monkey, etc.), which many tribal communities do in fact eat. That taboos of Muslim communities, aside from “Gauriya Oxomiya” (who tend to eat pork regardless of religious sanctions), are unfortunately not considered with respect to public food repertoires is grist for the mill in the current climate of urban Assam, which—as of the Summer of 2017—seems to be joining in with the communal “Hindu vs. Muslim” politics of the nation-state.

But then there is the booze. If festival food is an index of pan-tribalism, and cross-cuts caste Hindu and Tribal populations, then festival alcohol is an index of ethnic containment and distinction. Again, from the perspective of an outsider, there is little difference between the kinds of rice beer served at these events, which is partially a function of the same kind of sanctions

against inoffensive food I mentioned above.<sup>18</sup> But, to assume an identity of substance would be an error of judgment, a mistake I made early on during my fieldwork. At one of these festivals I referred to the “*judima*” at the Dimasa booth as “*hor*” (the Karbi name for the same style of rice beer), and then received a rather stern lecture as to why *hor* is “not the same thing” as *judima* because the Karbi people are different than the Dimasa people. Yet, my error wasn’t simply in confusing tokens for real types, it was in projecting a sort of naturalist ontology (Descola 2013) onto one that centers instead on radical nominal being. The name *is* the thing; it doesn’t just rigidly designate the substance but rather *is* the substance, mirroring the singularity of tribal becoming concurrent with ongoing political segmentation. The conflation between name and substance not only indexes ethnic integrity, it further justifies and reinforces ethnogenetic claims and their politicized elaborations: e.g., why the Karbi *are not the same as* the Dimasa, and thus should have separate political autonomy, separate states, separate rituals and kings, and so forth.

As it turned out, the two rice beers—that is to say, the two names—were meant to have their own distinct destinies as well. Choosing to ignore my Dimasa friend’s insistence that to drink both would be to combine two radically different substances, I ended up suffering the physical consequences—a rather bad hangover reminiscent of those times I broke the cardinal American taboo of mixing liquor and beer (*Beer before liquor, never been sicker...*). Maybe I could have gotten by if I had just named both beverages *mod* or *lau pani*, the generic Oxomiya word for booze and rice beer, respectively—i.e., if I had classified the substance at a higher order of inclusion. Then again, the fact that the Plains Karbi of Burha Mayong refer to their sacred rice beer as *mod* in colloquial speech is, among other things, why other Plains Karbi communities

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<sup>18</sup> If certain rice beers taste differently, it is often explained as deriving from the kind of rice and quality of water used to make them. But exegesis of this sort does not happen in “multi-ethnic” settings, like food festivals, where primordialism and nominalism are the paraded forms of exegesis.

outside of Mayong (in Dimoria and Thakurkuchi, for example) consider the Mayongian Karbi to be “more Oxomiya than Karbi,” especially now that “Oxomiya” has become an ethnic category of belonging (see Baruah 1999). That, however, is another obscure moon, in Mauss’ terms, best left untouched and further unmentioned for the time being.

## CONCLUSION

### Comparison as Attunement

As the preceding chapters have shown, a double-sided cosmographic situation underpins the history and praxis of the Mayongian shared account. On one hand, Mayongian politics now unfold in a mythopoeic register. Kings, tribes, and the state are locked into a situation that has led Mayongians to wager their political alignments on relative regimes of publicity and prosperity. On the other hand, Mayongians are attuned to the deceptive features of publicity and prosperity. Sorcery, for example, undermines access to the forces of life but it, just like the *maya* cosmologies it is based on, draws out what is hidden and propels forward a value of transparency. With this cosmographic situation in view, I proceeded to demonstrate how the content of secret accounts and *so'rang* knowledge are transformed into the shared account by means of four different processes: quiescence, speciation, exhortation, and particularization. Through an investigation of these processes within and beyond the ritual order of the shared account and the *raijmel*, we were able to notice how the “path to publicity” of the shared account almost inevitably creates surfeits or a surplus of meaning that decomposes the totality it sets out to (re)compose.

Thus the picture we have is of a set of cosmographic processes that fuel the unraveling of the very same cosmos that the shared account sets out to replicate in the “meso level” of social life (Lincoln 1986, 1991). I have attempted to show that this contradiction does not collapse the structural logic of the Mayongian situation, but is, in fact, its sequitur. Indeed, it creates a dynamism whereby the processes of shared accounting depend on realms beyond its ritually closed structure to assist in resolving an antimony of qualitative decomposability, framed in

Kantian terms between the “simple” and the “composite”—or in a more general sense of undifferentiated unity and necessary differentiation. Yet, no resolution or terminus can happen—the dialectic cannot synthesize, only negate itself further. All this leads to a kind of uncertainty that is productive and irresistible, but nevertheless framed as a “shared commitment” (Tomasello 2009) because there still are hooks of mutual certitude in every articulation of the shared account: the king is still a divine patron of prosperity, the mother goddess is still the source of that prosperity, and even if it is a “narcissism of minor differences” that makes Mayongians feel different than their neighbors and divided against themselves, it is this very internal division—a polity built on incorporation of strangers—that prevents Mayong from complete disintegration and the ethnic realignment of its populace toward other political possibilities...at least in the present moment.

I am thus uncertain as to how long this cult of accounting will thrive. It, as well as this ethnography that attempts to understand it, may ultimately be nothing but a “snapshot” (Bloch 2000, 2013) of an evanescent moment in a larger process of socio-cosmic transformation. Mayongians, however, see the shared account as necessary and pleasantly irresistible to their moment and it is this necessity and pleasure, even in the face of decomposition, that this dissertation has attempted to understand.

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For the remainder of this conclusion, I will switch into a quasi-confessional, but still ethnographic, voice. Perhaps it is unorthodox for a PhD dissertation, but the need to do so weighs heavily on me. I cannot wrap this up in any other way without sacrificing the satisfaction of saying what I think needs to be said about Mayong—and this in a voice that is more comfortable to me.

I originally wanted to conclude this dissertation with reflections on public feasting (*bhoj*) and how it fits into the dialectical making and unmaking of the shared account. End with a dense, concrete image, I thought, which would speak to all the themes of the thesis and emphasize the dynamism of the shared account. But when I began writing my conclusion, something nagged me: I went to the field to study accounting practices, yet what I ended up researching and writing about was a quasi-formal system of public reckoning that, even if referred to in terms of “accounts” and “account keeping” in local discourse, was so far removed from what we normally think of as accounting *proper* (especially in its financial avatar) that I feared I was mixing apples and oranges in the end. The Mayongian *raijor hisap* obviously has moral and judicial features, thus perhaps linking it historically to the monastic orders of Assamese Vaishnavism, which, in part, provided the bureaucratic scripts for the “liminal states” of the baby kingdoms in Central Assam (see Chapter 1; cf. Paul 1995). And yet, even after making my case in the introduction that accounting is most generically and ultimately a matter of “cosmography,” of attuning parts and wholes and communicating that attunement in some sort of performative or rhetorical capacity (what I called “elicitation”), I could not help feeling that an understanding of the Mayongian *raijor hisap* might be limited by framing it in terms of a specific kind of semiotic technology that seems “primarily” about dealing with the world of money and financial bookkeeping.

These last-minute anxieties of analysis led me down a rabbit hole. I felt I had to justify the grounds on which I was comparing the *raijor hisap* with a very specific “economic” technology. I returned to my fieldnotes and transcriptions, pouring over every page and detail to find notes on where I made that comparison work. Everything was still there, but nothing to the effect of, “Oh, this is how it is like when I do managerial accounting in Chicago!” or “Cf. the

figure of the IRS auditor.” One passage, however, struck me, albeit in a more generic capacity about “comparison” in general. I composed it a few days before returning to Mayong in June 2013 (right before the “naked man” incident described in the Preface):

*At the Dowdy Farm in the early summertime. With an imminent return to Mayong, the damp heat and the floating chaff are getting to me. This field and that field, this forest and that forest, these doves and those doves. I remember my first day with Dipon Deuta, his AM radio barely whispered out Bhupen Hazarika tunes as he drove at 5 kph down the shitball roads to visit other big men for timepass and tea talk. All I could think about was my childhood, riding with Pa-Paw in his beat-up Ford in Winchester, KY...doing exactly the same: driving at super sub-limit speeds with Willie Nelson hushed on the radio, meeting this old feller and that old timer, this fisherman and that berry picker, for showing off, timepass, and coffee talk. How to compare these two worlds with intellectual justification? I continue to hesitate grounding any possible comparison in such vague chestnuts like ontology, epistemology, capitalism, the subject, affect, phenomenology, etc. Like Mayongians say, the trick is to hit the dhol [ceremonial drum] in just the right place...to attune the player to the played. What orchestra and what score to imagine, then?*

There are whiffs of Lévi-Strauss’ musicology of comparison here, something that influenced me a great deal early on in the field. I often wondered what a musicology of anthropological comparison would look like when it didn’t take the fugues and libretti of Wagner, but the screeching tremolo of D. Boon, or the soulful shades of Buffy Saint Marie, or the cosmic imagination of Sun Ra as it’s starting point. That is to say, when it removed itself from its bourgeois trappings of “music proper” and looked at the dissonant music of the drunks and corndogs—i.e., when it would stop comparing “primitive philosophy” with the high-culture of Europe and started seeing the former in terms of the bricolage of the struggling musician in the dive bar, or the outsider making her art speak to something beyond formal, notational systems.

Needless to say, the passage struck me—it was an externalized memory I had forgotten. And I realized that there was something more than just a sappy self-serving reflection here. It was a search for a ethnological method beyond systematic formalities and more resonant with the way most of experience music. I am drawn to the image of the ceremonial drummer who has to whack

the drum-skin in just the right place: not only to get the desired resonance but to attune his body to the object before any music can happen. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of *Da-sein* to flesh out a theory of "moral experience," Jarrett Zigon (2014: 22) notes that one of the ontological conditions for a moral being-in-the-world is what we might call *attunement*:

This attunement manifests itself as the potentiality to become engaged with and become entangled in diverse and particular relationships that makes possible the vast diversity of ways of living we find in the social world. This engagement and entanglement is best conceived as having-fallen-upon *Da-sein* as a nexus rather than actively sought. Attunement, in this sense, is not done by an individual who psychologically adjusts; rather, attunement in the ontological sense is that foundational capacity that allows relationships to assemble. To be very straightforward about this: attunement is what allows *Da-sein* to be a being that is initially and always a being-in-relationships.

I am not entirely seduced by the Heideggerian metaphysics here, but I do find the idea that "attunement" is not a psychological or physiological adjustment, but rather a foundational condition and capacity for relationships to exist at all, quite useful for thinking about what goes into a musicological method of comparison. The ceremonial drummer, after all, is trying to create music in a condition that is already entangled by several performative, physiological, cultural, and interactional relationships. The alignment of his body and the object is a secondary "attuning" made possible by the fact that he is already intersubjectively and interobjectively attuned: "a being-in-the-world that is already thrown into and does not exist in any way other than always entangled in a world of relationships (ibid.: 23).

*Attunement*, with its double sense of harmony and dissonance, might be a felicitous way to begin thinking about whether our comparisons are justifiable or not. An act of attunement is already pre-figured by an entanglement that allows comparison to proceed. For me, though, all this is too abstract, too focused on metaphysical conditions of possibility and not on actual experiences, which as Durkheim ([1912] 1995) clearly argued, are the only way to make the

*socially born* categories of understanding have flesh in the world. So even if attunement is irreducible to experience, it is in experience that comparison can lift off.

There is a Mayongian theory to this as well. After two years of many interview sessions with Jadab Teron, the current *bor bangthai*, I finally was able to get an imaginative answer out of him as to why public accounts are so important. Before that, he would often say chiefly things like “it’s our tradition” or “it’s our library”—the sort of self-explanatory utterances a chief is supposed to make. Yet, one day sitting and drinking on his verandah, both he and I were in a lucid mood discussing music and the joy of dancing with the *deka rajij*, how the pain in his legs is bearable because the youth give him strength to feel young again. It was quite a lovely moment. After some back-and-forth, I reposed the question about the purpose of the shared account, this time asking him what life would be like if Mayongians didn’t keep accounts all the time. The *bor bangthai* first interjected, “Our society would be destroyed!” But, after taking a sip of rice wine, he responded further with a keen philosophical wit:

Ok, listen, there is no society (*xomaj*) if there is no attunement/adjustment of your mind and my mind (*tur aru mur mon tú khap khúwar nilmile*). Our law fixes that...meaning, it makes many minds into one. Like the Ahoms said, one must destroy seven kingdoms to build one. But people do not follow the rules and rituals properly; they do not understand. So we have to take notice and bring the law to them. So we do the *hisap* to attune/adjust society to the law (*amar lawek xomaj tú khap khaisu*)....Now there becomes a *rajij*. The *rajij* then understands: my sin is like your sin, my fine is like your fine. This is how it goes.

I didn’t quite understand what he said at that point, but I followed up with a question about his meaning of “society” (*xomaj*). Jadab then reached up and grabbed a book from his shelf, *Dumrali Karbi Luk-Xongskriti* (“Folk Culture of the Dumrali Karbi”), a 2014 ethnographic study by Dayaram Kathar. He shook the book in front of me and said, “This is our law” (*Eitú amar “law”*). Then he grabbed a stack of shared account ledgers, waving them in front of my face and said, “This is our society” (*Eitú amar xomaj*).

At the time, I thought I finally had the key interpretive hook for my research: *hisap = xomaj* (“Accounts = society”). But now, looking back over my transcription of his philosophical explanation, something else comes into view. Here we have a theory of comparison as attunement. The *bor bangthai* posits “society” as the thing to be attuned to “the law,” and what the shared account does is make minds comparable in terms of “sins” and “fines.” Society gets created *and* the law becomes publicly intelligible in the process, recursively it would seem. If I understand the *bor bangthai* correctly, the logical progression is as follows:

There is no society without some kind of mutuality of minds. →

Law creates that mutuality, but people do not understand the law. →

The shared account allows people a tool or medium to compare their thoughts and actions, thus creating a *raij* (with all its implications; see Introduction, Chapter 3). →

∴ law is intelligible and society is created.

Perhaps I am reading too much into the *bor bangthai*'s reflections. After all, we were already drunk at the time; but it seemed good for me then and rather profound now. His utterance takes us into the heart of a “second possibility” of interpreting the Mayongian shared account and seeing it in relation to a world history of reckoning. That it: is not just about “accounting” as a kind of revelatory and cosmographic communication meant to align part and whole, but that it is a kind of *comparison as attunement*, one born of society that also makes society something experienced and intelligible (as society and not necessarily the cosmos). More or less, comparison is another way of describing accounting's capacity to make values evident, equivalent, and *shared* via a distance demolishing technology—which is the “final analysis” that most contemporary accounting theorists like to harp on about (see Introduction). It is a method of comparison as attunement that allows us to think of the *raijor hisap* as analogous to the work of a CPA.

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With this perspective on hand, I want to conclude with some experience-based reflections on comparison as attunement. Acts of comparison between different life-worlds abound in Mayong, perhaps due to the “extimate” quality of the place: where intimacy merges with a narcissism of minor differences. It is a place where ethnography is sort of what everyone is doing already. In the three vignettes that follow, though, I wish to demonstrate how a method of “comparison as attunement” can supplement the established methods of “conceptual disjuncture” and “imaginative translation” in ethnographic theory (da Col and Graeber 2011; da Col 2017). Each of the vignettes involves what Roy Wagner (1975 [2016]) has called “reverse anthropology.” They show that Mayongian comparisons to and misunderstandings about us (or me) are not the same as our (or my) comparisons to and misunderstandings about them. When they attune and compare parts of the cosmos, they are, of course, doing it on their own terms—but in a way that makes me think, here in the end, that “moving within the account” has implications far beyond their own forests, fields, and floods—indeed far beyond the “almost-saying” of equivocal translations that ethnographic theory relishes as sources of imaginative theory, and of a comparison in becoming (da Col and Graeber 2011: viii). Maybe Mayongians aren’t just ordinary ethnographers, but reverse anthropologists, or better “reverse ethnographic theorists” up to the serious business of comparing the real grounds for an undifferentiated unity we might call “humanity.”

### **The Bewitcher, the Bewitched, and the Careless Transgressor: Or, Why a Kinship Diagram might be Assault Sorcery**

During the first month of my fieldwork, I found myself the object of a minor controversy in Burha Mayong. At that point, my knowledge of Oxomiya was minimal and I had to rely on a

Hindi-speaking villager, my friend who we call “Nahorsingh”, to help me collect household surveys and do the necessary business of introducing myself to everyone in the village. Each morning Nahorsingh and I would speak to families in about 5-6 houses; I would ask basic questions about what kind of work they did, who they are related to, etc. Word traveled that “Mr. Census,” as I was known during the first couple months (before I became Sean Da or “Bogai”), was coming around, but that he was from the US and was doing research for a couple years so it would be a good idea to welcome him. One day, Nahorsingh was busted up from a bad night of drinking and fighting, so I decided to conduct a few surveys on my own. My Oxomiya was improving and I felt confident that I could handle at least some basic questions. (I decided whatever I could not communicate, I would just make a note and come back at a later date.)

At this point I was working in Gaonor Mur *suburi/khel*. I fumbled through two households and thought I would visit one more before calling it a day. At the third household I visited, no one was present except the eldest daughter and her young child. We sat down and began the interview. After some basic information gathering, she began recanting a story about why her own marriage was the “opposite” (*o'lo'ta*) of her grandfather's. She had married a Nepali man who, although taking up uxrilocal residence (*ghor juwai*) never converted to her own patriline to “become Karbi.” Whereas her grandfather, who received *uddhar* in order to take *ghor juwai* in Mayong, did “become Karbi.” From her reckoning, her own father replicated this pattern by keeping the name of his mother's patriclan rather than his father's. This had to do with the fact that he could get “better employment” if he was “ST” or *taibol* (see Chapter 1) rather than a caste-Hindu. After that, she lamented that her husband should have done the same as it would have been better off for her son's access to good schools and employment.

I began writing all this down, along with my usual notes on marriages and lineages, which included rough sketches of kinship diagrams. Shortly after I collected my survey, the daughter's mother arrived and offered me some rice beer. I gladly took it and after a few glasses, I stumbled off back to my house.

The next morning I realized two things: first, I was terribly sick; second, my notebooks were missing. The sickness left me completely debilitated. With a high fever, most likely malarial, the pain in my legs was unbearable. I tried to sleep it off for the day; because it was flood season, and the roads were already crested and there was no electricity, I probably would have had to wait a few days before going to a medical clinic. The following day, 4 members of the family I lived with also became sick. Neighbors brought in herbs and various local medicines to ease our pain while we all waited for the flooding to subside.

This went on for a couple more days. Meanwhile, strange things began happening. A neighbor saw a large black cat circling our compound at night. Two chickens were killed and we woke up to a patio covered in feathers and blood. Mobile phones in our household were taken to the *dhaba* to be charged, but when they were returned to us (showing full battery life), they would shut down and have to be recharged again. People were also reporting that they heard music coming from the jungle late at night—drums and flutes being played very slowly and hypnotically. It was all a little weird on top of the delirium induced by my fever.

I was feeling a little better by the fourth day and thought I would at least go back and try to retrieve my notebooks. When I arrived at the household where I left them, I was met by the matriarch of the household who told me to leave immediately. This family also had become very sick, it seemed. I said I would go once they gave me back my notebooks and I apologized about my own seemingly contagious state. When I grabbed the notebooks, however, I noticed that one

of them had several pages ripped out of it. I kindly asked the pages to be returned; I was instead pointed to a brush pile that had been burning near the gate.

All this was too much and was starting to make me very upset. I can't quite remember what happened after that—if I cried or shouted or moped off—but a little while after I returned home, a few neighbors came to hold a *raijmel* at my compound. Soon, a debate was unfolding. Nahorsingh was present, so I asked him to translate what was going on. He said that the man who ripped the pages from my notebooks was accusing me of being an unnamed sorcerer—in other words, not a *bej* who publicly avows their knowledge, but a *so'rang bej*, in other words, what we might translate as “a witch.” The strange events that coincided with me becoming sick, along with the fact that two households I had been in contact with were also becoming sick, were matters of detail to support the strongest evidence that I was up to nefarious preternatural activity: a page from my fieldnotes that linked names with kinship diagrams.

The *raij* asked me to speak and explain to them why these “mantras” were in my notebooks. All eyes were focused on me and I began weeping uncontrollably. I asked Nahorsingh to translate from Hindi to Oxomiya for me. I tried to tell everyone that they were not mantras, but symbols to show how people are related: the triangles were men, the circles were women, vertical lines represented descent, horizontal lines siblingship, and equal signs mean marriage. This proved nothing. The question was posed to me again: *why* did I write these images at all? This was followed by even more skeptical questions: What value would it give for my research? Why were certain names circled or underlined while others were not? This didn't look like a “census” so what was it actually? Claims were being made that my scribbles were what was making everyone sick. Something was *moving* across those images and lines that connected names, and it probably wasn't something good given the current state of things.

Unable to articulate an answer or defend myself with any clarity of mind, Dipon Deuta finally took my side and declared that the kinship diagrams were most certainly not the issue. What was at issue were the strange events and the collective sickness, which may still be my doing—even if unintentionally so. Dipon Deuta thus made the recommendation that Nahorsingh take me to a *bej* to see what really happened. At this point, I thought that the worst that could come of this was probably over and I might as well drag my delirious ass to a *bej*.

Nahorsingh and I took off. Night had already fallen and it was raining hard. When we arrived, he explained the situation to the *bej* who then took me into a small room, sat me down in front of a *saki* (earthen lamp) and began throwing cowrie shells down on the dirt floor. There were three shells. One fell closed-side up: this was “me” I was told. The other two fell open-side up. This is where it gets interesting. One of these shells, I was told, was the mother goddess (*Ai Kali*), the second shell was her sacred stream (*nijora*) near the Kesakhaiti *than*. The *bej* said all was now clearly explained: the day before I fell ill, several villagers noticed that I had been swimming in the *nijora* at the wrong time, the time of the day when the goddess herself bathes. Angered at my intrusion and most certain glances at her naked body, she made me sick, along with all those who were close to me over the next *tithi* (lunar day). The wild cat was a *bipod sangket* (“sign of danger”), the music in the jungle were ghosts (*bhut*) delighting in the chaos caused by the goddess, and the cell phones were also “sick” (*mobil’ot bimar xumai gol*) to prevent us from getting help.

The *bej* then took out a piece of paper and wrote down a list of items I would have to buy to perform a *puja* to make things right with the goddess: For *proxad* (*prasad*) I needed 1 kilogram of *bud* and *motor* (chickpeas and green pea sprouts) and 1 *axhi*—a full branch—of bananas. For the rite of asking forgiveness, I needed one packet of *dhup* (incense), a little bit of

*dhuna* (fragrant powder to be burned on coconut shells), 100 grams of *mitha tel* (mustard oil) for oil lamps, and one packet of *xindur* (vermillion powder). I could give the *puja* anytime, but 11 a.m. would be most preferred by the goddess. I would also have to pay the *deuri* to administrate the rite and both give and distribute the *proxad*.

When we returned, the *raijmel* had already disassembled and dispersed. It seems that while we were away, the *raij* started looking over the paper torn from my notebook more closely. Someone was able to make out that I had written a reference to my accuser “using a Karbi title so he could get a better job.” According to Dipon Deuta, my accuser was exhorted to admit that he was actually worried that he would get a “bad name” (*badnam*) if this “lie was not destroyed.” When we told Dipon Deuta about the “real situation”—i.e., that the goddess was pissed off because of me bathing in the *nijora* at the wrong time—he energetically concurred with the diagnosis and took my money to buy the things needed to give the *puja* the next morning.

The next day, I did my duty and patronized the ritual. I was told it was successful and that everything was now OK. The goddess was happy. After a couple days, the floods subsided and signs of everyone’s sickness were gone. The electricity returned and our phones were all charged and working. Nahorsingh and I began our work again and we returned to Gaonor Mur to finish the household surveys. Before we started work, I met with my accuser again to apologize for the whole situation. He handed me back the torn page from my notebook and said there was no problem anymore. Before we left, he turned and said “Write whatever you need to do so that you can finish your book. Just remember that *I am Karbi*, completely, 100%.” After thanking him, Nahorsingh and I departed. As we walked to the next household I asked him, “Do you really think he thought I was a secret *bej* doing black magic?” “No,” Nahorsingh quipped back, “He just thinks he is a big man. Besides, American magic does not work in Mayong.”

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On one hand, and strangely enough, Harry West's (2007) observations that the Muedan people of Mozambique interpreted his ethnography of their practices of sorcery *as* a form of sorcery itself is telling here. It is not so much that my accuser misunderstood the difference between a kinship diagram and a *ku mantra* (a mantra of harm and assault), but that my ethnographic solicitation of information about him from his daughter was *comparable* to sorcery: both do not elicit an account in the first- and second-person register, but use third-person descriptions to bring out something into the public. From my accuser's perspective, what I was up to was more or less the same thing that goes on when people draw out secret accounts outside of the ritual domain of shared accounting or when a sorcerer accesses the particulate data of your life to do with as they please. So here we have an implicit mode of comparison happening on local terms.

On the other hand, the shift in my status from bewitcher to bewitched to divinely punished transgressor—and both the public *fine/puja* and quiescence that followed—ultimately led to a surfeit. These kinship diagrams were indeed actually something else, something amoral and maybe, ultimately useful (if used in the right way). They were now understood as something more like a shared account: they made a family's particular connections and speciations legible through marriages and lineages in a singularly visible way. Moreover, my accuser and I became good friends after this whole fiasco; sometime later he asked me to draw a diagram of his clan (going back three generations) so he could show it off as proud evidence to others of his Karbi heritage (after all, *ghor juwai* cannot be easily symbolized in these diagrams). Often he and I would drink together at his house, watching the National Geographic channel on television and comparing peoples and things around the world. One of my friends in the village once laughed about this, saying that because of my influence, whenever my former accuser gives speeches at

*raijmel* these days, he uses the words “symbol” and “kinship” all the time. Here we have a reverse anthropology that moves within a very different kind of account.

### **The *Kali* and the *Dhepa Dhol***

According to the Karbi elders in Burha Mayong, the sound of the origin of the universe was not a bang or a resounding “OM,” but a sonic battle between the *kali* (a reed instrument similar to a clarinet) and the *dhepa dhol* (a ceremonial drum now used for Bohag/Rongali Bihu celebrations), whose players fought with such ferocity that neither could overpower the other. But in that draw, perfect “harmony and resonance” (*xomoloy aru onunad*) was achieved, the sound of which gave birth to the deities and the primordial bird(s) who laid the eggs from which the various tribes of the world would hatch, especially the Khasi, Ahom, Kéche (non-Karbi people, or “foreigners” according to the *bor bangthai* in Burha Mayong), Naga, and Karbi.

Now, this is a particularly Mayongian gloss on the Karbi origin myth, another pedaling of *goroka* history. The inclusion of a sonic element into the story is not found in other versions of this tale (see, e.g., Stack and Lyall 1908; Athparia 2003). But it does, I think, touch on a kind of deep symbolism, of Freud’s phylogenetic type, that still speaks to those of us willing to do such comparisons in the wake of Lévi-Strauss. The primordialism of the flute and drum pair has had its various theorists among mythologists and historians of religion. Leaving them all aside, the Oxomiya (Shankardeva) Vaishnavites who take shelter in the name of Krishna have their theories on the pairing as well. For Mayong historian Lokendra Hazarika, the pairing of the *pepa* (hornpipe) with the *dhol* underscores the Shakta roots of Shankardeva’s philosophy. In an interview about the history of Mayongian sorcery, he paused after a question regarding “belief” to elaborate on the following:

I do not believe in magic or sorcery. . . . But I do believe in *Xokti* and I think that even Shankardeva knew that Krishna and Ghunusa are representations of the same male-female union as Shiva and Parvati in the Tantric *dhormo*. It is all symbolic in Shankardeva's philosophy. The flute (*pepa*) is Krishna or Shiva, and the drum (*dhol*) is Ghunusa, the force of *Xokti*. See, one has to play the correct notes and strike the *dhol* in the right place to *get the understanding (buja-buji lagise)* of this symbolism. That means, not your ears. It is your soul (*atma*) that understands the link. One cannot have the man without the woman or the woman without the man. This is true for all life in the world.

Back in Burha Mayong, I was given a different and more explicitly comparative interpretation of the pairing of the *kali* with the *dhepa dhol*. My friend Diganta explained it to me as follows:

DT: The Karbi were the army for the Mayong king. You see this during the *goxai uliuwa mela*. We march with swords and shields to the sound of the *kali* and *dhol*. Then we dance as animals from the jungle: the centipede, the mongoose, the crow...all animals that attack quickly and secretly...I saw on television too that the America army uses something like *kali* and *dhol*...what do you call them?

SD: You mean a flute and snare drum?

DT: *Fute* and *isnare dram*, yes. I saw them! And—this is how you go to war, this is what the fighting sounds like.

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One thing that puzzled me was why Mayongians (and people across Assam) obsess over the pairing of the *pepa* and *dhol* in Bohag (Rongali) Bihu music year round. Bihu tunes belt out from public sound systems, boomboxes in small shops, and cell phones with the speaker feature turned on almost every day. As far as the anthropological significance of all of this, Kheshgi (2016) has made important discoveries regarding the bodily hexis and political symbolism of Bihu music and dance, and its infiltration into (or cathexis of) everyday modes of embodiment. Although I completely agree with her argument, something about the “everyday” element of Bihu annoyed me to the point that I never took it up as an object of study. For years, I had a somewhat cynical interpretation of it, i.e. that it was a bucolic ritual art form that had been co-opted by identity movements and capitalist cultural politics in the key of “ethnicity, inc.,” which in turn stultified

improvisational counter-trends in popular music (see Figure 7.1). To me, it seemed comparable to playing Christmas music year round. On my part, the first was an arrogant assumption, and the second a terribly incorrect comparison.



**Figure 7.1.** The *pepa* and *dhol* on a “special design pack” of Flake cigarettes sold during the month of Bohag to celebrate Bihu.

It wasn't until the Rongali Bihu and *Guxai Uliuwa* celebrations of 2015 when I finally “wised up,” as Mayongians would say, and asked some of my Mayongian friends why they liked to listen to Bihu music throughout the year. I was in Burha Mayong sitting with the *deka rajj*, all in “traditional” dress waiting for our time to go dance for the king during the *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial. We were drinking *kesa mod* (rice beer) and passing the time. Someone was blasting a Bihu song on his cell phone and a thought came to me, “Ah, at least it resonates with the day!” I decided to play researcher for a few minutes, and finally pose my question to the boys.

Most of the responses were in the tune of “I just like it,” while others referenced identity, as in “Bihu music is pure Assamese (*khati Oxomiya*) and we are of Assam” or “Because it is the music of our land.” However, my friend Pranab Timung gave a rather thoughtful answer to my pedestrian question that stuck with me and allowed me to grasp an alternative way of understanding Lévi-Strauss’ ([1971] 1990: 15–16) point about how music, like myth, “needs time in order to deny it,” being an instrument for the “obliteration of time,” in that “listening to it immobilizes the passing of time” and allows us to “enter into a kind of immortality.” Here are Pranab Bhaiti’s thoughts on the matter:

Our Bihu is your New Year’s. Just like Eid is the Miyan [Bangladeshi Muslim] Bihu. It is all about enjoying, dancing, eating, drinking. Everyone is fresh and new . . . we get new clothes. We eat a lot of fish and pork, and hunting is successful. Our granaries are full of *boro* rice. See, we have so many rules and rituals. That is why so many people like to drink, so they can enjoy themselves when there are no feasts or dancing. I do not drink alcohol, so I listen to Bihu music all the time. My mind goes to the time of Bihu [or, I wish to go to the time of Bihu, *Mon jai Bihu xomoy’ot*] . . . I remember the good times of Bihu and feel happy. If everyday was like Bihu, there would be no reason to worry about anything. . . . and I think it is not the words (*xobdo*, “lyrics”) of Bihu songs that make me remember, but the rhythm of the *dhol* and melody/harmony (*xur-xomoloy*) of the *pepa* and *kali*. It stays in my body (or, “The body is the crux of the matter,” *Gah’t thake tú*). . . . Music is such a felicitous thing, isn’t it? (*Gan-Geet tú eneke xubhidar bostu neki?*).

Indeed, if felicity is an apt judgment for evaluating any particular performance, music is probably the best one. Here, though, we again have a reverse anthropology that places Bihu within an account more capacious than our own “culture cults” might allow.

### **Stepping into the Luit**

This dissertation began with three epigraphs, one of which is a translation of Heraclitus’ cryptic comment on the collective transparency of *logos* [“reason,” “word,” “account”]: *logos* is shared even though everyone acts as if their thinking was a private matter. The Mayongian shared account is *apropos*; among other things, it is an attempt to treat thought as a transparent mode of participation (see Introduction). It does not resolve Kant’s second antimony of the simple vs. the composite, but it does call it forth into a dynamic regression through a transcendent picture of a totality that is never fully totalized. In this light, I wish to end the dissertation with a final thought on the more famous Heraclitan paradox of the “flow” and “flux” of reality. What might a river like the Luit (the “sentimental” name of the Brahmaputra) tell us about the capacity for comparison, the capacity for sharing *logos*?

All three instances of the Heraclitan fragment on rivers and flow are ones of reported speech. The most popular version of Heraclitus’ so-called “flow paradox”—it is impossible step into the same river twice—was an instance of reported speech by Plato in his *Cratylus* (402a) and Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (101a12). This is an informal paradox because, as Mackenzie (1988: 3) points out, it begs the question of *doxa*, the common-sense response that would say “Of course you can step into the same river twice!” The second version, accounted by the late figure Heraclitus Homericus and repeated in Seneca’s *Epistolae Morales* (58.23), is a more formal paradox, a synthesis of both paradox and *doxa* into the same (contradictory?) utterance: “We both step and do not step, are and are not in the same rivers.” The third, and the only

fundamental variation, of the river argument is from Arius Didymus (in the work by Stoic Diogenes Laërtius VII.174), “citing Cleanthes who may be supposed to have had access to a text of Heraclitus” (Mackenzie 1988: 2):

*ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν, ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρρεῖ.*

(“Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers.”)

The “one vs. many” and the “simple vs. composite,” in other words Kant’s first and second antinomies of reason, seem to be more apparent in this Heraclitan fragment than the more popular version. Indeed, this version is not paradoxical at all: stepping into “the same rivers” with “ever-newer waters” flowing in them suggests we are talking about qualitatively different things: water and rivers. Water is pure flow and flux, but rivers are of a different conceptual category. Seemingly, the latter are more stable in what they reference or more ambiguous in their sense. Perhaps this is a Stoic misreading of Heraclitus—it may be a caution about making category mistakes—but I think it happily points to something particular about what we think of when we think or speak of “rivers”—and how we *compare* them.

First, let’s get our feet wet with the more popular paradox, that it is impossible to step into the same river twice.

Two of my own teachers have contrasting interpretations of what to do with the popular version of the Heraclitan fragment. Here, in arguing for a social theory that begins with “encounter” over-against “structure,” William Mazzarella (2017/forthcoming) makes the following use of Heraclitus:

Rather than asking how structure is reproduced [or changes] one might ask how it is that the world comes to seem structured at all. Given that, as Heraclitus observed, one can’t step in the same river twice, it’s really quite extraordinary that anyone is ever able to feel that they live in relatively continuous worlds and that they generally experience – or come to experience – encounter as iteration rather than as rupture or drift. What interests me here is encounter as the resonant occasion and trigger for everything social theory

understands as ‘identity,’ ‘culture,’ ‘desire’ etc. Encounter as a moment of mimetic yielding that at the same time actualizes the intelligible differences that people then proceed to inhabit as ‘me’ and ‘you,’ ‘ours’ and ‘theirs.’

Compare this, then, to Marshall Sahlins (2013a: 341), who in responding to the critics—well, really only to Maurice Bloch—of his recent book on kinship, hilariously gives the post-Hellenistic philosopher “Sebarnos Dardanos” at the “Deutera Polis” symposium the last laugh. Here is the wisdom recounted from the symposium at that historical intersection of Halsted and North Ave. in Palaia Polis:

[O]ne cannot step into the same ethnography twice. But then, one is reminded of the apocryphal tradition of the refutation of Heraclitus’ famous dictum about the flux of reality by his wife Helen, as recounted by the post-Hellenistic philosopher Sebarnos Dardanos at the Deutera Polis symposium:

Returning one day from the agora at Ephesus, Heraclitus said to his wife Helen, Helen Heraclitus, “You know, Helen, I discovered something really interesting. Really interesting. I discovered that you can’t step into the same river twice.”

“What d’you mean Heraclitus?”

“Well,” he said. “Suppose you go down to the river, and you put your foot in the water and at the same time you throw a stick in. Then you take your foot out, wait a bit, and put it back in. But the stick has gone downstream, so you didn’t put your foot in the same river. It isn’t the same. You can’t step into the same river twice.”

“Don’t be a fool, Heraclitus,” she said. “You can put your foot in the same river twice.”

“How’s that?” he asked.

“Well,” she said. “You go down to the river and put your foot and a stick in it at the same time. Then you take your foot out and run downstream at the same rate as the stick, and you put your foot in again. You can step into the same river twice.”

He was amazed!! But according to the anonymous auditor of the Deutera Polis symposium, Helen also added a second, simpler solution:

“Besides, there’s another way you can step into the same river twice,” she said to Heraclitus.

“What’s that?”

“Well,” she said. “You can give the river a name.”

When the news of this conversation reached the good citizens of Ephesus, they decided to give the river that ran by the town a name; they called it “Kaistros.” And so for centuries to come the people of Ephesus were able to step in the same river, the Kaistros, thousands and thousands of times.

The *moral*: reality is a nice place to visit, philosophically. But no one ever lived there.

On the face of it, both my teachers accept the “reality” of flux and flow. But whereas Mazzarella sees it as the phenomenological or interactional ground for figurations that effectively *create* structure, culture, intelligible differences, etc., Sahlins sees it as the “reality” where no one really lives—i.e., the figuration beyond the *cultural* ground in which we all necessarily belong. In effect, Sahlins makes the point that even though permanent flow might be ultimately what’s going on, we can indeed step in the same river twice as long as we give it a name. And this is what humans do; this *is* culture. With respect to the Heraclitan paradox, I would like to call this a “soft nominalism.” Mazzarella, conversely, argues that, as the condition of possibility for the very thing we call “culture,” flow and the encounters it produces are *primary*. Let’s call this a “soft realism.” Both are “soft” in the sense that neither wants to discount the possibility of the alternative view; the matter is what is primary and what is secondary. In this sense, both end up replicating the second version of Heraclitus’ river fragment: “we both step and do not step, are and are not in the same rivers.”

Perhaps there is a third way—one not governed by accounting for what is primary or secondary, or one that doesn’t appeal to a synthetic (if still paradoxical) resolution of paradox and *doxa* (things just are and are not this way). What if, given the third variant of Heraclitus’ river argument, we take the point that water—or something that indexes permanent flow, flux and evanescence—is one way of experiencing reality that does not contradict the semiotically “stable” experience of things like “rivers.” What I mean by “semiotic stability” here is that rivers have a remarkable capacity to be *entextualized* and *contextualized* as objects of sentiment beyond just the ability to name them (Silverstein 2014). For example, the distinction in French between a *fleuve* and a *rivière* (Culler 1986), which is a matter of linguistic/referential contrast concerning “flowing water” (one flows into the sea, the other does not), still has to confront the *entextual*

and *contextual* stability of the Seine as the site of a remarkable number of suicides in both fiction and reality, from Inspector Javert to “L’Inconnue de la Seine.” Or consider what “crossing the Jordan” means in Biblical mythology. Or the “sorrow” of the Yellow River in China—the “weary place” some Kuki-Mizo-Chin tribes in Northeast India believe they migrated from.

What about naming a river though? Does the name capture its destiny like a personal name or the ethnic names for alcohol that we saw in Chapter 6? In Assam, here are a few of the (hundreds of) names used for what we normally call the “Brahmaputra River” in English:

Luit/Lohit/Louhityo/Bor Luit/Burha Luit (Oxomiya)  
Bahmaputo (Oxomiya)  
Brahmaputra (Bengali/Hindi/English)  
Yamuna (Bengali)  
Bornoi/Bornodi (Mayongor Upbhaxa)  
Lut (Karbi)  
Burlung-Buthur (Bodo)  
Dilao (Dimasa)  
Khe Nam Tilao (Tai-Ahom)  
Ti Wa (Tiwa-Lalung)  
Ano/Dihang (Mishing)

Linguistic ideologies based on “referential” models of language would suggest that all these refer to the *same* river. But the referent “river,” as Mackenzie (1988: 3) points is opaque and allows for “ambivalent justification” about what one is really talking about whether our point of reference is a single or multiple languages.

Let’s return to Mayong to soak up this point. First things first, Mayongians distinguish between that huge, unstable, precariously shifting, and flood-prone body of water and silt on their northern border (“the *bornodi*”) and the more sentimental and poetically bucolic image of the “Luit”—a term popularized in the lyrics of Assamese bard Bhupen Hazarika.<sup>1</sup> These are not

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike other rivers in India, the Luit/Bornodi/Brahmaputra/etc. is not worshipped as a deity, even if it has elements of animistic subjectivity (see the myth of Arimatta in Chapter 4). Its Sanskrit name, Brahmaputra, implies that it is a son of the god Brahma, or as Hindu pundits like to narrate, the only “male river” in India. For Mayongians, this

just terms for the different “moods” of the river, but rather fundamentally two different entities with different destinies. The *bornodi* pisses everyone off; with its flooding, shifting flows, expanding and receding banks (changed by earthquakes and erosion), and inability to sit still, it is rather like the river in the popular fragment by Heraclitus. Not only can you not literally step in the same place twice, but that same place may one year be water, the next year silt, and the year after that an overgrown field. The Luit, however, is something else entirely.

The wonder Mayongians have about my life and my world in the United States sometimes takes the form: “Oh oh, you are from Chicago. And your Luit is the Mississippi, isn’t it?” The utterance “your Luit is the Mississippi” was so common that my early fieldnotes were speckled with notes in the margins: “why does Luit=Mississippi???” I never bothered to ask for a long time. It wasn’t until my friend Pranjal and I were sitting together listening to songs on his mobile phone when Bhupen Hazarika’s song *Moi eti Jajabor* [“I am a Traveler/Wanderer/Vagabond”] came on. Pranjal asked me if I understood the meaning of the song. I said, “Yeah...he’s traveling this way and that, thinking about home, that’s why everyone here talks about Chicago and the Mississippi, whatever...” Pranjal was a bit taken aback by my casual dismissal of the significance of this song. He countered, “Sean Da, do you understand? You are the *jajabor*. Actually, we, all of us, are the *jajabor*. And when we leave our homes, the Luit goes with us—just like your Mississippi goes with you. Your Luit is the Mississippi; our Mississippi is the Luit.” I sort of half-heartedly agreed with Pranjal, but he insisted I listen more carefully. He grabbed his phone and then helped me go line-by-line with the lyrics to understand what Bhupen Da was saying. Here are the lyrics, translated into English:

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resonance was and still is rather bizarre, despite Hindutva attempts to change the religious significance of toponyms in contemporary Assam.

*Moi eti Jajabor* (lyrics and music by Bhupen Hazarika)

I am a traveler, I am a vagabond.  
Flitting, floating, shifting, drifting  
And never seeking a home.  
I am a traveler, I am a vagabond

From the Luit through the Mississippi  
I saw the beauty of the Volga's face.  
From Ottawa through Austria  
I held Paris in embrace.  
I carried the ancient glory of Ellora  
To the vast newness of Chicago.  
In Dushanbe I heard Ghalib's verses  
Ring in a minaret's echo.

I spoke of Maxim Gorky  
Sitting by the tomb of Mark Twain.  
And each time I found that strangers  
Didn't for long strangers remain.

I am a traveler, I am a vagabond.  
Flitting, floating, shifting, drifting  
And never seeking a home.  
I am a traveler, I am a vagabond.

Many wanderers are aimless drifters  
But I keep a goal in my sight.  
Wherever I see life's joyous colors  
I want to share the light.

I've seen the tall reach of skyscrapers kiss  
The sky in their golden glow.  
I've seen the homeless cower nearby  
Blinded in the shadow.  
I've seen the fronts of a few pretty homes  
Filled with luxuriant green gardens.  
And I've also seen dead flowers fall  
Untended, withered, and hardened.

And seeing all this all too often,  
I worry about it as I roam:  
Your own people are fast becoming  
Strangers to you at home.

I am a traveler, I am a vagabond.  
Flitting, floating, shifting, drifting  
And never seeking a home.

I am a traveler, I am a vagabond.<sup>2</sup>

When Pranjal and I went through this song line by line, I finally *heard* what Bhupen Hazarika was saying. And something strange occurred to me. Not only did his song resonate with my self-image as an anthropologist, but I suddenly heard *jajabor* differently. I heard “rolling stone.” I heard the whole history of blues and rock-n-roll as it moved up the Mississippi River and out and beyond to Northeast India. And here it condensed into an Oxomiya tremolo harmonizing with an Elvis-era “Hawaiian” slide guitar. I heard a different kind of comparison where one steps into the Volga *through* the Luit and the Mississippi. And in that process, both rock-n-roll and the Mississippi suddenly became less familiar to me. The river of my childhood wasn’t the same river anymore. I now heard the sandbanks crashing into the water and smelled different kinds of fish. Johnny Cash’s tears that flooded the Mississippi were now my tears of homesickness and failing love as I sat at Hiloikhunda looking beyond the Luit at the Himalayas on a clear afternoon. My Mississippi was now the Luit. All the while, I kept Pranjal’s words in my head: “We, all of us, are the *jajabor*.” We are all the rolling stones. We step in the same river, but the ever-new waters that rush across us won’t let us gather any moss. Flux is there, but it is only a different way of experiencing reality; another way would be to literally let that flux wash over us as we attune the cosmos to this or that river. Both Pranjal and I are children of Bhupen Da, and also Mark Twain—innocents abroad, whether “abroad” is a hostel in Guwahati, a minaret in Dushanbe, or a seat at Second City in Chicago.

The universe condensed when I finally listened carefully to Bhupen Da, and I *got it*; no longer was I attuning myself to the cosmos, I was letting the cosmos attune me to registers that

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<sup>2</sup> This English translation of *Moi Eti Jajabor* is from Bhaksar Khaund (2014), who quite beautifully captures the rhyming sequence and sentiment of this Oxomiya classic: <http://desolationwrote.blogspot.in/2014/09/remembering-traveller-remembering.html>.

only show up in a reverse anthropology. In other words, not only can you step into the same river twice, but its flow is global: you can step into the same river whether it is in Europe, the United States, or Assam.

This, in the end, is the fundamental work of *goroka*: the perspective that sees mythic precedence where others might see governmentality and cynical politics (Chapter 1), the active stance of aesthetic labor that searches for the rice among the chaff (Chapter 2), the fear of the python who makes debt ownership something desirable (Chapter 3), the perspective that sees fish and humans as part of the same contiguous and endlessly speciating realm (Chapter 4), the exhortative position that allows one to be shocked or surprised by patterns unfolding in unending play (Chapter 5), and the fear that a shared name might be a mutual destiny that needs to be untied and unraveled (Chapter 6).

This is the affordance of the loom pedal, the life of the shared account—it allows us to *see* the one in the many, the simple in the composite, the Luit in the Mississippi, Chicago in Mayong.

## APPENDIX

### THE MAYONG BURANJI AND THE LINEAGE OF KINGS

[2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, transcribed from the hand-written *Mayongor Buranji*  
and *Rajaghoria Goid* (ca. 1938 CE)  
by Shri Pawan Kumar Bishaya with assistance from Shri Utpal Nath  
and Ms. Kavita Medhi in 2006]

#### English Version (2017)

Translated by Daizi Hazarika (University of Oregon)  
Revised and Edited by Sean M. Dowdy (University of Chicago)

#### Editor's Preface

This English translation of the *Mayongor Buranji* and *Rajaghoria Goid* ["The History of Mayong and the Patriclan of the King's House"] was completed in 2014 by Ms. Daizi Hazarika (M.A., Jawaharlal Nehru University; currently a PhD Student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oregon). It is based on the re-written, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of the *Mayong Buranji*, produced by Shri Pawan Kumar Bishaya in 2006 and retitled as the "Mayong Buranji and Lineage of Kings" (*Mayongor Buranji aru Rojar Bongxovali*). The original text was written in a mix of Assamese and Bengali (according to Bishaya), and had many orthographic and dating "errors" (according to local historian Lokendra Hazarika). When Bishaya undertook the duty of copying the *Buranji* into a more durable form, he made the decision to keep the original language, mythic structure, and perplexing dating system unaltered despite the logical (or perhaps simply clerical) inconsistencies therein. Bishaya did, however, add several historical details here and there from existing *xasipat* and his own knowledge, including a longer description of the first *Goxai Uliuwa* ceremonial, extra information about the rule of 10<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong, Xarassa Singha, and with the help of the current Raja Taranikanta Singha, he completed the biographical details for the 37<sup>th</sup>-40<sup>th</sup> kings of Mayong who, of course, would have

no mention in the 1938 Buranji. It is probable that it was at this time of transcription that the dating system became confused or miscopied.

The backstory of accessing this manuscript involved several trips to the current king of Mayong's house in 2013, in which he refused to allow me to even look at the original 1938 Buranji or any of the remaining *xasipat* manuscripts, which are kept in safe storage. A compromise was reached and the Raja allowed me to take Bishaya's revised, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition to a photocopier in Mayong Bazaar; I would then consult the king directly on the details for verification per the original. The king was worried that the original *xasipat* had already been handled too much and might degrade further, so we agreed that this was the best solution.

I consulted my colleague, Ms. Daizi Hazarika at JNU, to assist in translating this text for research purposes only, but later felt that it needed to be included in my dissertation as an appendix and eventually published in English. Accordingly, I consulted Shri Pawan Kumar Bishaya and Shri Taranikanta Singha, the 40<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong, to receive their blessing to do so. We decided that any further notes or editorial additions would be marked by brackets or footnotes so as to retain the integrity of Bishaya's work. Accordingly, we have retained the dating system and language from Bishaya's 2006 edition, and only corrected a few misspellings and typographical errors. Regarding our editorial additions, we have attempted to clarify certain terms and tie together grammatical gaps in brackets. Footnotes have been added for clarifications. Name spellings have been corrected for consistency only, except where consistency is uncertain and names might be referring to another person. Otherwise, alternative spellings are included in brackets only. Finally, to provide an alternative reckoning of the dating system in a more historicist lens, we have included at the end of the Buranji an extra table of dates corresponding to the reign of each Mayong Raja per Guneswar Deka's 2009 reckoning.

The narrative form of the Mayong Buranji in many ways replicates the form and structure of other Buranji in the region, which chronicle the biographies and major initiatives of lines of kings in times of war and peace. The Mayong Buranji, however, details very little about war beyond the battles fought by the “pre-lineage” of Kachari Kings. Once the line of kings in Mayong is established by Suinat Singha, the running themes are largely about sudden death from illness, epidemics, establishing and maintaining the annual ritual orders and religious complexes, appointments of officeholders to offices, and the consistent construction of ponds for drinking water and pisciculture. The latter is of particular note in that it reveals an administrative/economic element to the Mayong kingship beyond its more visible place as a divine source for the maintaining/replicating the cosmic order in Mayong. Moreover, although most Buranji in Assam conclude with the passing over of an early modern kingship to a petty British officer, the Mayong Buranji continues on to the present millennium and—in its current form—ends with the construction of a paved road.

The pre-lineal list of Kachari (Dimasa) kings included in the Mayong Buranji skips much of recorded history and many kings outlined in both the Kachari Buranji and in Edward Gait’s *A History of Assam* are not detailed here. For example, the Mayong Buranji jumps from the “first king”—the half-demon Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima, from the *Mahabharata*—to Megha Narayan (1576–1583), referred to in the Buranji as Meghnad, and then jumps back to the line of Kachari kings that ruled Dimapur. It is only a hypothesis on my part, but the inclusion of the Kachari line of kings in the Mayong Buranji is most likely mobilized as *proof* of a divine connection between Suinat Singha and the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. This makes the Mayong kingdom an extension of an existing cosmic order while still showcasing the cosmic reordering of Suinat Singha as a characteristic stranger king.

Regarding specific personalities, the tenth king of Mayong, Xarassa Chandra Singha, has an unusually large entry in the Buranji. According to Lokendra Hazarika (personal communication), the authors of the Buranji—including Shri Bishaya—attributed the origins of several myths, rituals, ceremonials, archaeological remains, political events, pond digging, and bureaucratic positions to him because he was revered as “the king who made Mayong into a *real* kingdom.” Here, Hazarika means “political state.” If Suinat Singha was the stranger king who established “civilization” for Mayongians, then it was Xarassa Chandra Singha—in most accounts, the third son of Suinat Singha—who capitalized on the theme of powers of alterity (bringing gods, officials, and skilled laborers into the kingdom) and thus gave Mayong its cosmographic situation of being a kingdom that magnetizes outside power toward ends of prosperity and fortune.

The twenty-fifth king of Mayong, Balit Narayan Singha, is credited here with creating the area’s *puwali roja* (“baby kings”) system of 7 kings (*xatroja*) and 5 kings (*pasroja*), although it isn’t clear whether this was a micro-replication of the existing regional septarchy and pentarchy (of which Mayong is said to be a part of), or the actual establishment of the galactic polities. The confusion mounts as Mayong was also said to be ruled by *Baro Bhuyan*, or 12 Bhuyans (minor chiefs), during the medieval and early-modern periods (see Bhuyan 1949; Gait 1906); and the Karbi people in Mayong also claim that their Bangthai was a part of the *Baro Bangthai*, or 12 Banghati, system of minor chiefs who also supposedly ruled the area between the Ahom and Kamata kingdoms. Regardless of the historical situation, the Mayong Buranji contains the cosmonumeric form in its own political reckoning and describes the 12 figures concerned as “junior kings” (*Deka Roja*) who were made satellite protectors of Mayongian suzerainty. According to the Buranji, Balit Narayan Singha also used this opportunity to replicate the Ahom

*paik* system, establishing labor/military units of 12 (with a Bora leader), 100 (with a Saikia leader), and 1000 (with a Hazarika leader). In this way, the Mayong polity came to reform itself into an “Ahom type” galactic kingdom.

To return to the matter of temporal “jumps,” one will most likely notice that the chronotopes employed in the Mayong Buranji are jarring—the reader is drawn from mythical time to medieval time to modern time (e.g., accounting for sixteenth-century payments between gods in Indian Rupees) in the same sentence or passage.<sup>1</sup> There is also lexical and referential slippage between the Kachari Kingdom’s seat at Maibong and Mayong itself. Today, Mayong is approximately 260 km northwest of Maibong as the crow flies, yet the Buranji synthesizes the two as a single regal unit and identical geographical location.

To be sure, the Mayong Buranji is not a linear history based on homogeneous, empty time. However, it too is a function of its creation as a palimpsestual document in 1938 as well as in 2006. According to the current Mayong Raja, Taranikanta Singha, the initial hand-written Buranji composed in 1938 was written by a royal family member educated in Bengali-medium schools and he attempted to synthesize the data from various *xasipat* manuscripts into a modern historical form, reckoning everything according to “Christian centuries in the British style” (as the Raja put it to me). Bishaya followed suit in 2009 and both Ms. Hazarika and myself have felt a similar awkwardness in trying to balance the linear chronotope with the mythopoeic one. In the end, what we have is something of a mythopoeic history where gods, dead kings, and meta-persons play active roles in life, time leaps forward or falls backward in order to establish divine connections, but the narrative as a whole is rendered in terms of a progressive, Gregorian time.

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<sup>1</sup> The Indian “rupee system” was not introduced into Assam until 1836–37 (Gosawmi 1987: 37).

The result is no less than a living cosmographic history; in so many words, a further pedaling of the *goroka* of Mayong.

SEAN M. DOWDY  
Guwahati, Assam, India  
July 2016

### **Introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition [by Shri Pawan Kumar Bishaya]**

Known for its magic (*jadu*) all around the world, the place called Mayong is unique in itself. It was said that Mayong had a written history (*buranji*) where the birth of this place, its royal dynasty, and its history of the traditional and administrative works were mentioned. Nothing is known about the author of this original, hand-written *buranji* of Mayong.

Initially, however, the history of Mayong was also mentioned in local *xasipat* [aloe bark scriptures and annals], but as a result of the lack of preservation these were destroyed with time. According to the 39<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong, Ghanakanta Singha, and his son the current king Taranikanta Singha, this handwritten history of Mayong was copied down in the year 1938 AD from the *xasipat* that were available. This [“official”] hand-written history of Mayong is available at the royal household, but it is stored there under vulnerable conditions; there is always a fear of this book becoming destroyed and the history [of the kingdom] fading away with the coming generations. So in order to preserve it an effort has been made by copying it down in the form of this current book.

This book was encouraged by the current [40<sup>th</sup>] King of Mayong, Shri Taranikanta Singha, the renowned historian Shri Lokendra Hazarika, and a famous social worker of Mayong, Shri Dilip Chandra Nath. As a result of the cooperation of these scholarly people, along with the 40<sup>th</sup> King of Mayong, an effort was made to write down the history of Mayong [in more permanent form]. The words used in this book are taken directly from the *xasipat* and no

translation has been made into English. Some of the words are difficult to interpret but effort has been made to explain these words as far as is possible.

The credit of this book goes to Shri Utpal Nath (Lecturer, Mayong Anchalik College), Kavita Medhi (Associate Lecturer), and Shri Pawan Kumar Bishaya (Hatimuria, M.Phil), who took a collective initiative of re-writing/transcribing this history of Mayong. [Shri Bishaya] is a member of the family of a royal official in Mayong. As his surname suggests, “Bishaya” means an official which we shall see later in this book. He is the Grandson of Maniram Koch and the son of Mahendra Koch. His family took over the title “Bishaya” (which means “official”) proceeding the “Koch” title.

SHRI PABAN KUMAR BISHAYA  
*Mayong, Assam, India*  
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## THE MAYONG BURANJI AND THE LINEAGE OF KINGS

*Shri Shri Krishanaye namo namah  
Oti purwar Dimapur  
Mayong ba maibongor rajar  
Buranji ba purukhnama.*

[In the name of Shri Krishna  
(From) the ancient land of Dimapur  
(Behold) the history and biography  
Of the kings of Mayong or Maibong.]

At the first instance, we shall recite the history related to the [Kachari] Kings of Dimapur (and later, Mayong or Maibong).

### **The Kachari Kings**

The early part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century saw the rise of the Kachari Kingdom, which had extended along the southern bank of Brahmaputra, from the Dikhow to the Kolong or beyond, and included the valley of the Dhansiri and the tract which now forms the North Cachar Hills District. The Kacharis claim decent from Ghatotkacha, the son of Bhima in the *Mahabharata* from Indian Mythology. Ghatotkacha was the son of [the Pandava] Bhima and [the Rakshasi] Hidimbi [sister of Rakshasha Hidimba] and that is why the Kacharis named their capital as Hidimbabur (presently known as Dimapur) and the Kachari kings introduced themselves as *Hidimbeshwar* or “the Ghatotkacha Rajas.” But by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, this kingdom began to fade away [or “break apart”]. Towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century the Kacharis had to surrender their capital Hidimbapur and the adjoining areas to the Ahoms. A fierce battle was fought between the Kacharis and the Ahoms in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Although initially the Kachari kings showed their might, but in 1526 two battles were fought regarding the Dhansiri border. In the first battle the Kacharis emerged victorious but during the second battle the Ahoms were able

to defeat the Kacharis. Again in 1531 a battle was fought and the Ahoms were able to push back the Kacharis until the Dimapur border. After that the Kachari king along with a large army went and rescued their capital. But the king was not able to enjoy his victory for long and died due to some illness.

### **Meghnaad [Meghnath, or Megha Narayan(?)]**

After the death of Ghatotkacha Raja, his son Meghnaad annexed the throne. During his reigning period for a number of years there was no enemy invansion. He died in the battle between the Kurus and the Pandavas.

### **Khunkhora**

After the death of Meghnaad Raja, his family member Khunkhora took over the throne. But even Khunkhora could not withstand the Ahoms. The Ahoms defeated the Kacharis and made them assemble in Dimapur. Seeing this Khunkhora fled and his brother Dessak was killed.

### **Detsung**

After Khunkhora Raja fled, the Ahom commander-in-chief placed his family member Detsung on the throne and made him the vassel king. Detsung vowed loyalty to the Ahom supremacy and promised to pay a huge amount of taxes to them every year comprising of a large amount of gold, precious stones, and a horse. But soon the Kachari Raja forgot his promise which enraged the Ahom king Suhungmung. So in 1536 AD the Ahoms again attacked the Kacharis. Detsung fled but was caught in the forest; he was set free after [the Ahoms] received the tax. As a result the terrified public left Dimapur and sought refuge in another place called Mayong or Maibong.

Some remains are still found at Dimapur and some people still identify themselves in relation to these remains. Presently in front of the Dimapur Police Station, south of the Dhansiri river, a concrete wall dating back to this period can still be found.

### **Chakradwaj**

The traces of another place can be found near the Daya river in the field of Kachmara. This place was built by the Kachari Raja Chakradwaj. But before this on the bank of Dhansiri river the Raja of Maibong or Mayong set up his army. From 1536 to 1600 the empire of the Kachari Raja was safe from any kind of external aggression.

### *Chilarai's Invasion*

Initially the Kacharis were able to enjoy peace in Mayong [Maibong], however in the 1600s the mighty Chilarai, brother of the famous Koch king Naranarayan, invaded Mayong [Maibong]. But the king of Mayong [Maibong] defeated the Koch army and won the battle. Though sometime later, after collecting a huge army, Chilarai again invaded Maibong and defeated Chakradwaj. Chakradwaj was set free, but only after he decided to pay an amount of Rs. 7000 and 100 gold coins annually.<sup>2</sup>

### **Shatrudaman**

Shatrudaman was one of the most powerful among the Kachari kings. In the seventeenth century Prabhakar, [Shatrudaman's nephew and] the Dimarua [Dimoria] ruler of the Kachari kingdom,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Other records either add 30 elephants to this amount (Hazarika 2001: Chapter 3) or record the tribute at 70,000 gold *mohars* and 60 elephants (see *Kachari Buranji*).

<sup>3</sup> Prabhakar was a Kachari "vassal king" or *puwali roja* ("baby king") who was placed into power at the Dimoria Duar at the Southern edge of the Brahmaputra River Valley near the eastward turn of the Kolong/Kopili River. It is

was arrested by the Jayantia king Dhanmanik. When Shatrudaman asked the Jayantia ruler to set his nephew Prabhakar free, the latter paid no heed to the request. Later, when Shatrudaman attacked the Jayantia kingdom, Dhanmanik had to face defeat.

### *The Battle of Roha*

After the Jayantia attack the son of Dhanmanik Raja, Jahamanik, had to serve as a slave for compensation. After Dhanmanik's death, Shatrudaman set Jahamanik free and made him the king of his paternal dynasty [as a subsidiary king in the Jayantia Hills]. But Jahamanik joined hands with the Ahoms against the Kachari Kingdom. Accordingly [and in collusion with the Jayantia Raja], the Ahom king Susengpha (a.k.a. Pratap Narayan)<sup>4</sup> attacked the Kacharis. As a result, they fled to Mayong [Maibong?]. Later the mighty Kachari king Shatrudaman gathered power and returned to battle. In 1630 AD another battle was fought between the Ahoms and Kacharis [at Roha]. Shatrudaman emerged victorious. After this Shatrudaman called himself Pratap Narayan or Pratap Daman. [Maibong was restored as the capital of the Kachari kingdom and its name was changed to Kirtipur.] Meanwhile, the Mughals attacked Assam, and the war between the Ahoms and the Kacharis came to a halt.

### **Naranarayan**

After the death of Shatrudaman his son Naranarayan took over the throne. But while he was preparing to attack the Ahoms he had to face death. Nothing more happened during his rule.

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uncertain whether his advent was a nepotistic appointment or a usurpation in the “stranger king” style of other *puwali roja*.

<sup>4</sup> Susengpha's second title was actually Pratap Singha; he was the 17<sup>th</sup> Ahom Raja and ruled between 1603 and 1641. The use of “Narayan” here connects Singha to the Vaishnavite imaginary, being an incarnation of Krishna.

### **Bhimdarpa**

After Naranarayan his brother Bhimdarpa took over the throne. He was also known as Bhimbal. He was the commander-in-chief in the Ahom-Kachari battle during the reign of Shatrudaman. He was a very powerful king and in order to defeat the Ahoms he attacked an outpost of the Ahom empire beside the Dhansiri river with strong and careful preparations. However, he suddenly died in 1637 AD.

### **Indraballabh**

After the death of Bhimdarpa, his son Indraballabh became the king of Mayong [Maibong] or Kirtipur. In order to maintain amicable relations with the Ahoms, he sent a lot of gifts and an offer for improving their relations. But the Ahom king Swargadeo Susenghpha considered the Kachari Raja as independent [and denied the gifts]. Indraballabh, having some confusion, nevertheless withdrew his forces from the Dhansiri River. Indraballabh ruled for seven years from 1637 to 1644 AD.

### **Virdarpanarayan [Bidarpa Narayan]**

After Indraballabh, his son Virdarpanarayan became the king at Maibong. Realizing his weakness, he decided to set up matrimonial relations with the Ahoms. The Ahom king Surangpha agreed and handed over an Ahom princess to Virdarpanarayan and established friendly relations with the Kacharis. But this friendship was not really accepted by either of the kings whole-heartedly. It was a compromise and after the marriage there was some inner conflicts. In 1660 AD the tension mounted and the Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha openly warned Virdarpanarayan. He ruled for 28 years from 1644 to 1672 AD.

### **Tamradhwaj Narayan**

After the death of Viradarpanarayan three kings named Gurudhwaj, Makardhwaj, and Udayaditya ruled for 30 years. After that, in 1703 AD, Tamradhwaj Narayan ascended the throne. He declared himself as an independent king and refused to be a vassal king under the Ahoms. This enraged the Ahom king Rudra Singha and he attacked the Kachari kingdom from both sides with 70,000 soldiers. The Kachari king Tamradhwaj fled to Khaspur and the Kachari capital Maibong (or Kirtipur) came under Ahom rule. Tamradhwaj fled and sought help from the Jayantia king and the Jayantia Raja Ram Singha decided to help. By this time a severe epidemic broke out in Mayong [Maibong] and the Ahoms left this place. Hearing this Tamradhwaj refused the help from the Jayantia Raja and sent back his troops. This was insulting to the Jayantiyas. Ram Singha, coming to know the weak point of Tamradhwaj, attacked and captured him. Under capture, Tamradhwaj secretly sent out a message seeking refuge under the Ahom king. The Ahom king Rudra Singha thus asked the Jayantia king to set Tamradhwaj free, but Ram Singha denied the request. This angered Rudra Singha, who took this denial as an insult. The Ahom king then attacked Jayantiapur in 1708 AD and captured it. In turn, Rudra Singha restored Tamradhwaj as the king of Maibong, provided he accept Ahom authority. Soon, due to some severe illness, the Kachari Raja Tamradhwaj died.

### **Sudarpanarayan**

After the death of Tamradhwaj the Ahoms installed his nine-year-old son Sudarpanarayan as the king of Maibong. But after being a vassal king for about 12 years under the Ahoms he died.

## **Sandhikari**

After the death of Sudarpanarayan a line of kings that included Harischandra Narayan [Dharmardhwaj Narayan] and Kirtichandra Narayan ruled for around 40 years. After them a powerful king called Sandhikari ascended the throne of Mayong [Maibong]. When the Ahom king Rajeswar Singha [Surempa] invited Sandhikari to his kingdom, the latter chased the Ahom diplomats away from his kingdom. This enraged the Ahom king and he sent his commander-in-chief to arrest Sandhikari. But later, being pleased by Sandhikari's behavior, the Ahom king set him free. After that, Sandhikari was not able to rule for long and in 1771 AD another king called Harischandra Bhupati ascended the throne. [At this time, the capital was moved from Maibong to Khaspur, near modern Silchar in the Barak Valley]

## **Krishnachandra Narayan**

In 1785 AD another ruler named Krishnachandra ascended the Kachari throne after defeating Harischandra Bhupati. After ascending the throne, he along with his brother Govindachandra accepted Vaishnava Hinduism [*Krishnor Nam Dhormo*] as their religion. During the reign of Krishnachandra, the Moamoria and other Ahom rebels sought refuge in the Kachari kingdom. Knowing this, the Ahom King Kamleswar Singha sent his army to arrest the rebels but Krishnachandra did not allow this to happen. The Ahom king had to again attack the Kachari Kingdom, which led to another war. This Ahom-Kachari war lasted for two years, from 1803 to 1805 AD. The Ahoms emerged victorious and later arrested the Ahom rebels in the Kachari Kingdom and punished them. The Kachari Raja Krishnachandra died 8 years later in 1813 AD.

## **Govindachandra Narayan**

After the death of Krishnachandra, his brother Govindrachandra became the Kachari Raja. In the beginning of his ruling period a royal worker named Kahidhan revolted against him. Kahidhan was set up by Krishnachandra as an official. He was in charge of the northern part of the Kachari Kingdom [in what is now called the North Cachar Hills or Dima Hasao]. In order to squash the revolt, Govindrachandra killed Kahidhan. But after that Kahidhan's son, commander-in-chief [*xenapati*] Tularam Kachari, took control of the northernmost part of the kingdom and started revolting. Alongside such hardships, a Manipuri prince Majjit Singha also attacked the Kachari Kingdom. Having no other way out, Govindachandra sought help from another prince of Manipur, Sauryajit Singha. But Sauryajit in turn joined hands with Majjit Singha and captured a part of the Kachari Kingdom. In the next year another prince from Manipur named Gambhir Singha came and joined hands with them. Effectively, the Kachari kingdom had to pass into the hands of the Manipuri princes. In the end Govindachandra sought help from the Burmese. The Burmese king decided to help Govinda Chandra and sent his forces to assist. Meanwhile, upon hearing this news, the British government asked Gambhir Singha [now the Raja of Manipur] for assistance in order to capture the Burmese king. But Gambhir Singha did not consent and joined hands with the Burmese and decided to divide the Kachari kingdom amongst them. The British interfered, defeated the Burmese, and again set Govindachandra on the Kachari throne. But this did not end the misery of Govindachandra, so he decided to follow the advice of the British in the future. The public under him was so upset at that time that he turned out to be the last Kachari king. Govindachandra did not have a son. After his death in 1832, the British totally annexed the Kachari Kingdom that was under Govindachandra's rule [what would become Cachar District]. At first the Cachar district was kept under the Assam Commissioner in

the hands of a British superintendent. Then, in 1835 AD it was included under the Dhaka section and put in the hands of a Deputy Commissioner.

### **Tularam Senapati [Hills Raja]**

After the death of Kahidhan, his son Tularam Kachari also revolted against the Kachari Raja Govindachandra. He even tried to take over the Kachari throne from Govindachandra. In 1828 AD he sent his nephew Govindaram as a commander-in-chief of an army to go and attack Govindachandra in Khaspur. But Govindachandra defeated the forces of Govindaram and this made the latter rise against his uncle Tularam. Unable to bear such conspiracy Tularam fled to the Jayantiya king's headquarters. In 1829 he, along with the help of the Manipuri Raja Gambhir Singh, attacked his nephew. Govindaram was defeated and he fled to Dharampur and joined hands with Govindachandra. At this time, and to pacify him, the British official Sir David Scott advised Govindachandra. But he didn't listen and as a matter of fact had to again face Tularam's actions. Tularam revolted against Govindachandra until his death. Even after his death Tularam urged to acquire the Kachari throne but since Tularam did not have an heir the British government took over the Kachari kingdom. He was not made the king, but he was made the zamindar of a part of the Kachari kingdom. His land stretched from the south of Mahur river and the Naga hills to the north of Jamuna, Doyang, and Dhansiri river and in the west from Doyang river. For this he annually had to pay a tax of 4 elephant tusks initially and later an amount of Rs. 490 to the British Government.

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[**Editorial Note:** Here begins the line of kings in Mayong with the advent of Prince Suinat Singha, who is believed to be the youngest brother of Kachari Raja Shatrudaman. Suinat Singha fled from Maibong during the Ahom-Kachari conflicts and established the Kingdom of Mayong as an independent kingdom around 1536 or 1538 AD. Suinat Singha is a classic “stranger king” who “civilizes” the natives, brings in power and prosperity, and marries the daughter of a local chief (see Sahlins 1981b, 2008, 2014b). According to the legend, he took uxori-local residence in the house of his wife thereby becoming domesticated into the local culture per their ritual order. However, being a “Dimasa Kachari” (who reckon descent ambilineally), his patrilineage remained intact as well and, according to the 40<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong, Taranikanta Singha, was why the kingship followed a “Kachari” rule of succession up until the 39<sup>th</sup> Raja changed the rules to a “Koch” model, see Chapter 1). Suinat Singha’s “official” rule of Mayong began at some point during the 1530s. In the mythopoeic history, Mayong was not strictly a vassal kingdom of the Kacharis, but a *puwali rajjyo*, or “baby kingdom,” mixed among the 12-14 (or more) kingdoms variously ruled by the Baro-Bhuyans, vassal lords, or itinerant stranger kings between the Kachari, Jaintiya, and Ahom dominated areas of the East and the Koch dominated areas in the west.]

### **Suinat [Xuino] Singha (1<sup>st</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

The youngest brother of Shatrudaman came to Mayong and became the king. But his ancestors ruled this place even before the kings of Dimapur, or even before Narakasur. After his family had ruled for a long time, and after getting defeated by the Ahoms and some others rulers, Suinat Singha fled from Maibong and sought refuge in a hilly plateau at Mayong. But due to some unfavorable circumstances in the hills, he decided to come down to the plains and started living

in Mayong. The area of the hills came to be known as Burha Mayong for the king first came and stayed here; the area in the plains where he stayed came to be known as Deka Mayong for he settled at this place after leaving Burha Mayong. When Suinat Singha first came to Mayong, there were only a few households at that place. He stayed secretly and gradually gathered some other people and made them settle there. During this time Suinat Singha was between 30–35 years of age. After settling everything at the age of 45 years, Raja Jay Singha [believed to be either a Koch chieftan, a Baro Bhuyan, the king of Topakuchi, or a Karbi chieftan] married off his daughter, a girl called Phuleswari, to Suinat Singha. After that, he undertook a lot of work to teach the public [*raij*] how to farm paddy and gradually, from 1535 AD [or at the latest by 1538 AD] he started ruling the Mayong *raij*. He brought many people into his kingdom from elsewhere and made them settle in Mayong by marrying the women there. He tried to fulfill the demands of the *raij* accordingly, but he died in the year 1545 AD due to some illness. He had three sons named Muhit Singha, Maniram Singha, and Xarassa Singha.

### **Muhit Singha (2<sup>nd</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Suinat Singha, his son Muhit Singha became the king. After ascending the throne in 1547, he decided to create two posts for Deka Raja [junior kings] for assisting in the administration, and chose Xoruman and Muhiram Deka for this purpose. But after the creation of these posts they paid little attention to the administration and more to other business and hunting. Because of this the annoyed public ejected Muhit Singha from the throne.

### **Maniram Singha (3<sup>rd</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After Muhit Singha's reign, his younger brother Maniram Singha became the king of Mayong. After becoming the king he traveled around the kingdom and, upon returning, decided to solve the problems the kingdom was going through. However, he suddenly died. After his death the public felt insulted. He ruled for only eight years.

#### **Krishna Singha (4<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Maniram Singha, his nephew—the son of Muhit Singha—sat on the throne. He tried to facilitate and make the public happy by encouraging them in irrigation works and rice farming. He also made proper facilities for drinking water for the public, but in 1562 AD he too had to face death. At that time he had two children: two boys named Kamaleswar Singha and Dadhi Singha.

#### **Ananta Singha (5<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Krishna Singha, his brother Ananta Singha became the king in 1563 AD. After Ananta singha became the king, the Deka Raja, Xoruman Deka, rose against him as his land directly came under Ananta Singha's rule. So Xoruman Deka hatched a conspiracy. Within a year, Xoruman Deka was able to remove Ananta Singha from the throne and killed him by poisoning his food.

#### **Xingiram Singha (6<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Ananta Singha, one of his relatives, Xingiram Singha, became the king of mayong in 1564 AD. He kept a secret eye on Xoruman Deka through some of his faithful

servants and within one month he killed him. He became fearless after the death of Xoruman and ruled quite peacefully for about eight years until he died in 1571 AD.

### **Kamaleswar Singha (7<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Xingiram Singha, Kamaleswar Singha, the son of Krishna Singha, became the king of Mayong. He set up Rassik Deka as the new Deka Raja and, along with the initial Burha Deka Raja Muhiram Deka, decided to build Xoruali Pukhuri (“the small road pond”). He also dedicated a lot of his time to hunting deer and sold off many wild elephants. These elephants plundered the farms and ate the crops so the king, along with the *raij*, gathered all of them and sent them to the other places along the river. As a result, for a long time elephants could not reach this kingdom. Then Kamaleswar Singha and Muhiram Deka died.

### **Dadhi Singha (8<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Kamaleswar Singha, his brother Dadhi Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 1581 AD. But he was a useless king and in the year 1582 he died.

### **Xoniram Singha (9<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Dadhi Singha, the son of Maniram Singha (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Raja of Mayong), Xoniram Singha became the king. He also tried to solve the problems of his kingdom. He constructed a road between Deka Mayong and Burha Mayong and dug a water tank at the west of Deka Mayong village. He also thought of rearing some fishes in the tank but since it was a mud built tank, it flooded during the rainy season. Effectively, he abandoned the idea of rearing fishes and

called this water tank Kali Pukhuri. Soon he fell ill [Guneswar Deka says it was from cholera, which had swept through the area at this time] and in the year 1589 he died due to his illness.

### **Xarassa Chandra Singha (10<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Xoniram Singha the third son of Suinat Singha became king [Guneswar Deka writes that this king was the third son of Muhit Singha and that Suinat Singha actually had two children only per the original Buranji]. He was a very wise and powerful person and his public was in favor of him because he worked for the prosperity and fortune of the people. He paid importance to some of the vital problems of Mayong and also patronized religion and worship and created many official posts. He ruled his public very peacefully and brought many new settlers into Mayong. The people loved him a lot and wanted him to become the king, so accordingly and by a fixing a special date Xarassa Chandra Singha [also spelled Swarchcha Chandra Singha] was made the 10th king of Mayong. He had 14 sons. From that very day he took the name of Bor Raja (“Big King”) and made his eldest son Prem Singha as the Xoru Raja (“Little King”). He created the post of Xoru Raja for the well-being of the people. After that, in order to fulfill the demands of the people, the Bor Raja along with the Xoru Raja held discussion (*raijmel*) to find out the ways and means for meeting these demands.

At first they decided to bring the idols of respective gods (*goxai*) from Majuli<sup>5</sup> and sent people to retrieve them. Accordingly they bought about 10 idols which included Gopal, Laxmi, Narayan, Shiva, etc. and appointed three Medhis (“priestly officiants”) in charge of three of these respective idols. The Medhis were in charge of worshipping and holding feasts for their

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<sup>5</sup> The current king of Mayong, Taranikanta Singha, argues that the mention of Majuli (a riparian island in the Brahmaputra, and home to many Vaishnavite/Shankardevite monasteries) is a mistake here. The original Buranji instead names Nabadweep, a pilgrimage site in what is now West Bengal, as being the place the Bor Roja and Xoru Roja took the idols from.

respective gods. The king (*bor raja*) was in charge of the other idols. Public discussions were held regarding the arrangements and whatever the collective decision finally was, it would be carried out by everyone. It was believed that if anyone disobeyed the arrangements of feasts, then he and seven generations following him would be condemned to hell.

During the 4<sup>th</sup> day of Bohag the three Medhis properly dressed their respective *goxai* idols and assembled them in front of the path to the king's house. The Katakai ("high priest," = Brahmin) of the king would welcome the Medhis and the respective *goxai* idols with *tamol* (areca nut) and pan leaves, and announce their coming out with drums and traditional music. They would then take them to the gate of the king's house. They were then made to take their respective place in the king's house and the king—along with his officials like the Bangthai, Medhi, etc. along with the *raij*—would take up decisions as to how the rituals were to be carried out over the next two days of the Maha Utsav ["great festival," also spelled Mahotsav] and how the *goxai* idols were to be taken to two places over the two days. The king's assembly was then dispatched. The next day the *goxai* had to be taken to the middle of Mayong. There, the priests would perform the rituals regarding this during the early part of the day and the Medhis, along with their *goxai* dressed in new clothes, would gather near the path to the king's house. After feasting, the king's officials—namely the priests, Medhi, and Bangthai—would take the *dhol* and *khol* [traditional drums] and would gather in the king's house ground. Then the Medhis would offer the king flower garlands. Later the priests would offer the king and his respective officials flower garlands. Thereafter the king along with the *goxai* would travel on a *dola* ("palanquin") followed by his officials and they would assemble in front of the way to the *than* [a sacred place or grove, often associated with a water source in Mayong]. The priests in charge of the *than* would welcome the *goxai* with *tamol* and pan placed on the *xorai* ("offering plate"), and then

make the *goxai* take their respective *asana* (“seats”) in the *than*. The king would then take his seat. The Bangthai would then dance to the tunes of the *dhol* and *khol* in front of the *goxai*, the king, and his officials. The king would then take a stroll followed by the *goxai*’s Nam Kirtan (“prayers/hymns”) with the Medhis again offering flower garlands to the king. This would be followed by the offering of flower garlands to the officials. They would then conclude the meeting by offering prayers to the *goxai* and shout in celebration.

On the next day, i.e. on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of Bohag, the King along with his officials took the *goxai* to Burha Mayong. The Bangthai, along with three of his commanders-in-chief would welcome the *goxai* with *tamol-pan*, dancing, and music and then take them to the *than*. After that the *goxai* were placed on their respective places and the king took his seat along with his other officials like the Deka Raja, Bangthai, Deka Bangthai, Pator [Chiefly Officer], Tamuli, and so on. This was followed by several games and martial arts which were to be conducted along with dances. This was then followed by prayer offerings to the *goxai*, along with the beating of the *dhol* and *khol*. The Medhis then would offer flower garlands and this was to be distributed among the officials by the priests. They all then gave praises in the name of the *goxai* and put a halt to the meeting. Later they would go to a nearby place and would offer prayers to the goddess Kamakhya and place a *goxai* out there. This would be again followed by a lot of dancing. They would then dispatch the meeting and proceed to a place called Kathpara where they would bid farewell to the commanders of the Bangthai.

After returning, the king and his other officials, saw that the king’s gateway was being surrounded by a crowd and the *goxai* were not allowed to enter the *namghor* because Lord Krishna had gone to town would not return until the seventh day of Bohag; he stayed at Ghunusa Devi’s place. So, the goddess Laxmi built an embankment and blocked the road, and the people

plundered the Ghunusa Devi temple. As a result Lord Krishna sent consoling to his wife Laxmi. The next day, when he returned, he was shocked to find out that the road to his home was blocked. So he sent his Panda (“priest”) to talk to Laxmi Devi, sent an amount of Rs. 300, and asked them to return. The followers of the *goxai* then unblocked the path by breaking the embankment wall. The followers of Laxmi Devi revolted, but at last the road was unblocked. As a result, the *goxai* were welcomed and placed at the *namghor* but had to face some confrontations from Laxmi’s people for being out in the town. After that, they celebrated and concluded the meeting; Shri Krishna and Laxmi now remained under the temple together. But because of Lord Krishna’s behavior, the entire expenses of the *goxai* had to be taken from the king’s treasury.

Xarassa Singha was said to have three Medhis. But more is mentioned regarding who belonged to what *khel*. Of the original Medhis the first, Dandadhar Nath, belonged to the Panimara jak,<sup>6</sup> second was Gohin Nath from Kana jak, and the third was Tolaraam Nath from Goda jak. They, along with the *goxai*, carried out the Mahotsav every year from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> day of Bohag. If anyone disobeyed that person would be condemned to hell; people with false thinking would have to face a lot of hurdles in their family life.

The Medhis were in charge of the garlands. For the three days the Medhis had to present 50 flower garlands along with separate flower garlands for the king and his *xorai* (“offering plate”). A lot of time and energy was consumed for the preparation of these garlands by the Medhis during these three days. Accordingly, everyone—including the king—had to offer some amount of money to the Medhis.

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<sup>6</sup> A *jak* is a residential unit, like a *khel*, in which members of a particular kin group reside. *Jak* are peculiar to the Jugi Nath sect/*jati* in Mayong and carry the significance of having a “guru” lineage rather than an apical/lineal ancestor that unites the unit.

For the presentation of dance and music, an official post was created and held by Mahidhar Nath. When the king was in distress, he would be in charge of organizing dance and music to deliver peace of mind to the king. Xarassa Singha created so many official posts that many deserve mention, even the ones that do not have official names.

1. When the king and his officers set out for hunting, the king needed a set of officials for scoping out plots of land beside the Bhahmaputra River; he named these officials as Barujak. Among this group a person named Rajendra Nath was given the job of looking into the comforts and luxuries of the king and the Deka Raja and also having discussions with the king and his officials on important issues.

2. Another person named Tooleswar Koch was in charge of making the pandals (the temporary dwellings) of the *goxai*; and during the Mahotsav he was in charge of welcoming the *goxai*. He was also in charge of the king's dola (on which the king was carried from one place to another), and when the king was in need of all these luxuries, he provided him with it. He could also take part in the discussions at the king's darbar.

3. Among the Tamuli ["royal gardeners" who especially cared for the king's areca plantations] Gohin Koch was made an official. He was in charge of the edible items which were to be presented to the king during the Mahotsav. He was also in charge of the preparations that have to be done for any kind of ceremony or rituals, including providing invitations to all the villages.

4. Among the Bor Koch [a.k.a. Dangor Koch, who claim royal lineages], Thopou Koch was made an official who was in charge of providing two helpers for the welcoming the *goxai* during the Mahotsav. The people from his group would perform martial arts before the king and then offer him a *japi* (a hat used for working in the rice fields). For the numerous amount of work done by the Bor Koch, the king again created 4 posts and they would also take part in discussions at the king's dabar.

5. Again there is a mention of the Bangthai. The Mikir [Karbi] have 12 *khels* so their chiefs are known as the Baro Bangthai. The Bor Bangthai is the foremost among them. Among the Mikir of Burha Mayong, Santaram Mikir was given the first post of Bor Bangthai. They would live together as the king's younger brothers in the future. They had their own commanders-in-chief who were made into bangthais among the people and the Mikir *raij* had to live according to their rules. Among the Mikir of Burha Mayong, Jogeswar Mikir was given the responsibility of being minister of the king, the Bor Bangthai, other officials, and also the public.

Again at Burha Mayong another person named Bham was asked to assist the minster. They both would assist the Bor Bangthai in welcoming the *goxai* and also was responsible for the tents, seats, and other facilities needed by the people during the Mahotsav.

Another person called Khadal Mikir was given the position of the Thakuria. He was in charge of the safety of the royal equipment and instruments [swords, rhino hyde shields, and weaponry]. He was also in charge of the rules regarding dances, musical instruments, and their maintenance.

In the same village of Burha Mayong, two persons named Loodak and Garjan were made the Commanders-in-chief (*xenapati*). As per the king's order, the commanders-in-chief were given the work of taking care of the king's elephant, digging of ponds, road construction, taking care of the kingdom in case of war, and maintenance of the army.

6. Four households of Brahmins were kept in Mayong from Xarassa Singha's rule. They were put in charge of the pujas, rituals, and ceremonies. The Brahmins of Deka Mayong were Harachandra Sarmah, Gajakanta Sarmah, Santadhan Sarmah, and Gugle Chandra Sarmah. They were in charge of the religious ceremonies and had to decide the proper date and time for any kind of work as par the king's order.

7. Among the Hiras [a "potter" *jati*], Nanda was the Thakuria and his son Nidhiram also acquired the same post as his father. He was in charge of Bor Dhuliya, Dhepa Dhuliya, and other kinds of musical troupes [drummers, flautists, and gong wielders]. This post had the responsibility to organize any type of function relating to the king's household—like marriages, naming ceremonies, deaths, etc.—and to summon the musical troupes to the festivals. Eventually, Salatu was made the Hira Thakuria. Even his son was also made the Hira Rhakuria. He was made in charge of the provision of the utensils for any of the king's festivals.

8. A person named Mariya was given a post in charge of the king's horses. This means he was in charge of the king's stable and had to keep it clean. He was also responsible for the arrangement of the seats for the king and his other officials.

9. Xarassa Singha also brought four *khels* of weavers from Darrang. They were Gadhur Katoni's son, Kampal Katoni's son, Gupit Katoni, and Maraa Katoni. They were brought from Darrang and were given a place to settle in the king's compound. They were in charge of preparing silk needed for the king's clothes, which were made either of *pat* or *muga* silk.

10. Tabharam was in charge of the water and the fisheries in the kingdom. He had to pay an amount of Rs. 600 to the king for his six fisheries and the rest were handled by an official named Goiroh. His post was responsible for providing fish to the king, but after Mayong came under British rule, the king had to withdraw this post.

11. Another man named Tikong Koch and his group was responsible in providing fire wood to the king and his household.

12. Gugaram and some of the members from his group were made in charge of the leather garments. These leather garments were necessary in case of battles and warfare. They were made in charge of dhan and baru [money, liquid capital, and loans] needed for war. For this reason they were named the Barukatiya.

13. [During Xarassa Singha's reign] the Dimarua [Dimoria] king was pushed to the other side of the Kolong River and thus the river was made into the border between the Dimaruas and the Mayongians. Till today the Kolong River is understood as the border between them. Alongside the Kolong River, there is a hillock. The king of Mayong Xarassa Chandra Singha also brought different clans of potters: viz. the Kamar, Kumar, Kahar, and Mariya and made them settle in this place. They worked there for some time but gradually they started to have conflicts among themselves. The king, thinking the situation might worsen, decided to move the Kamar community to the southwest of the Gouranga pukhuri. As a result this place came to be known as Kamarpur. It is said that on the bank of the Kolong, since the Kamars and the Kahars stayed and worked together there, this place was known Kamarpur.

14. Along the Brahmaputra on a hillock two Kamar artisans named Kahidhar and Mahidhar were made to settle there by Xarassa Singha. They were blacksmiths who used to prepare weapons by shaping iron and were also responsible for preparing gun powder needed during wars. They had to provide the king with different weapons during warfare; their post continued until the British invasion and then it stopped. This place was named as Hiloikhunda after that.

After various discussions at the *raijmel*, the Xarassa Singha and his officials prepared various temples and *than* throughout the kingdom. At first they sculpted an idol of Lord Ganesha towards the north of the kingdom. They also created the post of Deuri ["ritual experts," akin to priests but with control over particular sacred places only] for those *than*. A big turtle climbed up from the Brahmaputra River to a rockface there and was converted to a stone by Shiva and Parvati during Xarassa Singha's reign. That is why this hillock came to be known as the Kasoxila Pahar. On this hillock various idols were sculpted, which include the idols of Shiva and Parvati along with their disciples Nandi and Vinghi. Pujas were regularly offered to these gods and goddesses. But for the performance of Pujas there was a scarcity of water at this place. So the Bor Raja and the Xoru Raja called the commander-in-chief and ordered for a pond to be dug between the two hillocks. This pond came to be known as the Bor Pukhuri. Toward the west of the Bor Pukhuri another new pond was dug and was named as Xoru Pukhuri. The water of the Bor Pukhuri was used only for drinking and worshipping purposes, and the water of the Xoru Pukhuri was used for other chores like bathing, washing, etc.

In the villages of Mayong there are three famous *than* named the Burhi Ai Than, Kesakhaiti Than, and the Bhagawati Than. At the Kesakhaiti Than various animal sacrifices were offered to the goddesses which consisted of poultry, goats, etc. After many *raijmel* discussions and accounts, the Bor Raja and the Xoru Raja appointed the kamars for providing and creating different swords needed for the sacrifices of different animals along with utensils (pots, etc.) needed for fetching water to bring to the *than*. The Deuri was responsible for the maintenance of these swords and utensils needed in the *than*. The Kesakhaiti Puja was celebrated for three days and during the first day swords were taken out with music and grandeur. After three days the people would offer puja to the goddesses and when it ended the swords and the utensils would be taken back to the *than* of the Burhi Goxani [the eldest female goddess/mother, or Burhi Ai]. The king would administer his people as per this rule so that the kingdom would remain safe always.

The Deuris offer puja at the Bhagawati Than in a particular and different way. If the goddess wishes, she could enter into a person's body and utter out the good and bad things that is to happen to the kingdom. The goddess would answer the questions of her devotees and the people would lead their lives accordingly. Later the king and the people would head back home after distribution of the *prasad* and offering of the puja, and contemplate on what the goddess had to say.

There is also a Kamakhya Than at the foot of the hills of Mayong. Every year the king along with his officials—the Mikir Bangthai, Pator, and the commanders-in-chief—offer puja to this goddess with great pomp and grandeur. Animals and people were also sacrificed at this *than*. For offering of the puja there were two deuris here, namely Teporu and Mahanga. There was a house constructed where the Deuris used to offer puja for days to the goddess and would come

out after a number of days. But due to some reason once a Deuri had to go back to the puja house after the puja and somehow the door became locked. Luckily the Deuri survived. The Deuris were not supposed to enter the house after the puja and so the door became locked. This scared the *raij* and the deuris, and since that day the kingdom-wide puja at this Kamakhya Than stopped at Mayong. Since then the king ordered his officials to offer puja to the goddess Kamakhya in a simple way. But after some time even the two Deuris died in the *than* because of the power of the goddess.

In the northeastern part of the village it was said that the king was ordered by Viswahari [a universal *avatar* of Krishna/Narayan/Vishnu] to perform a Maroi puja—a special puja offered to goddess Kali. After discussion with his officials, the king called for a scholarly person from one of the villages known as Lehuram Keot. The King and his officials decided the case with the person who decided to help [Shri Keot]. As per the *raijmel* discussion, a place was chosen for the Puja, the place was cleared up and Lehuram along with two other persons were given the entire responsibility of the puja. Accordingly a particular day was fixed for the puja and Lehuram was given the entire responsibility.

They decided to celebrate the Viswahari Maroi Puja. So they gathered a deuri for the performance of the puja and the in 1589 AD during the month of Phalgun on the 15<sup>th</sup> day, a three day puja was organized. For three days Ojapali<sup>7</sup> was performed and on the third day after the immersion of the goddess, the meeting was dispersed. Then accordingly prizes and payments were made to the deuris and the other people who were related in the organization of the puja. Lehuram was given the title of Chakiyaal and since then his place came to be known as Lehuati.

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<sup>7</sup> A theatrical troupe led by a shaman who operatically sings mythical stories.

As mentioned, Xarassa Chandra Singha created the titles of Bor Raja and Xoru Raja. Later a coronation ceremony was conducted for this and accordingly date and a venue near a pond was fixed for this purpose. The things required for this ceremony were bought in and the ceremony began. Again after the celebration of the names of the two kings were declared as per the public order. After the distribution of alms to the public, the crowds dispersed.

After some time during Xarassa Singha's rule, there was a creation of three *bhagi* [segmented lineages of sons] of the three kings who were sons of Suinat Singha, i.e. the four sons of Muhit Singha would belong to one *bhagi* (the *Sari Bhagi*), the nine sons of Maniram Singha would belong to another *bhagi* (the *No Bhagi*) and the fourteen sons of Xarassa Singha would belong to the third *bhagi* (the *Soiddho Bhagi*). The three founders of each *bhagi* all took *xoron* at different *satra* ("Vaishnavite sectarian monateries") and became Hindu.

With Xarassa Singha as the Bor Raja and Prem Singha as the Xoru Raja, they both called their officials together, along with the Bangthai, Pator, and the Commander-in-Chief, and held a darbar with the kings Maniram and Muhit.<sup>8</sup> After the discussion, the kings decided to adopt [Vaishnava Shankardevite] Hinduism. After that they visited the Kaliabor Gohain and after spending sometime in Hatimuria, the Mayong King Muhit Singha and his *bhagi* went back to Kaliabor and sought shelter and food.<sup>9</sup> Maniram Singha sought shelter in the Xildubi Satra ["monastery"] and started following it, as it was under the Mayong kingdom. Xarassa Singha noticed that that the [Ahom] king of Assam and known scholars went to a particular *satra* and

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the kings referenced here are already dead.

<sup>9</sup> Here meaning that they took *xoron* (shelter) in the name of the one God, Krishna/Narayan, and effectively "converted" to Hinduism by being initiated into a particular *satra* and Vaishnavite sect.

converted to Hinduism. So he and his *bhagi* went to Auniyati Satra [in Guwahati] and started following it.<sup>10</sup>

When Xarassa Singha was the Bor Raja and Prem Singha was the Xoru Raja, the [Ahom] king of Kamrup/Guwahati sent an invitation to Xaressa Singha, Raja of Mayong, and the Dimarua [Dimoria] Raja. On this request, the Xoru Raja Prem Singha, along with some of his soldiers, went to Guwahati. For the Dimaruas, the son of Prabhakar named Prabhut Singha also went to Guwahati. After all the kings met the Ahom king asked as if there was some kind of linkage between the king of Mayong and the Dimaruas. Then the king of Mayong [the Xoru Raja] told him that the king of Mayong was the maternal uncle of the Dimarua king Prabhakar [as Prabhakar was also the nephew of Shatrudaman, Suinat Singha's elder brother]. Thus the Ahom king ordered Prem Singha to give him twelve households of *paiks* [corvee laborers and foot soldiers], but Prem Singha refused saying that there were no *paiks* available in his kingdom. After that they got into an argument which enraged the Ahom king. But Prem Singha, having known some of the internal matters of the Ahoms, made the Ahom king cool down his temper. The issue of the *paiks* was resolved and the king [Xoru Raja] of Mayong decided to give [loan?] the Kekura Dola [crooked palanquin, literally "crab palanquin"] to the Ahom king. After that they returned to their respective kingdoms.

After reaching Prem Singh explained the entire situation to the Bor Raja. However, upon his return, the king of Dimarua plotted a conspiracy and immediately sent people to Guwahati. The next day on their arrival to Guwahati they told the Ahom king that they were sent by the king of Mayong to take back the Kekura Dola and return it to the Mayong king. When the Ahom king returned the dola, the Dimaruas fled to the hills, being scared of the rage of the king of

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<sup>10</sup> According to the 40<sup>th</sup> king of Mayong, Taranikanta Singha, this is incorrect. Xarassa Singha was actually initiated into the *satra* at Pat-Bausi.

Mayong. But when the king of Mayong actually sent his troops to collect the Kekura Dola from the Ahom king, the latter explained that somebody had already taken it in the name of the Mayong king. The Ahoms were keenly aware that this was the conspiracy of the king of Dimarua and so he gave the Mayongians a Charia Dola [a four legged palanquin] and asked them to get the Kekura Dola from the Dimaruas. So the troops left Guwahati and upon reaching Mayong they explained the issue to the king. Upon hearing this the Bor Raja ordered the Xoru Raja to gather troops and search for the Dimaruas and gather the Kekura Dola from them. But, even after much effort, the Mayongians were not able to find the Dimaruas and so had to return empty handed. With this failure, the king summoned his officials and the *raij* to his main court room and discussed the matter. They arrived at the conclusion that the Dimaruas and their king would come to the festival that was to be held at the Banks of the Haduk Beel and there they would attack them. In the meantime, they would prepare the troops and the weapons needed for the attack.

On the day before the festival started, the Dimaruas came and cleared the place and on the next day the Dimarua king paid a visit. The king of Mayong, along with his troops, went and questioned the Dimarua king. From this a fierce argument drew out between the Mayongians and the Dimaruas. The Dimarua king thus also gathered some of his powerful men. Soon this argument converted into a battle and the Dimaruas started to retreat. The Ahoms joined in the fight and made the Dimaruas retreat to the banks of the Kolong river. The king of Mayong thus extended his kingdom from the banks of Haduk Beel to the banks of Kolong river. He then cursed the Dimarua king: just as he conspired and stole the Kekura Dola from the Mayong king, the Dimarua king would also face similar conspiracy from his family and finally meet his fate.

With the passage of time the Bor Raja and the Xoru Raja completed their rule. And as Xarassa Singha grew older he asked his son Prem Singha to take over the responsibility of Bor Raja. In 1615 he died, but his reign was very important in the history of Mayong as he created new rules and regulations for the administration of the kingdom.

### **Prem Singha (11<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Xarassa Singha, his son Prem Singha took over rule as the king of Mayong. The Xoru Raja was immensely grieved by the death of Xarassa Singha. But Prem Singha continued to give importance to the yearly festivals which were organized for the gods and goddesses of Mayong. He instructed his officials—the Thakuria, the Bangthai, the Medhi, the Pator, and the Commander-in-Chief [*xenapati*]*—*that, in order to maintain peace and harmony in the kingdom, they must ensure that the yearly festivals of the deities be organized properly and held on time. Since he was extremely grieved by the death of his father, with the course of time his own health began to deteriorate and in 1621 AD he died.

### **Govinda Chandra Singha (12<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Prem Singha, his brother Govinda Chandra Singha took over the throne. During his tenure he became aware of the fact that some people of the *raij*, including Brahmins, were undergoing water crises. So he ordered his officials that a pond was to be dug in order to end the water crises of those households. As a result, the commander-in-chief of the king's army asked the people to dig a tank which was to be completed within six months. The Brahmins helped a lot in the construction of the water tank, and as a result it was named the Bamun Pukhuri. Govinda Singha also paid importance to the yearly festivities of the gods and the

goddesses, the public wetlands (*beel*), and other issues too. In short he tried to fulfill almost every need of the kingdom. He became the favorite king of his people, but unfortunately he died in 1632 owing to some kind of sudden illness. After his death one of his officials, Bhem Mikir, also died and his son Gudhar Mikir was given the title of Pator.

### **Keshav Singha (13<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Govinda Chandra Singha his nephew Keshav Chandra Singha became the king of Mayong. Immediately after becoming the king in 1633 AD he order a pond to be dug owing to the water scarcity in the kingdom. A discussion was organized regarding the construction of the pond and a person named Kalaram Hira Dariya was given the responsibility of digging the pond. He, along with the people, finished digging the pond within ten months and owing to his hard work he was given the title of Thakuria. To this date this pond is named after him as the Dariya Pukhuri. As per his ancestors, Keshav Singha followed all the rules and the regulations regarding the organization of annual festivals. By then the two Deka Raja, Xorumon and Mohiram had already died, and Gendhela was chosen as the Deka Raja. With time everything went on peacefully and in 1639 AD Keshav Singha died.

### **Bidita Singha (14<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Keshav Singha, his brother Bidita Singha became the king of Mayong in 1640 AD and he ruled for three years. During his reign, and after completing his duties towards the gods and the goddesses, he decided to take over other issues of the kingdom (like constructing a bigger pond), but he met with sudden death. After that Hara Chandra Bamun died. As he did not have any sons, his official position [as royal Brahmin] did not last any further.

### **Bhem Singha (15<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Bidita Singha, the son of Govinda Chandra Singha, Bhem Singha, became the king of Mayong according to the family hierarchy. After he became the king some of his officials named Bajendra Nath and Gohin Nath as Medhis, and then held a meeting where they decided to dig another pond in the eastern part of Mayong. The place where the pond was to be dug was a bit higher in elevation and as a result of which it had to be dug very deep. It was completed in nine months but after some days two cows slipped into and drowned in the pond. But it was seen that the people picked the dead bodies of the cows out, and after clearing up the water and performing some pujas by the Brahmins, they started using the water of the pond. As a result, this *pukhuri* is named as Goru Mora Pukhuri [Dead Cow Pond]. Bhem singha paid much importance to the annual Kali and Maroi pujas made for the goddesses in the kingdom. He, along with his officials—the twelve Bangthais, Pator, Xenapati, and the Thakuria—organized discussions regarding various issues of the kingdom. But in 1654 AD Bhem Singha passed away due to very high fever.

### **Kirti Singha (16<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Bhem Singha his brother Kirti Singha became the king in 1655 AD. He looked into various important issues of the kingdom and found that towards the western corner of the Omora Mor Beel there was an ample amount of space of the construction of a *hatigahr* [elephant stable]. As a result he appointed two commanders-in-chief named Lodak Mikir and Garjan Mikir to arrange how the *hatigahr* was to be constructed. They, along with assistance from the *raj*, constructed the *hatigahr* within a few days. Kirti Singha then paid attention to the other ancestral

responsibilities and fulfilled them. The Omora Mor Beel got its name from the fact that on the eastern side of the *beel* towards the southern bank there was a very old omora [*Spondias mombin*] tree covering around 10-12 feet of the area. This tree was destroyed around 200 years ago in a storm and this place and beel came to be known as the Omora Mor [the dead omora]. Although Raja Kirti Singha constructed a *hatigahr*, he was not able to catch any elephant and died in 1664 due to some illness. After him Gajakanta Sarmah died. He did not have any children either, so another household of Brahmins lost their position in the kingdom.

### **Amar Singha (17<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Kriti Singha his brother Amar Singha ascended the throne of Mayong. After he became the king, Amar Singha collected revenue from the people and invested it on some important tasks related to the kingdom. He distributed about 4-5 *bigha* of land among his important *paiks*. They did not have to return this land to the king and every year the *paiks* were given a new silk *dhoti* [dress garment] as a gift by the king. In return, the *paiks* had to render their faithful and sincere services to the king whenever required or requested. Meanwhile the *hatigahr* constructed by Kriti Singha was of much help to his brother Amar Singha as he was able to capture around 10 elephants. But during old age the king set free four of the elephants and the remaining six were kept with the kingdom. But later he declared that two of the elephants were to be given away to the *raij* for the working convenience of the kingdom and the rest were gifted to the Ahom king. The Ahom king Pratap Singha was very pleased after receiving the elephants and in return he sent two gold coins and a golden crown to Raja Amar Singha. Amar singha was very happy with this and he also took care of the other responsibilities of the

kingdom relating to the yearly festivities of the deities and the gods and the goddess of the kingdom. In 1672 AD Raja Amar Singha died.

### **Nakul Singha (18<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Amar Singha his son Nakul Singha became the king. But he was not a good king as he did not pay any importance to the administration and the necessities of the kingdom. As a result in 1674 AD he was named as Bhanga Raja [Broken King] and was forced to give up his throne. After the death of another Brahmin, Shantadhan Sarmah, his son Khageswar Sarmah took over his position and began performing the royal pujas and the ceremonies.

### **Bhagadutta Singha (19<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the devestiture of Nakul Singha the son of the late king Kirti Singha, Bhagadutta Singha, became the king of Mayong in 1675 AD as per the family hierarchy. After he became the king, the Bor Bangthai Santaram Mikir died and his son Sataram Mikir ascended to the post. He had to work as per the king's direction. After he became the Bor Bangthai he, along with the Pator, Thakuria, and the Commander-in-Chief, decided to organize a puja for the Mal Devota ["Malshram," a deity of physical strength]. So after seeking the king's permission the Bangthai and the other officials organized a puja for the Mal Devota and brought the idol to Burha Mayong and Deka Mayong. After taking it to the king's household and then to every household of Mayong, they returned it to Burha Mayong. They then took the Mal Devota to the Gobhali Hill and buried it under a tree in the lap of the hill. They ended the ceremony with a grand feast and celebrations for the deity. After this every year the Mal Devota is worshipped as having been given by the ancestors. This puja was believed to bring peace and harmony to the kingdom.

Toward the south a small but very deep pond was dug for the provision of water to the Mal Devota and his puja. Although this pond wasn't very big, it was very deep (*gobhir*) so this place came to be known as Gobhali.

During his reign Bhagadutta Singha tried to fulfill all his responsibilities; be it the annual pujas, the Maroi puja, or the administration of the kingdom. He was a prosperous ruler who ruled wisely. He died in the year 1682 AD.

### **Gopal Chandra Singha (20<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Bhagadutta Singha the son of the late king Kirti Singha, Gopal Chandra Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 1683 AD. He constructed several new *namghor* and *than* for the devas and the devis in the kingdom, and made provisions for celebrating Maroi puja and other festivals every year in the kingdom. He also paid ample importance to the cleanliness of the *than* and *namghor*. But after that two of his officials died: Tuleswar from Pheta Bixoya [Bishaya] Phoid and Tularam Nath [a Medhi] from Gada jak. After the death of Tularam Nath, his son Kehola Koch ascended his position. In the year 1688 AD the king died. After his death another Brahmin Gugle Chandra Sarmah died and his son Bhakat Ram Chandra Sarmah became the royal priest.

### **Ranjit Singha (21<sup>st</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Gopal Chandra Singha, his brother Ranjit Singha ascended the throne of Mayong in 1689 AD. After he became the king he ordered his officials that another Medhi was to be appointed and five idols were to be established [as the patron deities of Mayong, reduced from the 10 originally gathered by Xarassa Singha Raja]. So the King, Medhis, the twelve

Bangthais, Pator, Xenapati, and Thakuria decided to appoint Sukuman Nath as the fourth Medhi, and after handing him the *goxai* they would be established along as the the five idols [*pancha murti*] of Mayong. Every year the people of Mayong celebrate the Pancha Devota (or Goxai Uliuwa) festival, which constitutes the universal five patron deities of Mayong and ensures the king's divinity. This fourth Medhi came to be known as *Nuwa Medhi* ["New Medhi"] because of the fact that his position was created much later and it was quite recent. Ranjit Singha was a very important king as he created the five idols. But in 1693 AD he died.

### **Mahat Singha (22<sup>nd</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Ranjit Singha, the son of Gopal Chandra Singha, Mahat Singha, became the king of Mayong. After he ascended the throne the Medhi Gohin Nath died and his son Kalaram Nath succeeded him. After the death of his Brajendra Nath, his son Bhugaman Nath succeeded him. After the death of the Tamuli named Gohin Koch, his brother Garjan Koch was given the title of Tamuli. After appointing the new officials the king started administering his kingdom very wisely. Peace and harmony prevailed. In 1698 AD Mahat Singha had to face death.

### **Shiva Singha (23<sup>rd</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Mahat Singha his brother Shiva Singha ascended the throne. During his reign the Pator Jugeswar Mikir died and his son Jutula Mikir was given position of the pator by the king, the bangthai, and the other officials. After the Medhi Dandaghar Nath from the Pani Loga jak, his son Dulabh Nath was made the Medhi. He too administered the kingdom wisely and also patronized the religious festivals every year. Then in the year 1701 AD Shiva Singha died. He left

behind two sons; one of them, Ramjay Singha migrated to Bhuragaon and established a kingdom there.

### **Sandit Singha (24<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Shiva Singha, the son of the late Raja Ranjit Singha, Sandit Singha, became the king of Mayong. After he became the king, he ordered two of his commanders-in-chief (*xenapati*) Lodak Mikir and Garjan Mikir to reconstruct the *hatighar* which was in poor condition. They did this in order to capture more elephants. But once when the people were about to capture some elephants, a female elephant with a baby killed one of the villagers. This incident terrified the rest of the people and they returned without capturing any elephants. After hearing the news of the death of the villager, the king and the people of Mayong offered an amount of Rs. 500 to his family. This was followed by the death of the *xenapati* Lodak Mikir and his son Mohang Mikir succeeded him. Yearly festivities were regularly organized. This was followed by the death of a Bor Koch named Thopou Koch who was succeeded by his son Thaneswar. After that a Pator named Bhugeswar Mikir died and his son Bhador took over for him. In his later days, the king Sandit Singha fell ill and in the year 1710 AD he died.

### **Balit Narayan Singha (25<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Sandit Singha, his brother Balit Narayan Singha ascended the throne of Mayong in 1711 AD. After he became the king, he procured a piece of land at Burha Mayong and built a *pam* [“farm”] here. He also ordered the people to do farming on a plot of land near Thekal Khila Beel and the harvest from those farming would be stored up for the future. If in the future there was to be any scarcity of grain in the kingdom, then this surplus would be used up. He tried

to cover almost all the important issues of the kingdom. The king, along with some of his officials—the Medhi, Pator, Tamuli, etc.—went to the western part of Nagoan in search of some learned persons. He then brought some of the known and wise persons from there and established them as the Deka Raja of the different villages in his kingdom. These villages include Samua Gaon, Kakmari, Kasdhora, Barangabari, Baropujia, Topakuchi, and Khaighar. These then were seven Deka Rajas in the kingdom they were also known as the Satraja [seven kings]. These outsiders were given the responsibility to administer these villages separately. Another five Deka Rajas were appointed in the western part for five villages: Dondua, Baghara, Kumoi, Xukhunagug, and Mogua. But these Deka Rajas, known as the Pasraja [five kings] were from their own villages. Besides this, a village was named Monoha as part of it broke away from the banks of the Monoha river. Two other Deka Rajas were appointed. One was called the Xorai Khuwa Deka Raja [The Junior King Who Eats the Offering] of Monoha village. The other was established in Maloiboria village. The Deka Raja of Maloiboriya village was called the Maloiboriya Raja because of the fact that he belonged to the family of the *mali* [gardeners] who used to provide *mala* [flower garlands] to the king. Alongside this, [Balit Narayan Singha adopted the Ahom model and appointed *paiks* throughout his kingdom]; above every twelve *paiks* a “Bora” was established, above every hundred a “Saikia” was appointed, and above every thousand *paiks*, a “Hazarika” was appointed. This is how new Tamuli, Thakuria, and Chakial were also given their titles based on their works rendered towards the king and the kingdom. After rendering all the necessary services to the kingdom, and patronizing the yearly pujas and festivals, Balit Narayan Singha died in the year 1718 AD.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> At this point in the Buranji, the dating system coordinating to the coronation and death of line of Mayong kings begins to misalign with other historical events outlined in the Buranji (e.g., the annexation of Assam by the British Empire).

### **Amrit Singha (26<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Balit Narayan Singha, the son of the Late Raja Shiva Singha, Amrit Singha, became the king of Mayong in the year 1719 AD. After he became the king the Brahmin Mahidhar died and his son Muni Bayan succeeded him. He reconstructed the temples and the *than* of the gods and the goddesses, and paid ample importance to the organization of Maroi Puja, Devi Sewa, and other festivals of the kingdom. He also visited the villages and ordered the respective Deka Rajas to administer the kingdom wisely by scrutinizing their work. But in 1725 AD he fell ill and died.

### **Bhogali Singha (27<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Amrit singha, as per the family hierarchy the son of the Late King Sandit Singha, Bhogali Singha, became the king of Mayong in the year 1726 AD. After he became the king the Thakuria Sutiram Hira died and his son Gunaram Hira succeeded him. After a while, the Thakuria named Kalaram Dariya Hira died and Garia Hira Thakruria took over his position. He was given the responsibly of grazing the horses and cleaning their stables. He was also as a watchman for the king's house. After the appointment of these people he started administering the kingdom according to the rules and regulation given by his ancestors. Bhogali Singha died in the year 1732 AD.

### **Padmaram Singha (28<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Bhogali Singha, the son of Balit Narayan Singha, Padmaram Singha, ascended the throne of Mayong in the year 1733 AD. After he became the king the Bangthai Sataram Mikir

died and his son Xukaram Mikir became the new Bor Bangthai. After this another official named Kehola Koch died and an individual from his family named Pheta Koch was handed over the late official's position. The king regularly organized the yearly festivities and in the year 1740 AD he expired.

### **Luhit Singha (29<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Padmaram Singha, the son of Gopal Chandra Singha, Luhit Singha, became the king of Mayong in the year 1741 AD. After he became the king he completed all the pending works related to the gods and the goddesses in the kingdom, be it constructions or pending ceremonies. The Nuwa Medhi and Xukamon Nath Medhi died during Luhit Singh's tenure. Their deaths were followed by the death of Tamuli Garjan Koch and Xopou Koch was appointed for carrying out his responsibilities in the future. Later on in the year 1747 AD Luhit Singha died and his death was followed by the death of the royal musician Muni Bayon, who was succeeded by Ghotbor Bayon.

### **Kularam Singha (30<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Luhit Singha, his son Kularam Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 1748 AD. After he ascended the throne he ordered his officials to collect some revenue from the people and then utilize it in the organization of various pujas for the gods and the goddesses of the kingdom. This included the annual pujas, the Maroi puja, and also the maintenance of the *than* and the *goxai* houses of Mayong. He then decided to go on a pilgrimage and once a suitable date was found, he set off for his tour. Since there was no favorable form of communication at that point of time he had to cover the entire pilgrimage on foot. After a period of about two

months he reached his first destination and bathed in the Ganges river. He then set off for his other destinations. After visiting all the destinations and offering alms to the Brahmins he returned to his kingdom. Upon reaching his kingdom he along with his officials held a discussion at his courtroom. The king was quite pleased by the peaceful situation in his kingdom and the way the officials administered it and organized the annual activities and pujas while he was away. But then Tularam Medhi of Gada jak died and his son Taling Nath succeeded him. This was followed by the death of Kularam Singha in the year 1757 AD.

### **Lakhiram Singha (31<sup>st</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Kularam Singha his son Lakhiram Singha ascended the throne of Mayong in the year 1758 AD. After he became the king another Brahmin Khageswar Singha died and his son Vishnuram Sarmah succeeded him as the royal priest. The king and his officials organized the yearly festivals and the pujas including the Maroi puja with utmost discipline. This was followed by the death of the Pator Jutula Mikir and his brother Joradiya Mikir was given the responsibility of being Pator by the king, the Bangthai, and the other officials. Then the commander-in-chief Garjan Mikir died and his son Gela Mikir succeeded him. The king went about administering his kingdom with much care, but in the year 1766 AD he fell ill and died.

### **Pratap Narayan Singha (32<sup>nd</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Lakhiram Singha, his son Pratap Narayan Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 1767 AD. After he became the king, he traveled around his kingdom and upon his return he appointed Raasik Hira as the Duliya Bora from the Hira *phoid*. Everyone from his *phoid* had to attend any marriage or ceremony at the king's home as well as the Goxai Uliuwa

festival. He appointed the necessary number of people required for carrying the Dola, and also aided the people by providing 4-5 *bigha* of land to every household of *paiks*, who also provided with food and gifts. By then the British had started conquering Assam. This was followed by the death of Kularam Medhi and his son, Gathimora Nath, succeeded him. The king and the people continued to organize the yearly Goxai Uliuwa festival and the Maroi puja. The death of Raja Pratap Narayan Singha happened in the year 1774 AD.

### **Ban Singha (33<sup>rd</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Pratap Narayan Singha, his son Ban Singha succeeded him in the year 1775 AD by becoming the king of Mayong. This was followed by the death of Durlabh Nath Medhi and Downath from Oanimora jak was made the next Medhi. After this the king collected revenue from the people and organized the yearly festivals and pujas in the kingdom. But this time he discontinued organizing the annual Maroi puja. By this time, the British invaded assam, made Mayong part of “Nowgong District,” and the king of Mayong was quite confused about the prevailing situation as he was not able to take any decision as what should be done. Then the king fell ill and in the year 1783 AD he died.

### **Narayan Singha (34<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Ban Singha, his son Nararyan Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 1785 AD.<sup>12</sup> After Narayan Singha became the king, the Mayong kingdom was administered by the British in the form of a Mouza for revenue collection. Now one part of the revenue collected from the people had to be handed over to the British officials in Nagaon (25%). After this the

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<sup>12</sup> By Guneswar Deka’s reckoning, this date should be 1855. This is most likely correct as the British did not annex Assam until 1826.

Bangthai Sukaman Mikir died and since he had no children his position did not last any longer. This was followed by the death of Taling Nath of Gada jak and his nephew Sanidhar Nath succeeded him. Then Ghatabor Bayon died followed by the death of Bhakatram Sarmah. He was succeeded by his son Kadam Sarmah. Some years before Narayan Singha became the king the British invaded Assam and divided the entire land into various Mouzas. Narayan Singha became in charge of the Mayong Mouza [a.k.a. Desh Myung, or as spelled in other reports Myang] and he agreed to hand over a part of revenue collected from the people to the British officer in Nagaon. The king was officially provided one part of the revenue as gift. This went on for a few years but a corrupt official (*mohori*), through a conspiracy, shifted the administration of the mouza from the king to the hands of the Deka Raja Bali Singha of Bothora village. Since then the Mayong Mouza disappeared.

The king Narayan Singha reared a rhino which was offered to him by the people of Mayong. The king was very fond of the rhino and named it “Garani” [“Queen Rhino”]. A British officer named Campbel once offered to buy it at the cost of Rs, 500. But the king of Mayong did not accept the proposal. Once after eating vegetables prepared for a feast at Phani Konwar’s house the rhino fell ill and died. This was followed by the death of the Pator Bhodor Mikir and since then the position of Pator vanished from the kingdom of Mayong. Then an official named Bejmon Nath died and one of his family member named Kajol Nath succeeded him. This was followed by the death of the Xenapati Lahang Mikir and his son Laimon Mikir was handed over the further responsibility.

The king paid importance to all his responsibilities and the maintenance of the musical instruments like the bor dhol, dhepa dhol, and also the army’s weapons. He called for an artisan named Dhighola Keot and ordered him to prepare two dolas: one would be prepared with poles

made of iron and the other would be made out of wood. The one with the iron poles would be used by the king and the one with the one made of wood would be used by the princes. He also ordered for some wooden stools (*pira*) to be prepared, and also ordered the construction of a big *chouraghor* [a house where royal *raijmel* and *darbar* were to be held]. Here he and his officials along with the people would hold important discussions. He also appointed a person for the maintenance of this *chauraghor*. Narayan Singha was also a patron of jewelry and paid ample importance in the maintenance of the *bor japi* [ceremonial royal hat], *chakra* [royal wheels], and patronized the extension of the royal treasury. After this he and his officials set off for the Goxai Uliuwa festival. The king followed the *goxai* seated on his new iron dola. He also paid importance to the maintenance of the *than* and the *goxai* and appointed people for carrying out the annual festivals. The king also had a number of buffaloes which provided him with milk and curd. The king administered his kingdom with peace and harmony, but in the year 1802 AD he died owing to some severe illness. King Narayan Singha had five sons.

### **Bakat Singha (35<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Narayan Singha his son Bakat Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 1803 AD. This was followed by the death of the Pheta Koch from the Pheta Ghoriya *phoid* and a person from his family named Motiram Koch was made the official of the Pheta *phoid*. He was asked to render his duties as per his ancestors. Then the Xenapati Gela Mikir died and with this the position of Xenapati came to an end. It is said, however, that he had a decendent named Nadal Mikir. After this the drummer Nidjiram Thakuria died and his death was followed by an epidemic [most likely what was called *kala azar*; Guneswar Deka argues that it was cholera] which broke out in the village and many people died. The ones who were alive shifted to some

other place and as a result of which the Hira *phoid* in Mayong ceased to exist. After the death of Vishnuram Sarmah, his son Joidev Sarmah took over the responsibility to guard Mayong. Then the Medhi named Sanibor Nath died and a member of his family, Tabhuran Nath was made to take over his position. The other Xenapati [i.e. commander-in-chief] Laimon Mikir died and thereafter his position of xenapati ceased to exist as well. This was followed by the death of the Medhi named Dour Nath and his son, Senaram Nath succeeded him as the Medhi of the Panimora jak. This appointment of officers went on for many days due to the many deaths from the epidemic. The king also organized the Goxai Uliuwa festival. Marriages were organized through the Assamese Duliya. Soon, the king also fell ill and in the year 1820 AD he died.<sup>13</sup>

### **Rahan Singha (36<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After the death of Bakat Singha his fourth younger brother Rahan Singha took over the throne of Mayong in the year 1821 AD. After he became the king he had to face an extreme financial crises, and by this time many of the official's posts like the thakuria, pator, and xenapati no longer existed. Several of the dola, horses, etc. were also destroyed. Then the Medhi Gandar Nath died and a person from his family named Gandar Nath succeeded him. This was followed by the death of the Bishaya Matiram Koch. He had two sons named Dhirai and Mahendra Koch. Neither of them succeeded their father as Bishaya but continued with their ancestral work without getting into the position. From the Barua jak the official Kajal Nath died and his son Joibor Nath succeeded him. He appointed two persons for organizing the yearly Goxai Uliuwa

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<sup>13</sup> The years of Bakat Singha's rule were most likely 1875–1899 according to Guneswar Deka (2009: 45).

and the Goxai Niya<sup>14</sup> festival. He also appointed persons for taking over the responsibility of the proper arrangement of seats for the king and his officials during the festival. After the death of the official Ghotbor Bayon, his son Holiram Nath succeeded him and assisted the king with various issues. Following this was the death of Gathimora Nath and a person from his family named Lora Bharath Nath was given the position of the Medhi of Kala jak. After some days the Medhi Senarai gave up his position and his brother Bipra Nath was given the responsibility of the Medhi. Then, after the death of Tabhuram Medhi his position remained vacant and the post was abolished. Eventually Rahan Singha fell victim to a neurological disorder (paralysis) and so had to give up the throne to his son Baneswar Singha.<sup>15</sup>

### **Baneswar Singha (37<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

Owing to ill health Rahan Singha gave up his throne and his son Baneswar Singha ascended the throne of Mayong in the year 1835 AD [the actual year was 1930 AD]. After becoming the king he performed the yearly festivities his forefathers used to perform. He served on the “jury” of the British court in Nagaon, and because of these duties he appointed Daneswar Deka and Purna Singha as the two Deka Rajas of Mayong [now taken from the Sari Bhagi and Nau Bhagi lineages]. They would take the initiative of the Goxai Uliuwa festival and would pay an eye to the administration of the kingdom of Mayong along with the king. After some days the official Joybor Nath died and one of his family members named Maheswar Nath was made the official Medhi of the Barua jak. He was to appoint two persons in charge of the proper arrangement of

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<sup>14</sup> This particular festival seems to have only been celebrated once, as the current king is uncertain what was involved in the ceremonial.

<sup>15</sup> The years of Rahan Singha’s rule were most likely 1899–1930 according to Guneswar Deka (2009: 46).

seats for the king and the Deka Rajas during various meetings. After some days a Medhi named Senaram Nath died. It was only after a number of days that a person from his family named Tuniram Nath was appointed to the former's post. After the death of Niral Nath Medhi from the Nuwa Medhi jak, a member of his family named Kukua Nath was appointed to his position.

The Brahmin priest Joydeb Sarmah, who was in charge of the *goxai* of mayong and other festivities died because of some illness. He did not have any heir so his post remained vacant and with that the priestly order of Brahmins in Mayong came to an end. During the days of Rahan Singha, on the eastern banks of Bamun Pukhuri, a house was constructed for the purpose of setting up a minor school. Furniture like chairs, tables, etc. were provided for facilitating the teachers and the students. The school started in the year 1837 AD [the actual date was 1937 AD] during the reign of Baneswar Singha. For the administration of the school a governing body was set up. For taking care of the treasury and finance an outsider named Shri Harichandra Gogoi was made the secretary. He would also act as the caretaker of the school. But the pond beneath the school was in terrible condition so the king and the people cleared up the pond after withdrawing some money from the local board.

Fourthly as a result of the water scarcity in the kingdom the king along with the people decided to dig a pond on Harichandra Gogoi's land but due to lack of money this could not be concluded.

### **Maniram [“Mina”] Singha (38<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

Baneswar Singha gave up the throne to his younger brother Maniram Singha who became the king of Mayong in the year 1867 AD [the actual year was 1957 AD].<sup>16</sup> After he became the king

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<sup>16</sup> As per Guneswar Deka's reckoning, the dates for Baneswar Singha's rule were 1930–1957 AD and the dates for Maniram Singha's rule were 1957–1980 AD (Deka 2009: 46–47).

he performed all the yearly festivals and ceremonies along with the people. He also summoned a doctor to the kingdom of Mayong in order to provide medical facilities to the people. He also constructed a house for the doctor where he was supposed to live and treat the people of the kingdom.

It was in the year 1937 AD<sup>17</sup> that Mayong also came to be known as the “Brahmaputra egora khohai uthai dia gaon” [“The village created and destroyed by the Brahmaputra”]. This was so because some of the villages of Mayong like Xogunpori, Xiyaaltari, Ujattari, Kolatoli, Barhoitari, Mantari, No. 1 and No. 2 Hiloikhunda, No. 1 Ganesh Gaon, Pakoriguri, Xapmari, Kotahguri, and Pakori Mukh were flooded and during 1948 AD [most likely 1950 AD] they were entirely washed away by the Brahmaputa. No trace of any of these villages are found today. In the year 1960 AD in the Assamese month of Magh on the day of Bhim-Ekadarshi Banerwar Singha passed away at the age of hundred. He joined the Congress Party and also worked for the Independence of India. During his lifetime on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 AD India achieved its independence from the British. After independence a dirt road was constructed from Monoha to Gogsoki Ghat (presently Dhamkhunda Kolong Ghat). After four years another dirt road was constructed from Mayong to Kajoli Soki. The king Maniram Singha was also a member of Nagaon Mila Sabha and established cordial relations with the king of Nagaon named Dadhi Singha. It was during his reign that both the Mauza Panchayat and Village Panchayat systems were created and operated separately from kingly rule. Mayong Higher Secondary School was also established during this time. A proper tin house was constructed at the Bhagwati Than. At Kamarpur a minor school was established along with the constructed of a tin house for the panchayat sittings. A library in Rajamyong and Hatimuria Mayong Girl’s School were also

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<sup>17</sup> According to Raja Taranikanta Singha, this date is most likely incorrect and is probably in reference to the 1950 Assam-Tibet Earthquake, which altered the width and flow of the Brahmaputra River.

established. This was followed by the establishment of a post office in Mayong. But with time, Maniram Singha's health deteriorated and his son Ghanakanta Singha became the king of Mayong.

### **Ghanakanta Singha (39<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

After Maniram Singha's health deteriorated his eldest son Ghanakanta Singha became the king of Mayong. In the year 1902 or 1980 AD [the actual date was 1980 AD] he was given the responsibility of the kingdom of Mayong. Before becoming king, he took an active part in India's war for independence and was taken to prison a number of times [especially for the derailment of a train at Panbari rail station]. During his reign one of his seniors named Golap Nath died and his son Navin Nath was given the responsibility of his father's position as Medhi. Again a Goxai Ghoriya Medhi from Goda Ghoriya khel named Abhiram Nath died and Navin Nath (2) was given the responsibility. As a result of the ill health of Bhaloman Nath from the Pani Moriya jak, a person from the Goda Ghoriya khel named Shri Gohin Nath was appointed temporarily to the former's post. Later on a person from the Pani Moriya jak named Phonidhar Nath was permanently appointed to this post. After the death of Tarapad Nath from the Pani Moriya jak a person named Badya Nath was given the responsibility of housing and maintaining the third *goxai*. After the sudden death of the Medhi named Tuleswar Medhi from the Hatimuriya Tamuli Medhi jak his son Shri Ananda Medhi was given the responsibility of his father's position. This was followed by the death of Xoniram Teron from the Bangthai *phoid*. He was succeeded by his son Jadab Teron [who remains the current Bor Bangthai in Burha Mayong]. It was during his office that in the year 2001, that a rural museum was first established in Mayong [it was later completed in 2006]. Under Ghanakanta Singha the annual festivals and

ceremonies were organized and carried out in order and traditionally according to Xarassa Singha's original interdiction almost 400 years ago. It was during the year 2008 AD, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Ahin, Friday (Suklapakhya, Fourth Tithi), the 39<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong passed away.

### **Taranikanta Singha (40<sup>th</sup> Raja of Mayong)**

Before the death of the 39<sup>th</sup> Raja, Ghanakanta Singha, his eldest son Taranikanta Singha became the king of Mayong in the year 2005 AD (on a Sunday, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the month of Bohag). During his reign, a Hatimuria Koch official of the royal court named Ghanakanta [the previous Raja's *sakhi* or *mita*, meaning "name-sharer"] died and his brother, Shri Lohit Koch, was given the responsibility over the office. The Deka Raja, Shri Jatin Deka, was expelled from his position on the grounds of carelessness, corruption, and misgovernance. In his place, a person named Braja Deka [from the Nau Bhagi in Hatimuria] was made the new Deka Raja. The present king of Mayong, Shri Taranikanta Singha, has been carrying out the yearly festivals and ceremonies traditionally with the cooperation the people of Mayong. Presently, alongside the traditional work, he is also involved in a number of socio-economic programs for development in Mayong. It is during his current rule that, with the help of Krishnakanta Konwar [the current king's eldest son], a paved road was finally constructed here.

**Table A.1. The Rajas of the Mayong Kingdom, the year of their rule,<sup>18</sup> and number of years ruled [according to the Mayong Buranji]**

No.	Name of Raja	Year (death)	No. of years ruled
1	Suinat Singha	1538	20
2	Muhit Singha	1541	7
3	Maniram Singha	1555	8
4	Krishna Singha	1559	5
5	Ananta Singha	1560	1
6	Xingiram Singha	1566	8
7	Kamaleswar Singha	1573	9
8	Dadhi Singha	1582	3
9	Xoniram Singha	1589	8
10	Xarassa Chandra Singha	1615	21
11	Prem Singha	1621	31
12	Govinda Chandra Singha	1632	11
13	Keshav Singha	1639	7
14	Bidita Singha	1643	6
15	Bhem Singha	1654	11
16	Kirti Singha	1664	10
17	Amar Singha	1672	8
18	Nakul Singha	1674	2
19	Bhagadutta Singha	1682	8
20	Gopal Chandra Singha	1688	6
21	Ranjit Singha	1693	5
22	Mahit Singha	1698	5
23	Shiva Singha	1701	5
24	Sandit Singha	1710	9
25	Balit Narayan Singha	1718	8
26	Amrit Singha	1725	7
27	Bhogali Singha	1732	7
28	Padmaram Singha	1740	8
29	Luhit Singha	1747	7
30	Kularam Singha	1757	10
31	Lakhiram Singha	1766	9
32	Pratap Narayan Singha	1774	8
33	Ban Singha	1783	9
34	Narayan Singha	1802	20
35	Bakat Singha	1820	18
36	Rahan Singha	1834	14
37	Baneswar Singha	1871	21
38	Maniram Singha	1892	10
39	Ghanakanta Singha	1902 or 1980	25
40	Taranikanta Singha	2005	present

<sup>18</sup> The dates included here, from the Bishaya transcription of the Mayong Buranji, fluctuate between being death or destitution dates and coronation dates.

**Table A.2. Revised timeline of the Rajas of the Mayong Kingdom according to Guneswar Deka (2009)**

No.	Name of Raja	Years Ruled (CE)
1	Suinat Singha	1538–1547 (as a coronated Raja)
2	Muhit Singha	1547–1552
3	Maniram Singha	1552–1560
4	Krishna Singha	1560–1562
5	Ananta Singha	1562–1564
6	Xingiram Singha	1564–1572
7	Kamaleswar Singha	1572–1581
8	Dadhi Singha	1581–1584
9	Xoniram Singha	1584–1590
10	Xarassa Chandra Singha	1590–1615
11	Prem Singha	1615–1621 (as Bor Raja)
12	Govinda Chandra Singha	1622–1630
13	Keshav Singha	1630–1639
14	Bidita Singha	1639–1643
15	Bhem Singha	1643–1655
16	Kirti Singha	1655–1662
17	Amar Singha	1662–1672
18	Nakul Singha	1673–1675
19	Bhagadutta Singha	1675–1682
20	Gopal Chandra Singha	1682–1689
21	Ranjit Singha	1689–1694
22	Mahit Singha	1694–1698
23	Shiva Singha	1698–1701
24	Sandit Singha	1701–1705
25	Balit Narayan Singha	1705–1740
26	Amrit Singha	1740–1749
27	Bhogali Singha	1749–1758
28	Padmaram Singha	1758–1786
29	Luhit Singha	1786–1790
30	Kularam Singha	1790–1810
31	Lakhiram Singha	1810–1825
32	Pratap Narayan Singha	1825–1840
33	Ban Singha	1840–1855
34	Narayan Singha	1855–1875
35	Bakat Singha	1875–1899
36	Rahan Singha	1899–1930
37	Baneswar Singha	1930–1957
38	Maniram Singha	1957–1980
39	Ghanakanta Singha	1980–2005
40	Taranikanta Singha	2005–present

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