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SOUNDING RURAL MODERNITIES:

GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND THE BODY IN ASSAM, INDIA

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Table of Contents

List of Figures v

List of Transcription Diagrams viii

List of Tables ix

List of Accompanying Audio Files x

List of Accompanying Video Files xi

Abstract xii

Acknowledgements xiv

Note on Spelling and Transliteration xviii

Note on Transcription xxi

Prologue: Who is *Bihu*? xxii

Introduction: *Bihu* as a "Modern" Festival 1

Caste, Class, Ethnicity, and Race in Northeast India 9

Modernities, Nationalism and the Public Sphere 19

Public Culture and Media 23

Intimacies and Publics 28

Performance and Ritual 31

Discourses of the Body and Embodiment 34

Sounding *Bihu:* The Rural As Lived and Imagined Experience 41

Research Strategies 47

Dissertation Overview 50

Chapter One – Intimate Encounters: Dancing with the Crescent Moon 54

Performance Venues – The *Sutāl* and the Stage.....64

Intimacy, Space and Performance 67

Bihu as Sounded Practice 70

Animating Bodies: Feminine "Attraction" and Athletic Masculinity 85

The *Bihuwotī*: Solo Female Competitive Performing 89

The Guardian: Protecting and Promoting the *Gābhoru* Performer 93

Āmār Suwālī: "Our Girl" Competing on the Proscenium Stage.....98

Moving Beyond the Village: *Bihu* and Ethnic Politics.....101

Chapter Two – Youthful Desires: The *Gābhoru* Body as Creative Force.....111

Fertility in *Bihu* and Assamese Cultural Reform.....113

Assam's Tantric Legacy and Feminine Power 115

Colonial Accounts of *Bihu* 121

The Changing *Gābhoru* Body 123

Tuloni Biyā: Coming of Age in Rural Assam.....130

Ritual Purity and Personal Hygiene.....137

The *Buwārī*: Marriage and Mobility.....139

Kidnapped Brides and Eloping Couples.....143

Chapter Three – It Entered My Body: Articulating a Folk Sensibility in Assam 148

Politics of Genre and Style 150

Creating a Folk Sensibility: Marking Assamese Modernity 154

Panchasur: Folk Music and Dance Training in Guwahati 158

Gāt Xumāle: *Bihu* Entering the Body 160

Preservation Through Performance: Creating Boundaries Around the Folk 164

The Assamese Language Movement and the History of the Folk Arts in Assam.....165

Transmission of Traditional Knowledge 168

New-Old Songs: Searching for Hidden Gems.....174

Creating the *Bihu* Feel: Raw vs. *Puronā* 179

Chapter Four – Crowning the *Bihu* Queen: Competitive Arenas and Reality Television .187

Transitioning *Bihu* from Stage to Television Studio: Introducing the Host.....190

Serialized Episodes: Creating a Dramatic Arc 192

Confessional Talk Formats: Creating Character Intimacy 202

Bihu-Samba Fusion Controversy in Guwahati 212

Bihu-Bollywood Fusion Celebrated in Dance Competition 219

Bihu on *Indian Idol Junior* 2015 226

The *Bihu* Queen "Goes Out" from Assam.....230

Epilogue 232

Appendix A: Pronunciation Guide 240

Appendix B: Months of the Assamese Year 242

Glossary 243

Bibliography 256

List of Figures

Figure 0.1 Map of Assam, 1950 (Baruah 1999, 92).....10

Figure 0.2 Map of Assam, 1999 (Baruah 1999, 92).....10

Figure 1.1 *Kāsi Jun nāsoni*-s prepare for *bihu* competition backstage at the end.....58
of a long night, Baruwoti village, near Silapathar, Assam. Left to right:
Bondita Das, Gudu Gogoi, Dulumoni Saikia, Pallabi Konwar,
Rinkumoni Saikia, Sima Gogoi, Mousumi Das, Poppy Gogoi.
April 28, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.2 Kāsi Jun performs at the *sutāl* of a family in Betoni Pam village..... 59
April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.3 Children throw pieces of gourd and eggplant on during the ritual..... 61
washing of cattle on the first morning of *bohāg*, the Assamese New
Year. Betoni Pam village. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.4 *Grihosto* (host) family receives blessings from Kāsi Jun, Betoni Pam..... 63
village. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.5 Kāsi Jun competes at Baruwoti *Bihutolī*, Baruwoti village..... 65
April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.6 *Grihosto* (left) offers *tāmul* (betel nut) and money to *bihu* performers.....66
during Kāsi Jun Bihu Troupe's competitive routine at Silapathar
Regional *Bihutolī*, Silapathar town, Assam. April 28, 2014.
Photo by the author.

Figure 1.7 *Ḍhulīyā* Arup Nath poses with *ḍhul* drum. Guwahati. Photo by the author...72

Figure 1.8 Priyanka Das and Dulumoni Saikia at the Saikias' home in Kenduguri..... 85
village near Silapathar, Assam. March 16, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.9 Mintu Gogoi (far right) acts as guardian during Kāsi Jun *bihu* rehearsal.....94
at Silapathar Bohagi Utsav field. March 27, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 1.10 Monika Morang and Ronjita Taid at 6th Annual Mising Youth Festival,.....104
Akajan High School Field. March 29, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 2.1 Devotees visit the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. January 14, 2016.....116
Photo by Benita Mahanta.

Figure 2.2 *Bihu* Album by Khagen and Archana Mahanta. Gramophone Company.....125

1974. Photo by the author.

Figure 2.3 Menaka Basumatary catches fish with the *jākoi* basket. Near Simen.....127
Sapori, Dhemaji, Assam. March 6, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 2.4 Women gather to sing at Priyanka Baruah's *tuloni biyā* ceremony.....132
Betoni Pam village, Assam. March 18, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 2.5 Bathing rituals performed during Priyanka Baruah's *tuloni biyā*.....135
ceremony. Betoni Pam village, Assam. March 19, 2014.
Photo by the author.

Figure 2.6 Young women throw rice at Priyanka Baruah's *tuloni biyā* ceremony.....136
Betoni Pam village, Assam. March 19, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 2.7 *Buwārī* sits on the ground in the presence of men at the home of the.....141
Boruah family. Betoni Pam village, Assam. April 14, 2014.
Photo by the author.

Figure 2.8 Manisha Borah and Montu Gogoi playing the roles of Komola and.....146
Moniram in a performance of *Menaka* at Nalbari Theatre Fest,
Nalbari, Assam. April 28, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 3.1 Probin and Roshmi Saikia teach at home. Guwahati, Assam.....158
March 28, 2015. Photo by the author.

Figure 3.2 Women performing Deurī *bihu*. Bormoriya Deurī Village, Assam.....162
April 17, 2011. Photo by the author.

Figure 3.3 Women performing *Oxomīyā bihu*. Borpothar Village, Assam..... 163
April 22, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 3.4 Sculpture of *Buṛhi Āir Xādhu* dramatization featuring a grandmother.....166
telling folktales to young children, Dibrugarh University Park,
Dibrugarh, Assam. February 26, 2014. Photo by the author.

Figure 3.5 Laboinya Das sings *bihu* songs while sifting rice flour ground by the.....169
ḍheǩī. Santipur village, near Silapathar, Assam. April 13, 2011.
Photo by the author.

Figure 3.6 Khagen and Archana Mahanta perform at Latasil Bihutolī, Guwahati..... 174
April 2009. Taken from video footage by the author.

Figure 3.7 Cover image of mp3 CD album containing songs from..... 177
Jānmoni 2009 VCD.

Figure 3.8 Roshmi selects Pallabi Bhuyan as the next contestant in a mock..... 181
song competition. Delhi-Guwahati Rajdhani Train. February 6, 2015.
Photo by the author.

Figure 3.9 Samsung Smartphone Advertisement. *The Assam Tribune*. April 8, 2013... 184

Figure 4.1 Bonti Hazarika in *zuzonā* pose.....197

Figure 4.2 Bonti Hazarika performs *koṅkāl bhāngi* (breaking waist) with hands..... 197
palms-up at her *koṅkāl* (lower back).

Figure 4.3 Bonti Hazarika performs *koṅkāl bhāngi* (breaking waist) with open arms..... 197
(*hāt meli*), breaking her wrists along with her waist on beats 1 and 2.

Figure 4.4 Bonti Hazarika plays the *gogonā*.....199

Figure 4.5 Bonti Hazarika flirts with singer during *bihu* routine.....200

Figure 4.6 Bonti Hazarika plays the *ṭokā*.....200

Figure 4.7 Bonti Hazarika and her *bihu* troupe end in a final pose at the.....201
conclusion of her competitive routine.

Figure 4.8 Smritirekha Saikia, Rehanna Kheshgi and Seema Kakoty preparing to.....206
judge an episode of *Bihu Rānī* at the DY365 studios in Guwahati.

Figure 4.9 Sandip Soparrkar and his troupe perform Samba dance to a *bihu* song..... 213
with live musical accompaniment during fashion show in Guwahati.
January 22, 2014.

Figure 4.10 Still image from news footage featuring women protesting *bihu* fusion.....214
performance in Guwahati. January 24, 2014.

Figure 4.11 Still image from news footage featuring men from *Asomiya Yuva*..... 215
Mancha protesting *bihu* fusion performance in Guwahati.
January 24, 2014.

Figure 4.12 Pradeep Gurung and Piyali Saha dance *bihu* to Hindi film music as..... 222
contestants on *Dance India Dance*. March 11, 2012.

Figure 5.1 Promotional material from “Eye Am Indian” Facebook campaign.....236
sponsored by *Northeast Today*.

Figure 5.2 Promotional material from “Eye Am Indian” Facebook campaign.....237
sponsored by *Northeast Today*.

List of Transcription Diagrams

Diagram 1.1 Linear diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, lyrics, and melody.....75
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrases 1 and 2.

Diagram 1.2 Linear diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, lyrics, and melody.....76
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrases 3 and 4.

Diagram 1.3 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.....77
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Part 1.

Diagram 1.4 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.....78
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Part 2.

Diagram 1.5 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.....79
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Part 3.

Diagram 1.6 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.....80
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Parts 1-3 combined.

Diagram 1.7 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, lyrics, and melody.....81
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Parts 1-3 combined.

Diagram 1.8 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.....82
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1.

Diagram 1.9 Linear diagram of "*O nāsoni*" in *bihu zuzonā* form..... 84

Diagram 1.10 Circular diagram of "*O nāsoni*" in *bihu zuzonā* form.....84

Diagram 4.1 Linear diagram of *bihu* rhythm aligned with *bihu* dance movements..... 198

Diagram 4.2 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm aligned with *bihu* dance movements.....199

Diagram 4.3 Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm aligned with Samba dance steps..... 216

Diagram 4.4 Linear diagram of *khemtā* rhythm aligned with *bihu* rhythm and dance.....224
movements.

Diagram 4.5 Circular diagram of *khemtā* rhythm aligned with *bihu* rhythm and dance.... 224
movements.

List of Tables

Table 4.1 Table outlining Bonti Hazarika's competitive performance,.....195
Margherita, April 2009.

List of Accompanying Audio Files

Audio 1.1 "*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song. Sung by the author..... 71

Audio 1.2 "*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, performed in *bihu zuzonā* style..... 83
Sung by the author.

Audio 2.1 "*No junti ulāle*" *bihu jāt-nām* song. Sung by Khagen and Archana.....124
Mahanta. Gramophone Company, 1974. Audio digitized from original
45rpm vinyl disc.

Audio 2.2 "*No junti ulāle*" *bihu* song, performed without the *jāt*..... 124
Sung by the author.

Audio 2.3 "*Kus kus*" from *bihu* album *Moromor Junāli,* released in 2014.....126

Audio 2.4 "*Edāli bholukā*" *bihu* song. Sung by the author..... 140

Audio 2.5 "*De ḍhe̊kī de*" *bihu* song. Sung by the author.....144

Audio 3.1 "*Ābelā nulābā*" *bihu* song. Sung by the author.....181

Audio 3.2 "*Ābelā nulābā*" *bihu* song, performed with "new" lyrics composed.....182
by Montu Gogoi and friends. Sung by the author.

List of Accompanying Video Files

Video 1.1 Kāsi Jun performs at *sutāl* in Betoni Pam. April 14, 2014..... 61
Filmed by the author.

Video 1.2 Priyanka Das sings *jurā-nām bihu* song and narrates competition.....91
experience. Kenduguri. March 16, 2014. Filmed by the author.

Video 1.3 Priyanka Das and Dulumoni Saikia discuss *bihu* competitions, hostel..... 97
restrictions. Kenduguri. March 16, 2014. Filmed by the author.

Video 1.4 Kāsi Jun performs at *sutāl* in Junaki Nagar. April 21, 2014.....100

Video 4.1 Bonti Hazarika's competitive performance, Margherita, April 2009..... 195
Filmed by the author.

Abstract

This dissertation moves beyond cosmopolitan centers to focus on how young people in rural India engage with global media networks by investigating the intersections between gender, youth, and performance. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the northeastern Indian state of Assam since 2009, I explore performances of music and dance associated with the springtime *bihu* New Year's festival. I demonstrate how *bihu* is more than a celebration of fertility and the beginning of the agricultural cycle. By engaging with performers who move between ritual contexts, festival stages, and reality television competitions, I recognize the embodied sounds of *bihu* as constitutive of gendered and contested spaces where social, economic and geopolitical anxieties play out on the world stage. But I also investigate *bihu* as a context in which relationships are cultivated and affirmed between families and friends, between humans and the natural world, and between individual selves and multiple imagined communities. Theorizing *bihu* as "sounded practice," I approach the study of performance through an investigation of sounded movement that seeks to avoid common binaries such as music/dance and melody/rhythm. As the subject of highly gendered debates about cultural authenticity, *bihu* constitutes an arena in which the sounding, moving body serves as evidence of regional belonging. Urban music and dance schools, university folklore departments, and state cultural institutions situate *bihu* as constitutive of a broader folk sensibility that spans seasonal and life cycle ritual contexts, commercial music markets, and university student politics. I argue that this vernacular sounded practice provides young people with opportunities to experiment with socially determined boundaries of gender and sexuality, to learn how to navigate risks, and to bridge seemingly incommensurable media worlds. In so doing, my work challenges and advances scholarly discussions of youth culture and media in South Asian communities as well

as postcolonial analyses of gender and liberalization in a broader geopolitical context. Supplementary audio and video files are available online.

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Note on Spelling and Transliteration

"Assamese" refers to both the language and to the people who speak it (Assamese poem, Assamese woman). As a member of the Indo-Aryan language family, Assamese is similar in many ways to modern Hindi, Bengali, and Oriya. The Assamese script shares most characters with Bengali, differing only in the representation of the symbol for "r" (Assamese ৰ vs. Bengali র) and including an additional consonant "w" (ৱ) which does not exist in Bengali.[1] The Library of Congress recommends transliterating the implicit vowel following a consonant or consonant cluster in Hindi, pronounced as "ə" according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), with the letter "a". The recommendation is the same for Bengali and Assamese, but in these languages the implicit vowel is pronounced as "ɒ" in IPA, closer to the English word "awe" – a rounded open vowel produced in the back of the mouth. Therefore I have chosen to transcribe all implicit vowels as "o". The chandrabindu (ঁ) indicates a nasalization of the vowel. While LOC variously transliterates nasalization as ṅ and ṁ, depending on the surrounding consonants, I have placed the chandrabindu directly above the nasalized vowel so as to avoid confusion. For example, while LOC would suggest *huṅsori,* I instead write *hu̐sori.*

Aspirated consonants are pronounced with a strong burst of breath, indicated by an "h" (kho, gho, jho, tho, dho, bho, pho/fo). In order to distinguish between aspirated and non-aspirated consonants, the English speaker can test the breath pressure by placing a hand in front of the mouth while saying the word "pin" (unaspirated "p") and "spin" (aspirated "p"). A dot below the consonant indicates a "cerebral" or retroflex consonant, pronounced by curling the tongue back to touch the roof of the mouth (ṭo, ḍo, ṛo, ṇa) and their aspirates (ṭho, ḍho, ṛho).

[1] A pronunciation guide with correspondences between Assamese and Roman scripts is included in the Appendix.

Assamese also includes an important voiceless velar fricative, which is represented in transliteration as either "x" or "s." While the sound is similar to the "ch" sound in the German "*acht*" and Scottish "*loch*," I use the letter "x" to represent this fricative. This is an iconic sound that distinguishes Assamese from Bengali and is a source of great pride for Assamese speakers. In Assamese script, the "x" sound is represented by the same three characters that in Bengali are pronounced as "sh," (স, শ, ষ). Therefore, while Assamese speakers pronounce Assam as "*Oxom*" (অসম), many Bengalis understandably pronounce the same word as "Asham." It is particularly problematic when people refer to Assamese people as "Ashami" or "Asami," because the Assamese word *āsāmī* (আচামী) means "criminal" or someone accused of a crime and awaiting trial. In the case of common words where the English spelling with an "s" is broadly used, I write "s" instead of the more accurate "x" (for example, Assam, Assamese, and the surname Saikia instead of Xoikīyā). But in the case of particular words related to Assamese cultural traditions, I will write "x." For example, the Assamese dance tradition *Xotrīyā* begins with the velar fricative, but since this sound is not present in any other language of the Subcontinent, it is often written as *Sattriya* for non-Assamese audiences.

I choose to use "x" to represent the velar fricative in part because Assamese also has words that contain characters accurately represented by the letter "s" as pronounced in English. This becomes especially important when there are two words with different meanings distinguished only by the use of "x" or "s" — for example *xorāi* is a traditional Assamese brass vessel used to store betel nut for offering to guests, while *sorāi* is a bird. In representing the "s" sound, I do not use the alternative transliteration "ch," although it appears in direct quotations of print sources. I make this distinction because the two characters shared between Assamese and

Bengali (চ, ছ) are pronounced as “ch” (as in “church”) in Bengali and “s” (as in “song”) in Assamese. For example, the word for “tea” begin with the same written consonant in both Assamese and Bengali, but Assamese speakers say “sāh” and Bengali speakers say “chā.” For this reason, I write *sādor* (the upper part of the traditional Assamese dress worn by women) instead of the alternative *chador*.

I have represented plural nouns using the English “-s” because Assamese uses a complex array of classifiers to indicate the character of a noun, either attached as a suffix to the number that precedes the noun or as a suffix to the noun itself. There are different classifiers for animate and inanimate objects of different kinds that indicate various levels of respect but also quality (-*khon* is used for flat, rectangular things like books, -*jupā* is used for trees, -*khil*ā is used for leaf-like things such as papers, while -*jon* is used for adult males, -*joni* is used for women and female animals, and -*gorāki* is used as an honorific suffix for both men and women). So, for “two *bihu* queens” I would write “two *bihu rānī*-s” rather than *dujoni bihu rānī.*

Note on Transcription

My approach to transcribing performance emerges from a variety of traditions. In this dissertation, I resist the prevailing tendency to compartmentalize music and dance into separate analytical realms. Instead I focus on melody and rhythm as sounded practices that emerge from bodies in motion. When I have found it to be effective, I incorporate horizontal depictions of melodic, rhythmic and bodily movement into linear diagrams that can be read from left to right as a type of modified staff notation. I have also presented the same information in circular diagrams in order to convey the cyclical nature of time experienced during performance. Inspired by Steven Friedson's analysis of Ewe song in Ghana (2009), I submit these transcriptions neither as strictly descriptive records of past performances nor as prescriptive models for future performances. Instead, I envision them as visual models of fluid structures that are never necessarily articulated verbally but are learned and communicated through performance itself. In this dissertation, transcriptions serve to help me articulate visually some of the sounded relationships I have learned to embody as a performer of *bihu.*

Prologue: Who is *Bihu*?

"I'd like to introduce you to an old friend of mine…" Angaraag "Papon" Mahanta narrated the story of how we met ten years ago in Delhi, a chance encounter possibly written in the stars that aligned our two musical paths. As his full, bassy voice boomed out over the speakers, reaching the *rāiz*[1], the crowd of thousands that faced us on the outdoor stage, I adjusted the levels on my in-ear monitor by discreetly twisting the knob on a small black box clipped to the inside of my petticoat at my lower back. Although he was standing only three feet from me, I heard Papon's voice as it traveled through the microphone, cables, and soundboard, transmitted wirelessly into my earbuds. When I closed my eyes, I experienced a surreal feeling, as if I was standing in a studio listening back to recorded sounds. This surreal feeling was compounded when I heard my own voice speaking in Assamese, thanking the *rāiz* for accepting me as an artist on their *bihu* stage, which I learned to recognize as a gendered and contested space where social, economic and geopolitical anxieties are routinely performed. The noise-cancelling function of my earbuds created a sense of isolation from the crowd, and a tenuously intimate connection to the other musicians in the band, which broke down when the sound engineer periodically changed the levels of the sounds before they reached me. That performance on April 14, 2015 with Papon and his band East India Company at Chandmari Field, one of the oldest *bihu* festival stages in Assam's capital city Guwahati, set in motion a series of events for which I was unprepared.

I anticipated that association with Papon, famous in Assam as a singer of pop, rock and folk fusion genres and icon of Assamese youth culture, would allow me privileged access to the

[1] *Rāiz* has similar connotations as the German concept of *volk*, which refers to a collective of people often glossed as "the people," "the nation," or "the folk."

inner workings of celebrity stardom. But I could not anticipate the emotional intensity that would accompany this journey as I literally and figuratively entered the homes of thousands of families in Assam. Video recordings of our 20 live *bihu* tour performances were broadcast repeatedly over local satellite television networks, news channels pursued me for interviews, and television talk shows invited me as a special guest. Dressed in the traditional Assamese *mekhelā sādor* while singing and dancing Assamese folk genres, I was held up in public debates as a figure against which conservative cultural authorities could compare "Westernized" Assamese youth in order to declare the demise of Assamese culture. For example, a few nights after our performance at Chandmari, another singer and youth icon Zublee Baruah made a bold move by wearing a North Indian-style *kurta churidar* outfit woven from Assamese *mugā* silk and incorporating designs from Tiwā and Kārbi tribal communities, embodying a vision of Assamese cultural unity through fashion. The Chandmari *bihu* organizing committee humiliated Zublee by interrupting her performance and forcing her to leave the stage, because she was not wearing the traditional Assamese *mekhelā sādor*. During the following evening's broadcast, a newscaster from *Pratidin Time* asked the *rāiz* why Zublee would do such a thing when it would clearly hurt Assamese sentiments, especially considering the fact that a foreigner has come and shown respect for Assamese culture by dressing properly.

The *mekhelā sādor*, a dress that looks similar to the North Indian *sārī*, but actually is comprised of two pieces – the floor-length skirt (*mekhelā*), and the wide shawl that covers the upper body and drapes over the left shoulder (*sādor*) – plays an important role in grounding public discourses about modernity, nationalism, gender, and the body in women's lived experiences. During early political movements for Assamese linguistic and cultural sovereignty in the 1960s, elite and middle-class Assamese women began wearing the *mekhelā sādor* instead

of the *sārī* to express their commitment to a newly emerging sense of public Assamese identity (Saikia 2004, 61). As the student-led mass civil disobedience "anti-foreigner" agitation, referred to as the Assam Movement, gained power during the early 1980s, the *mekhelā sādor* became a symbol of control, when the male leadership required all female students to wear the *mekhelā sādor* even though male students were allowed to continue wearing "Western" trousers and shirts (Proceedings 2005, 58). These double standards mark the patriarchal roots of politics in Assam as women bear the burden of representing values associated with respectability. In a recent monograph, political scientist Namrata Goswami reflects on her experience as a college student in Guwahati in the early 1990s, when students felt extreme peer pressure to display allegiances to culture, ethnicity, and tradition, describing a hazing incident when senior students forced hostel residents to dress in *mekhelā sādor* during the first two weeks of classes or be denied food (Goswami 2015, x).

The recent upsurge in public outrage at Zublee's choice of dress for her Chandmari performance reveals ongoing pressure to conform to a conservative vision for identity politics in a multicultural society. Decisions regarding clothing styles, especially during performances of music and dance, are tied to highly gendered debates about cultural authenticity. As I argue from different vantage points throughout this dissertation, *bihu* creates possibilities for multiple visions of society to coexist. The dominant agenda expressed in these efforts to police public performance is a powerful form of social control, but this dissertation demonstrates that it is one among many expressions and interpretations of *bihu.* For example, in her response to the event, Zublee addressed her fans directly in a Facebook post featuring an image of her wearing the condemned dress. On April 19, 2016, She wrote, "I AM ASSAMESE & I AM TRIBAL," expressing solidarity with marginalized communities across the state, and declared:

> I Love My Mekhela Chadar and I Love All the traditional outfits of North East. I always wear Mekhela Chadar starting few days of Bihu Celebration and I will of-course keep wearing it in the future too, but the point is as long as the artists dress is decent and maintain the decorum of Bihu Function, one shouldn't dictate or force his or her opinion on someone. Moreover rules should be equal for all irrespective of gender.

Zublee's articulation of the relationship between ethnicity, gender and *bihu* in this statement about fashion is connected to historical debates about how bodies have been regulated in public spaces according to caste through dress codes. For example, in the context of colonial Kerala, Udaya Kumar writes about the transformation of the "breast cloth" as an upper-caste marker that lower-caste women were prohibited from wearing in public to the "blouse" as an object of fashion and personal aesthetic choice (1997, 248). Under colonial rule, debates about tradition and modernity, and community and nation became entangled with debates about fashion and style. These entanglements persist as caste relations continue to be realigned, especially on the material and discursive site of the female body. Later in Zublee's Facebook post, she addresses ongoing debates about the definition of Assamese identity in relation to fashion:

> People have reached the Moon but some of us are still unaware of the definition of Assamese. And so for their kind information, would like to let them know that all the tribes of Assam together forms the greater Assamese Community. I had to mention this bcoz the respected President of Pub Guwahati Bihu Sanmilan stated in a TV Channel that Zublee is not a tribal girl…..She is Assamese and that's why she should wear Mekhela Chadar. I have clearly mention that, I will accept their proposal of wearing Mekhela Chadar only if they are also in proper Assamese traditional attire.

In response to the media frenzy that ensued after the incident involving Zublee's dress in April 2015,[2] as well as ongoing opposition by various groups to Hindi songs being performed on

[2] See for example: "Assam Singer Faces Indian 'Attire' Discrimination, Not Allowed To Perform." *News World India*. April 21, 2015. And "The Shredding of Assamese Culture: *salwar kameez*-clad Zublee barred from stage" *Telegraph Calcutta*. April 18, 2015.

bihu stages,[3] an organization called the "Guwahati Committee for the Preservation of the Honor of Bihu" was formed, and created an official list of rules for *bihu* committees across the state to implement in April 2016. This committee consulted with 50 local organizing committees, each in charge of their own *bihu* stage, in order to encourage them to enforce rules which include dress and language codes, as well as time limits for late-night shows and efforts to source handmade *gāmusā* cloth from local weavers to present to honored guests. In an interesting twist, these debates have incorporated an added concern, first suggested by Zublee herself and echoed by others, that it is unfair to hold women to different standards than men. A recent article in the *Assam Tribune* describes the bizarre image of a young man playing electric guitar while wearing the traditional Assamese sarong-like *dhuti* cloth around his lower body, which organizers will apparently try to enforce this season (March 8, 2016). Ranjan Borah, president of the "Preservation of the Honor of Bihu" committee, told the *Tribune* that requiring artists to "adhere to traditional dress code" would help to "retain the originality of the festival."

My work with young people in rural Assam emerges in dialogue with recent studies of popular culture, globalization, and gender in South Asia that have recognized the importance of critically engaging with youth culture as a site for debating social values and shaping subjectivities. But most studies focus on the experiences of middle class youth in cosmopolitan centers (Banaji 2012). In metropolitan centers like Delhi and Bombay, or even smaller cities like Assam's capital Guwahati, studies have tended to focus on young people who are plugged into global networks, for example as they work in offices at multinational corporations and spend leisure time at clubs and restaurants (e.g. Saldanha 2002; Aneesh 2006; Basi 2009; DeSouza, Kumar and Shastri 2009; Roy 2010; Bansal 2013; Mathur 2014). In this dissertation, I

[3] See for example: "Voices of Protest" *The Telegraph, Calcutta*, April 19, 2013. Baruah, Pranjal. "Ulfa(I) 'bans' Hindi songs in Bihu events" *Times of India*. Dec 23, 2015. And "Bihu caught in 'dress code', 'Hindi ban' diktats by ultras." *Deccan Herald*. April 3, 2016.

incorporate experiences with young people in urban, cosmopolitan spaces, as well as experiences with young people who live in rural areas of Assam where agricultural cultivation is the main source of livelihood, demonstrating how access to many of the same media worlds spans this apparent urban-rural divide. Due to uneven and haphazard processes of development in India, satellite television and mobile data networks bring MTV and Facebook into villages that lack basic infrastructural developments like paved roads and running water. My research shows that for many young people, the annual springtime *bihu* festival provides an opportunity to bridge seemingly incommensurable worlds.

Seven years ago, in April 2009, I traveled to Margherita, a town in northeastern Assam close to India's border with Myanmar, in order to experience an all-night *bihu* competition for the first time. As a guest of Anil Saikia, a high school principal and bihu judge, I filmed the performance routines of the different contestants. Although I didn't pursue an opportunity to interact with any of the contestants at that time, I brought the video footage back with me and analyzed the performance of the winning contestant, Bonti Hazarika, during a Music and Gesture seminar soon after I began my doctoral studies here at Chicago. Little did I know, Bonti Hazarika would become an important interlocutor as my research developed over the next few years.

During subsequent trips to Assam, I interacted with *bihu* performers based in a cluster of villages in Dhemaji District, near Assam's northern border with Arunachal Pradesh, which I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2. I studied with folklorist-performers at a folk music and dance school in Assam's capital Guwahati, which I discuss in Chapter 3. And in March 2014, I participated as guest judge on a few episodes of a *bihu* reality television competition series broadcast out of Guwahati, which I discuss in Chapter 4. In between sessions of filming these reality television

episodes, I connected with the host of the show, Monikanchan Konwar, who turned out to be the winner of a previous season of the show, and also a master's student in the Performing Arts Department at Dibrugarh University, which would later become my local affiliate research institution. Monikanchan secured my invitation to a *bihu* workshop at Dibrugarh University a few weeks later, which was sponsored by the powerful All Assam Students Union.

As I checked into my guest room upon arriving in Dibrugarh, I found out that my bunkmate would be none other than Bonti Hazarika, who had been hired to lead the female workshop participants in singing and dancing bihu. During the ten-day workshop, I learned *bihu* songs and performance techniques from Bonti alongside other participants, and in the evenings, Bonti and I discussed the state of the *bihu* competition industry, and debates about pedagogical methods and judging practices. We also traveled to Margherita together, where I sat next to her as she judged the competition at the same *bihu* stage where she had won first prize back in 2009. We stayed at the home of her kind, welcoming parents-in-law, and after meeting them, it was hard for me to reconcile the stories of struggle Bonti had described, marrying into a higher caste family and being therefore prohibited from cooking in their kitchen because of pollution taboos. While these encounters expose the power of social pressures faced by families to conform to patriarchal gender and caste norms, my work with Bonti and other young performers in Assam also highlights the various ways in which agency is expressed at the local level, and how focusing on alliances rather than individuals makes possible a relational and intersectional approach to understanding the power of folk music and dance in the 21st century in relation to embodiment, youth culture, and global media.

My experiences as a researcher, student and co-performer in Assam shape my interpretations of the way sounded practices associated with rural livelihoods have become

symbolic of a modern Assamese identity performed through *bihu* music and dance. While many of the performances and contexts I discuss reinforce gender normativity by valorizing a "pure" and respectable femininity associated with domestic skill and grace – positioning the ideal woman as simultaneously modern and traditional – they also contain the possibility for interventions whereby young performers express creative agency. In this dissertation, *bihu* emerges through the dynamic relationships that have shaped my research. While I focus on the many ways families, communities, performers, and even I become part of *bihu* through the sounded practices of everyday life, I also question what it means to exist "outside" of *bihu*. The experiences of those who position themselves as distinct from mainstream Assamese civil society or find themselves categorically excluded from deceptively all-encompassing narratives of belonging bring into focus how caste, class, gender, sexuality, and race operate as discursive and embodied modes of both creating and dissolving boundaries critically located on the site of the body.

Introduction: *Bihu* as a "Modern" Festival

"The season of the Behoo, or spring festival, however, has always been claimed by the female sex as a period of considerable license; and the exercise of their freedom within that period does not seem to be attended with any stain, blemish, or loss of reputation" (1855, 226-7).

– *Travels and Adventures in Assam*, Major John Butler, Bengal Native Infantry

Many contemporary ideas about ethnic identity and belonging in India's northeast region have their roots in the colonial period. Before 1826, when the East India Company annexed the previously independent *Āhum* Kingdom and incorporated the territory into the colonial empire, the region had a very different relationship to what would later become India. The *Āhum* Kingdom, the neighboring princely state of Manipur, and other autonomous but interdependent entities maintained trade and kin relationships that reached into Burma which were complicated under colonial rule. To British colonial administrators, Assam was essentially unknowable because its people had no clearly documented history (Saikia 2004). With the help of elite Assamese Brahmans, colonial historians plotted out a history of Assam that took into account a long-standing tradition of chronicling historical events in the *Buronjī*-s, locating arguably mythical places on real geographical maps in order to establish a coherent history tracing Assam's origins to Upper Burma (Kar 2008).

The British East India Company had many interests in the region, one of the most lucrative being tea cultivation. The project of transforming the region's jungles into "gardens," or tea plantations, began in 1840 (Sharma 2011). Colonial records indicate that alongside land cultivation, one of the primary concerns of the administration was the rationalization and standardization of local social practices in order to record and monitor them (Scott 1998; Stoler 2002; Kar 2007). In this way, local social practices could be rendered "legible and

administratively more convenient" through what James C. Scott describes as "discriminating interventions of every kind" (Scott 1998, 3). The monitoring and shaping of private and public lives emerged not only as a strategic means to an end, but also as an end in itself. The close association of one's physical body and one's moral character was an important basic assumption of policymaking in British India. English administrators in colonial Assam believed the sensual absorption of sounds, sights, and smells would directly affect not only the perceiver's health, but his or her character as well (Kar 2007). Assam was understood as a place where the soil was inherently miasmatic, containing decomposing animal and vegetable matter that hung in the air (Kar 2007). Before germ theory "revolutionized understandings of odors" miasma theory maintained that smells were not only offensive but also hazardous (Jenner 2011, 346).

The close relationship between moral and physical experience was a foundation of colonial policies in Assam. Reform efforts in Assam centered on cleaning up miasmatic wastelands, restoring energy to the local people who were perceived as lazy, and improving the climate. The focus of these reforms shifted seamlessly from the "natural" to the "cultural." The colonial administration linked disease caused by miasma exposure to uncivilized lifestyle practices (Kar 2007). Cultivation of land served as a solution for "wasteland" organization and simultaneously provided the administration with a lucrative venture in the region, founded upon what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri called "the utopia of open spaces," explaining that in North America, "terrain can be imagined as empty only by willfully ignoring the existence of the Native Americans – or really conceiving them as a different order of human being or subhuman, part of the natural environment" (2000, 169). In his *History of Assam* (1906), which became the standard text on the history of India's northeast, Sir Edward Albert Gait repeatedly emphasizes

the weakness, flaccidity, passivity and femininity of the Assamese people, which he attributed to the fertile, damp, relaxing climate.

Colonial administrators' preconceptions about Assam were also shaped in large part by lore about the region of Kamrup and its famous Kamakhya temple, a center for Tantra practice, which is located on the outskirts of Assam's capital, Guwahati. Hugh Urban writes that nineteenth and twentieth century British writings depicting Tantra worship practices in Assam, which was singled out as the religious tradition's origin, summarized colonial attitudes about the Orient — "the critique of its weakness, femininity, sexuality, and violence" — Tantra being singled out as the "clearest example of all the hyper-sexuality and savagery that lies in the deepest recesses of the Oriental mind itself" (Urban 2010, 156-7). Historian Bodhisattva Kar discovered that the modern Kamrup was often mistakenly associated with the ancient, possibly imaginary Kamarupa, as an exotic, sexualized place where foreign male visitors were dominated by powerful women who turned them into sheep. The incredible stories that Kar discovered circulated for a long time, especially in British Bengal, considering their later realized implausibility. The legacy of these stories lives on in contemporary society where women from Northeast India are often the victims of sexual harassment and violence, especially in other regions of the country, and are subsequently blamed for being loose, provocative or of questionable moral character – a subject I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

With these ideas circulating about Assam, it is clear that controlling "contagion" was essential for creating a society that looked and sounded organized. Ann Stoler writes about the extensive laws governing the sexual lives of Europeans in the colonies, which were designed to control reproductive activities and therefore identity, and especially race. She describes the colonial state's "investment in knowledge about the carnal, about sense and sensibility," and its

commitment to the "education of desire" (Stoler 2002, 6-7). Stoler discusses anxieties about contact between Europeans and colonial subjects that formed the basis of colonial policies designed to create and secure the borders of the European community. These anxieties were expressed in terms of cultural, political and sexual contagions, to be encountered wherever "European and native sensibilities and desires brushed against one another as they were borrowed and blurred" (Stoler 2002, 6).

The colonial sources I examine in Chapter 2 generally disapprove of the songs and dances that form the major collective activities of *bihu* festival celebrations each year. Along with the movement and melodies associated with *bihu*, colonial observers disapproved of what they interpreted as the free interaction between young men and women. Assamese folklorist Prafulladatta Goswami mentions an 1885 article in a monthly Assamese journal by an engineer, Balinarayan Bora, writing apologetically about the "bad aspect" in *bihu*, and suggesting that only the "good" aspects be preserved (Goswami 2003, 23). But according to Goswami, by the early 1900s, it became respectable to speak and write about *bihu* (Goswami 2003, 23). Goswami mentions an entire book published in 1918 on the subject of *bihu*, as well as a 1917 article in which well-known Assamese literary figure Lakshminath Bezbaroa defends *bihu*, arguing that "Bihu does not give hurt to anyone, it gives joy to everyone, therefore it is that people laugh at and condemn Bihu…[Bihu] makes you youthful, so that you can act youthfully…now this Bihu is condemned by your people!" (quoted in Goswami 2003, 23). This excerpt from Bezbaroa suggests an awareness of foreign aesthetic judgments influencing local sensibilities, and a growing consolidation of an Assamese bourgeoisie. As nationalist groups adopted folk forms to present a mode of performance that could engender a new Assam, *bihu* troupes were formed and invited to perform on stages throughout the state.

A growing nationalist consciousness among students in Assam at the beginning of the 20th century is evident in the series of agitations around issues of Assamese culture. The *Asomiya Bhasar Unnoti Sadhini Sabha* was formed in Calcutta in 1885 in order to further the development of the Assamese language, and in 1905 *Ekta Sabha* (Students' Union) was formed in Guwahati (Deka 1998, 108). The *Asom Chattra Sanminlani* (Assam Students' Association), which was formed in 1916, did not limit itself to literary activities. In fact, over the years, *bihu* has been one of the main arenas for student-organized cultural demonstrations. A series of student-led social movements coincided with the shaping of *bihu* into a festival that would become associated with the modern state. While these student movements were struggles for economic opportunity, they mobilized the affective power from discourses of ethnic recognition and belonging, and *bihu* was transformed into a symbolic arena for expressing these struggles. In this dissertation, I explore how political struggles are expressed through performance, examining how *bihu* is mobilized as an embodied cultural practice in service of nationalist goals.

By the time of Indian independence in 1947, Assam's state cultural associations sponsored rural *bihu* troupes to stage performances in urban contexts (Goswami 2003). They sought to extract an imagined authentic Assamese essence from villages untouched by modernity. Radha Gobinda Baruah (1900-1977) is often identified as the man behind the first urban staged *bihu* in Guwahati in the early 1950s. He is often referred to as "the architect of modern Assam," having established the state's first English daily newspaper and having orchestrated the construction of its first sports stadium. Kamal Hazarika, composer and performer of Assamese songs now based in London, told me in an interview that Baruah brought groups from villages to Guwahati, "so instead of the field, they performed on the stage."[1]

[1] Interview with Kamal Hazarika at his home, London, UK, June 2007.

Speaking about his younger days in Guwahati during the 1950s, Hazarika told me, "Everyone knew about the *bihu*, but it was never performed on the stage openly. Radha Gobinda Baruah knew that there were lots of things to learn from here. We must bring it to the stage. At that time, we were not interested [in *bihu*]."

It was during this time that student activists launched a decade-long struggle to make Assamese the official state language of Assam, finally achieved in 1960. It seems that this struggle was motivated mainly by the economic opportunities that job-seeking Assamese speakers were hoping to secure, since most management positions were given to Bengalis at the time. The students were "incited by Assamese job-seekers and protected by college and university authorities" (Chakravarti 1960, 1193). Activists hoped that by achieving the goal of raising the Assamese language to an official status, they could perform better than their Bengali rivals (Kumar 1967, 41).

It wasn't until the 1960s that well-known middle-class singers such as Khagen Mahanta first began incorporating *bihu* songs into their repertoire. Mahanta first gained recognition during a solo performance at the 1959 All-Assam Inter College Music competition, and he won first prize in the All-India Inter University Youth Festival in Mysore that same year. During a recording session in Calcutta in 1963, Mahanta recorded a *bihu* song that was released on a gramophone disc. Mahanta told me in an interview that this record inspired the purchase of gramophone players in many Assamese households.[2] The son of well-known singers of religious hymns, Mahanta explained to me that he was taking a risk by performing *bihu*, which was not highly regarded by mainstream society. But as his fame grew, Mahanta became known for singing the *bihu* songs that he had begun collecting as he traveled with his father to sing religious

[2] Interview with Khagen Mahanta at his home, Guwahati, Assam, May 2009.

songs in rural areas of Assam, which I discuss in Chapter 3. During the Assam Language Movement in the 1960s, Mahanta joined other artists who toured rural areas to perform for the people despite violent outbreaks. By the 1970s, *bihu* was nationally recognized as Assam's state festival, and urban youth studied a standardized repertoire of *bihu* songs and dances in order to compete in front of authoritative judges. Television, film actress and dancer Madhurima Choudhury won the first *Bihu Rānī* (*bihu* queen) competition in 1979, a burgeoning arena for pageantry and Assamese sub-nationalist pride which I discuss in Chapters 1 and 4.

Meanwhile, in 1967, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) established a five-tier structure, which "percolated into the grassroot level of the society" gaining widespread support in rural areas of Assam (Deka 1998, 108). During the 1980s, a violent surge of Assamese nationalism resulted in the Assam Agitation, a movement led by AASU to expel from the state all so-called illegal immigrants, mainly Muslims born in Bangladesh or of Bangladeshi ancestry, but also Bengali Hindus. The late Bhupen Hazarika, arguably the most famous Assamese singer across the Subcontinent and the globe, released a song in 1980 amidst this tense political scenario called "*Bohāg Māthu Eti Ritu Nohoi*" (*Bohāg* is not just a season). Hazarika invokes many of the rituals associated with *bihu* that happen during the month of *bohāg* (mid-April to mid-May), but addresses his call to Assam as a national collectivity "with a memory and a will" (Baruah 2005, 129). Politicizing many of the rituals associated with *bihu,* Hazarika protests that *bohāg* is not just a season, but also a time when the "nation takes its ritual bath, gets rid of its old clothing" and "brings processions that transcend caste and creed, destroying difference" (Baruah 2005, 130).

By invoking *bihu* rituals through one of his famous "modern" songs, Hazarika voices a way to mobilize the collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995 [1912]) that emerges during the

month of *bohāg*, challenging the people of Assam to think more deeply about the significance these rituals may hold for renewed political unity. Hazarika's material success is, of course, reflective of his ability to capture this spirit in his songs and turn it into profit in the commercial music business. In Assam, *bihu* performers such as Bonti Hazarika, Himashree Saikia, and Monikanchan Konwar, who have been crowned *bihu* queens on various *bihutolī* stages and reality television competitions, are routinely called upon by student union groups connected to political parties, such as AASU, to lead *bihu* workshops in order to train young performers in *bihu* choreography and display the fruits of their labor in large stage presentations that reinforce the link between *bihu* performance and Assamese politics.

Although AASU came to an agreement with the Government of Assam and signed the Assam Accord in 1985, the anti-Bangladeshi sentiment in Assam is still very strong, and politically motivated violence is a dangerous reality for people living in rural areas of Assam. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), with its base in Kakopathar in northeastern Assam, emerged in the 1980s as a militant group committed to achieving the goal of a "sovereign Assam" through armed struggle (Baruah 1994). Although ULFA is officially disbanded, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) continues to allow the Indian army to arrest and detain anyone suspected of begin a militant, and soldiers proceed with impunity on the part of the government even getting away with torture, rape and sometimes murder, as in the 2006 case of Ajit Mahanta, which I discuss in Chapter 3. In Assam, contemporary political relations are characterized as a kind of "durable disorder," where an established state of emergency based on governance through insurgency and counter-insurgency reigns (Baruah 2005). This suggests the importance of ethnically fashioned expressions of public culture for consolidating and/or contesting group identities in Assam (Baruah 1999). I pursue this issue

which lies at the core of community: the creation of common myths, histories, and embodied expressions whereby people forge key alliances.

Caste, Class, Ethnicity, and Race in Northeast India

As one of the eight states that comprise the region of India commonly referred to as "the Northeast," Assam emerged from colonial rule with a unique set of resources and challenges. Although Assam was the seat of colonial administration for the northeastern region, opportunities for Assamese workers to benefit from colonial employment and economic expansion based on plantation agriculture were fairly scarce, due to colonial preference for civil servants from the neighboring West Bengal and indentured tea plantation laborers from other parts of India, including Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh (Horowitz 2001, 208). After India gained Independence in 1947, the ethnic diversity of Assam, compounded by a long history of intermarriage between communities, became even more complex as a great variety of tribal groups, many of whose ancestry is traced to Burma and Thailand, were joined by migrants from Nepal and refugees from Bangladesh's Liberation War of 1971.

Many groups of people in post-Independence Assam have appealed to the Indian government based on economic, social and cultural grounds for recognition as unique, marginalized tribe or caste groups.[3] India's affirmative action policy, called the reservation system, was drafted after Independence by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, whereby "untouchables," previously "outcaste," were incorporated into the caste system as "scheduled castes" (SC) and "scheduled tribes" (ST) (Dirks 2001, 278). Concerns about socioeconomically disadvantaged

[3] Although the category "tribe" enjoys wide currency in Assam, I recognize that the concept has been viewed with suspicion as a colonial construct by scholars (Béteille 1986; Wolf 2000; Chaudhuri 2008; Schwarz 2010; Shah 2010) but also that the category's continued salience must be taken seriously as an administrative and political concept which is meaningful in people's lives (Karlsson and Subba 2006; Xaxa 2008). The concept of tribe becomes even more complex when considering that official declaration of cultural, religious, and linguistic practices constitute processes of "detribalization" and "retribalization," for example in the case of the Koch Rajbongshi community in Assam, which has variously been classified as SC and ST by the Indian government.

groups that were not marked by clear ritually defined categories led to the government-appointed Mandal Commission's recommendation in 1991 that "other backward castes" (OBC) be incorporated into the reservation system (Dirks 2001, 275). Through this reservation system, economic and social benefits are conferred by the state upon individuals who can demonstrate membership in a recognized minority tribe or caste. In northeast India, some struggles for tribal recognition have resulted in mass-mobilization and the creation of new states that were earlier part of Assam (Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1986, and Mizoram in 1987) (Figures 0.1 and 0.2).

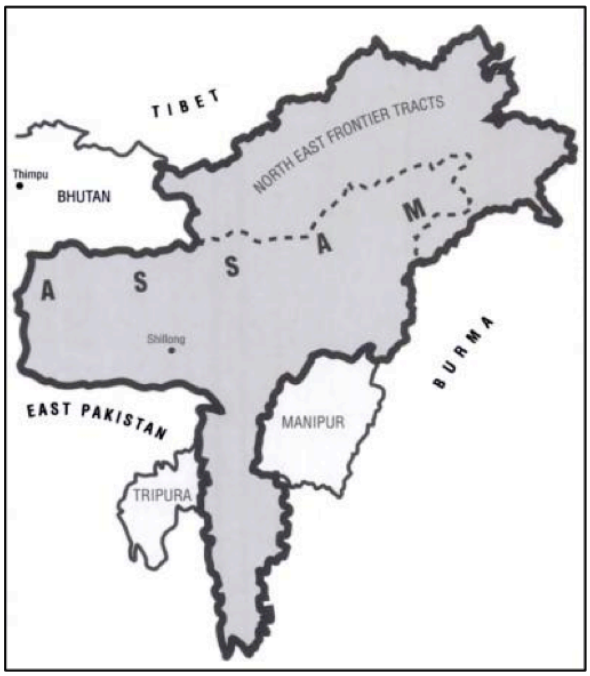

Figure 0.1 - Map of Assam, 1950 (Baruah 1999, 92).

Figure 0.2 - Map of Assam, 1999 (Baruah 1999, 92).

The Indian government recognizes scheduled tribes in Assam as divided into hill and plains tribes.[4] This division is rooted in paternalistic colonial policies, which were aimed at assisting tribal societies living in the hills to protect their land and culture from communities

[4] In Assamese "tribe" is usually expressed as *jonogusṭī* or *jonojātī.*

living in the plains, derived in part from British anthropologist Verrier Elwin's work for the Anthropological Survey of India (Guha 1999, 155). Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, similarly sought to protect the customs, beliefs, and traditional institutions of small ethnic communities of the northeast by adopting a policy of minimum interference, while simultaneously implementing empowerment programs aimed at encouraging them to "grow according to their own genius" (Misra 2014, 3). Many of the recognized plains tribal groups in Assam such as Mising, Sunuwāl Kāchāri, Rābhā and Deurī, have songs associated with springtime New Year's festivals in their own languages with slightly different melodic conventions and dance movements, but all share the same rhythm as *bihu*, which I analyze in Chapter 1.

While most people that I have interacted with in Assam use the word "tribe" when speaking with me in English, they use the specific group name when speaking with me in Assamese to refer to themselves, their language, and also specific song and dance forms (i.e. Mising woman, Mising language, Mising *oi-ni:tom* songs which are sometimes referred to as Mising *bihu* songs). While the Assamese or *Oxomīyā bihu* has gained widespread recognition as the overarching, dominant folk festival of Assam, traditions associated with tribal groups are characterized as localized variations. Judges presiding over statewide *bihu* competitions uphold this distinction and maintain this power dynamic by disqualifying contestants who incorporate songs or dance movements with perceived "tribal" elements into their routines.

In order to begin to understand the intersections between class, caste, ethnic and gender relations in Assam in the context of this dissertation, it is important to explore the contested concept of *Oxomīyā.* Upon first consideration, *Oxomīyā* appears to be a straightforward cognate of "Assamese," which operates as a general descriptor denoting, for example, the Assamese

language (*Oxomīyā bhāxā*), Assamese literature (*Oxomīyā xāhityo*), and Assamese folk culture (*Oxomīyā luko-xongskriti*). This straightforward linguistic and cultural association has proven to be problematic when applied to a person's or community's identity, because although it may seem that "Assamese" could refer to a person who lives in or "belongs" to the geopolitical area currently identified as Assam, debates about who counts as Assamese and what defines the *Oxomīyā* community have persisted in Assam for decades. Uddipana Goswami suggests that while the term *Oxomīyā* earlier indexed an interethnic identity built up over centuries, the modern redefinition of *Oxomīyā* identity emerged out of collaboration[5] between colonial agents who were searching for an *Āhum*[6] past through an Orientalist lens, and middle-class, Bengal-educated Hindus who set the agenda for the Assamese state (2014, 5).

Higher education in English for the emergent Assamese middle class was only available in Bengal until a college was founded in Sylhet in 1892 and Guwahati in 1901, and so the ideology and politics of the Bengali middle class (*bhadralok*) played a considerable role in shaping the Assamese middle class and Assamese nationalism (Guha 1977, 68). The *Oxomīyā* Hindu middle class or the "native intelligentsia" (Saikia 2004, 84) was "at the forefront of the nation-building process, and it had traditionally assumed an attitude of cultural superiority and social dominance over the other ethnic groups," (Goswami 2014, 5). Many families who migrated to Greater ("undivided") Assam during the colonial period — including Muslims from the region now known as Bangladesh brought over by the British to settle uninhabitable wastelands, *ādivāsī*-s[7] from other parts of the subcontinent brought to work as indentured

[5] See Partha Chatterjee for a discussion of this "attitude of collaboration" (Chatterjee 1993, 26).

[6] This refers to the *Āhum* Kingdom that ruled the northeast region now known as *Ujoni Oxom* ("Upper Assam") for 600 years before the British annexation of the region in 1826.

[7] In Assam, *ādivāsī* is used specifically to denote the tea plantation labor communities and their ancestors, sometimes referred to as "tea tribes" or "ex-tea tribes" (Misra 2014, 260). Other tribal communities in Assam are not

laborers on tea plantations, Hindu Bengalis brought from Kolkata to run the colonial administration, as well as laborers from Nepal — had by the 1960s "embraced the Axamiya language and identity, and been in turn allowed membership into the Axamiya fold" (Goswami 2014, 6).

The AASU-led Assam Movement created increased xenophobia and a reaffirmed sense of entitlement among *Oxomīyā* Hindus, who envisioned Assam as a homogeneous homeland for the true *Oxomīyā* community. This fueled violent clashes and motivated many groups to strategically distance themselves from the *Oxomīyā* identity in order to assert demands for separate ethnic homelands (Goswami 2014, 5). This created a difficult situation for *Oxomīyā* Muslims, (or "indigenous" Muslims[8]) many of whom fought as part of the AASU-led movement, but soon were forced to distinguish themselves as a separate community from the waves of Muslim migrants crossing the border into Assam from Bangladesh who had become the collective enemy of the state.[9] Anti-Bangladeshi violence erupted in 1983 when thousands of so-called Bangladeshi people were killed in a village near the town of Nogaon called Nellie. Sometimes referred to as the "Nellie Massacre," this horrific event generated a debate among *Oxomīyā* Muslims about their own place in Assam, and raised awareness that "BJP supporters are ready to call them "outsiders" and that they could be potentially vulnerable to violence" (Saikia 2004, 65).

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generally referred to as *ādivāsī*, nor do they identify with this term. Meeta Deka writes about the history of the *ādivāsī* community in Assam and their struggle to achieve ST status (2015).

8 Tanmoy Sharma writes that in 2016, 33 percent of Muslims in Assam consider themselves to be "indigenous" to Assam.

9 Many *Oxomīyā* Muslims have described to me how they participate in *bihu* celebrations, but there is not yet a scholarly study of *bihu* in the *Oxomīyā* Muslim community. The topic is usually glossed over by stating that *Oxomīyā* Muslims also love and celebrate *bihu* alongside their Xongkoriya neighbors, but this is a topic that merits further study and would benefit greatly from critical ethnographic research. The topic of *Oxomīyā* Christians' position with regards to *bihu* seems to be less fraught but equally as under-researched.

The *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP), the political party created by AASU leaders after the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, harnessed and amplified the fear felt by many *Oxomīyā* people across Assam that they were becoming a minority community in their own state. The continued resonance of this sentiment is powerfully evident today in the success of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) during the 2014 elections in Assam, whose main campaign strategy has been continue the scapegoating of supposed Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, sending *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) representatives door-to-door to drum up support, and to convince influential AGP leaders to join their party, in what political analysts have called the "saffronisation of Assam" (Gupta 2016). As Yasmin Saikia predicted over ten years ago, "Does this mean that the Assamese and BJP agendas have become one and the same? Is the Bangladeshi/Muslim their common enemy?" (2004, 66). For Goswami, *Oxomīyā* is an identity in flux, an amorphous entity that "has taken whatever shape its keepers or contestants have imposed upon it from time to time, depending on the prevalent political exigencies" (2014, xix). Goswami goes as far as to say that the *Oxomīyā* identity has been "hijacked" by the scheduled caste (SC) Hindu population, who "began to dictate the terms of inclusion into the nation for the minorities" (2014, 83). In order to translate this new definition of *Oxomīyā* into English, many people have begun using the term "ethnic Assamese" (Baruah 1999). In order to avoid the complex issue of who counts as *Oxomīyā*, politicians, newscasters and everyday people often use the term *Oxom bāxī* ("Assam residents" or those "settled" in Assam) to refer to the general Assamese public.

The *Oxomīyā* identity is also associated with a *bhokti* (devotional) Hindu tradition called *Eko-xoron nāmo dhormo* (religion of shelter in one name) known for its focus on entoning *nām*, or the "name" of Krishna (Assamese: *Krisno*) in his various forms. Xrīmonto Xongkordew[10]

[10] Often transliterated as Srimanta Shankaradeva. The religious sect is often referred to as Shankaria Vaishnavism.

(1449-1568) promoted this neo-Vaishnava tradition through his teachings and disciples, drawing on local music, dance and drama traditions to spread a message of social equality. As Anna Schultz demonstrates in her study of *rastriya kirtan* performers in Maharastra, "religious identities have become intimately connected with modern Indian politics" (Schultz 2012, 4). Although *bihu* is today promoted as a secular festival that incorporates communities from all religious traditions, the devotional ritual component of *bihu* is heavily influenced by beliefs and traditions spread by Xongkordew, which I refer to as "Xongkoriya." For example, the all-male *huṅsori* genre of music and dance which forms an integral part of *bihu* ritual and competitive performance practice incorporates Xongkoriya hymns (*nām-kīrton*), as well as prayers and praises to the Hindu god Krishna in his various forms as Hori and Ram. In recent years, intense debates have arisen between *Oxomīyā* cultural authorities and *bihu* competition judging associations regarding whether or not *bihu* performance troupes allowed women to participate in *huṅsori* performances. According to some conservative authorities, *huṅsori* and *bihu* were never meant to be combined, and there is no place for sexually suggestive themes in *huṅsori*. Therefore, in some competitions a troupe will be disqualified if they include a mixed-gender *bihu* sequence during a *huṅsori* routine, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

Many people I work with belong to different caste groups within the broader *Oxomīyā* community. Most of the families who I write about in Chapters 1 and 2 have few material resources compared to their middle class *Oxomīyā* counterparts in Guwahati, who appear in Chapters 3 and 4. The power of the concept of *Oxomīyā* is partly due to the way it links agricultural production and other lifeways associated with the "rural" to a shared sense of belonging regardless of caste or class, and by bridging rural and urban spaces. *Bihu* plays a

central role in grounding *Oxomīyā* identity in the collective body of the *rāiz* (the people), and in individual bodies, through performance. *Bihu* creates an embodied connection that legitimates romanticized urban nostalgia for village life. The activities of the daily lives of "rural" people are inscribed in *bihu* songs, embodied through performance, and serve as the raw materials for constructing modern notions of *Oxomīyā* identity.

Bihu's relatively recent incorporation into a state rhetoric of cultural heritage has created a path for *bihu*'s associated material cultural artifacts and embodied practices to represent *Oxomīyā* identity on a global stage. As historian Yasmin Saikia explains, the postcolonial identity movement in Assam led people to mobilize material cultural artifacts in service of negotiating identity in the public sphere, and to believe that "being Assamese was a shared, intimate, personal "thing" that belonged to the people of Assam and differentiated them from their neighbors, the Bengalis, and by extension from Indians" (2004, 62). One example is the emergence of the hand-woven *mekhelā sādor*, mentioned earlier, which replaced the *sārī* as the dress of upper and middle class *Oxomīyā* married women. Another example is the symbol of the *jāpi*, a wide-brimmed woven straw hat which farmers use to shield themselves from the sun during rice cultivation. Today, elaborately decorated *jāpi*-s are presented to guests of honor at political and cultural meetings, featured in advertisements to give products an *Oxomīyā* flair, used to adorn *bihutolī* stages, and have even been incorporated into *bihu* dance routines as props. The *jāpi* is a particularly salient symbol of the importance of maintaining links with the "rural," as *Oxomīyā* expressive cultural practices become increasingly commoditized and thematically distanced from many people's everyday experiences. I explore the curation of the "rural" in more depth in Chapter 3 through a discussion of pedagogical techniques designed to train urban youth to embody rural sensibilities through performance.

In this dissertation, I understand attempts to emphasize the unifying potential of *bihu* as a political strategy meant to obscure the reality of unequal recognition on the ground. The multiculturalist rhetoric propagated by the Indian government under the Nehruvian slogan "unity in diversity" — often supported by a "regional, brahminized, patriarchal elite" — serves to regiment cultural activities and divide people into discrete ethnic communities on regional grounds (Bharucha 2000, 125). This rhetoric relies on the romantic notion of the village as the harbor of authentic culture – at once "backward" and quaint. The nostalgia generated from this rhetoric plays out on stage through *bihu* performances as women and men enact an idealized picture of rural life. My work problematizes this imagined rural ideal by recognizing the various ways in which people living in rural areas claim agency though creating alliances.

The collective singing, dancing, and ritual participation that people engage in during the *bihu* season are often cited by journalists and politicians as a context for bringing people from diverse ethnicities and religious backgrounds together. Journalists report that even militant insurgents pause from disrupting the peace during the festive season out of respect for the cultural traditions they are supposedly fighting to protect. Arguments for *bihu*'s religious and ethnic plurality and inclusivity are often voiced in anticipation of the springtime *bihu* season, but these ignore the hierarchies that have been constructed between different forms of *bihu* and the groups of people associated with them. Private corporations and government cultural institutions invest more importance and material resources in *Oxomīyā bihu*, while claiming tribal "varieties" as evidence of diversity. It is no coincidence that most of the voices proclaiming *bihu*'s potential to unite come from elite or middle-class "ethnic" Assamese women and men (i.e. "non-tribal"). For example, Assamese author Arup Kumar Dutta published an op-ed in the *Assam Tribune* on April 6, 2013, called "Rongali Bihu Paradox," bemoaning the current state of affairs. After

listing many of Assam's tribal groups and their "divergent" ways of celebrating *bihu*, Dutta declares, "Such commonalities within divergence in a festival like Rongali Bihu should have ensured greater bondage between communities which have a common past and a shared history. That this has not happened is the paradox." Far from a paradox, I argue that the history of this region provides very clear reasons for these power dynamics, especially in realm of expressive culture, because of its public performative character.

When *bihu* travels beyond Assam, the performers who embody *bihu*'s rhythms, melodies, and movements are marked as "Northeastern." National news media characterize northeast India as exceptional and dangerous, describing people from the northeast as physically distinct from "mainland Indians" because of their "Mongoloid" features (Thounaojam 2012; McDuie-Ra 2012, 2015). As feminist scholar Papori Bora argues, "Indian citizen" is a constitutive category with a normative ideal, and in comparison to this ideal, northeastern subjects emerge as immigrants (2010, 346). In this context, Assamese women are doubly marginalized. Their racialized and gendered bodies are subject to public humiliation and critique. A study of northeastern women's experiences living in New Delhi argued, "Since they have different racial features from north Indians, they are subjected to humiliation, molestation and sexual violence" (Pandit 2010). A young woman from the northeastern state of Manipur is quoted as saying, "People perceive us as different. They have preconceived notions about women from the northeast and brand them as untraditional, easy, and available for sexual favours" (Pandit 2010).

The Indian government has been so unprepared to deal with racism of this kind, that the Ministry of Home Affairs invoked the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) in 2012 to address this problem, signaling a conflation of racial discrimination with minority status originally reserved for discrimination based on caste or tribe (Thounaojam 2012, 10). I explore the issue of

discrimination against Northeasterners through *bihu*, because performances of race, gender and sexuality are highly visible when realized through young women's singing, dancing bodies. I work with women who are facing great challenges but are also positioning themselves on their own terms. I examine how young women use expressive culture to define who they are in relation to others in this complicated moment in history. As they train to compete in *bihu* competitions, young women from rural areas of Assam make critical decisions about how to respond to expectations from peers, teachers, parents and competition judges. In this dissertation, I explore the alliances young performers create with family and community members, teachers, and political organizations as they learn to embody the melodies and movements of *bihu* as sounded practice. An intersectional approach that considers class, caste, ethnicity and race is therefore critical to this project, because young women's experiences of both discrimination and empowerment emerge through these intersecting embodied domains that shape the way they move through the world.

Modernities, Nationalism and the Public Sphere

Modernity is a fundamentally European concept, with itself as the source, the center, and the destination. Empire brought the concept of modernity via the colonial encounter to draw "others" into this process. But when institutions and technological processes were developed in the colonies and colonial subjects took control of their own institutions, they were treated as provincial resonances of those European models with which they coincided or even preceded. Scholars have recognized the Eurocentric bias behind notions of progress which would position "developing" countries of the "third world" on a sliding scale with a teleological end point representing successful emulation of "Western" economic, political, and social models. But the concept of modernity still holds an important place in the scholarly canon as a tool for

understanding culture and society, and bears the burden of this sense that the pursuit of modernity includes "catching up" with the West.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's project of "provincializing Europe" sought to explore whether ideas about modernity derived from traditions of European philosophy could really be as universal as they claimed to be, asking a fundamental question about whether places and histories leave their imprints on thought (2000). In order to move away from teleological interpretations of development, scholars have acknowledged modernity as a process, a becoming with different paths and different interpretations of the intended destination. Scholars have argued that modernity might be alternative, regional, vernacular, multiple, or "other" (Knauft 2002; Gaonkar 2001).

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) demonstrated how the circulation of print media became a foundation for creating a national consciousness and a sense of belonging among individuals who would never meet face-to-face. Anderson's work, coupled with notions of the public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas (1962), have emerged as a way to understand how mass media operates in society. Scholars have advanced analyses of the public sphere to include media technologies that have been developed since Habermas' work was translated into English (1989). The Habermasian bourgeois public sphere was based on the idea that private citizen strangers mediate between state and society and that their face-to-face communication is echoed self-consciously in print media. This work "offered [scholars] means of theorizing the formation of collectivities that cross ruptures of space and are outside formal definitions of 'culture.'" (Askew and Wilk 2002, 5). Contemporary work on publics advances the concept of strangers understanding themselves to be acting collectively via the mass circulation of texts to encompass issues of agency and an accompanying sense of "private" interiority (Cody

2011, 40). This development has served to reinforce the public/private binary, but has also challenged scholars to take intimacy seriously.

After independence, the Indian government worked to create a public sphere identified with the "national-popular," but the legacy of restrictive colonial policies toward mass media and a lingering fear of the public meant that broadcasting agencies, for example, were deprived of funds and the film industry was "obliged to conceive of a national audience independently, without paying the price that government subsidies would do doubt have extracted" — this meant that the film industry became one of the few institutions that incorporated commentary on culture, politics, and the economy packaged for mass consumption (Rajagopal 2009, 8). Arvind Rajagopal characterizes the Indian public sphere as a "split public" where social and ideological divisions are paired and serve to justify the division between them in deciding who or what represents the modern nation, and what must be corrected. He gives an example: if caste appears on one side, religion appears the other, and different groups disagree about which represents the modern nation and which serves to hold the nation back from becoming truly modern (2009, 10). Mazzarella's recent work characterizes this split public as a context for determining the grounds of censorship with respect to public expression (2013a). If the two poles of India's split public can be understood, as Mazzarella suggests, as either 'cosmopolitan' or 'traditional,' then anything in between borders on obscene by virtue of not conforming to either side (2013b).

These arguments follow Partha Chatterjee's "colonial rule of difference" whereby the promise of modernity was offered to the colony which — having been defined as traditional — would never be able to reach modernity (Chatterjee 1993, 19; Chakrabarty 2000). This paradox would serve to substantiate the legitimacy of colonial rule. In this way, tradition was "simultaneously devalued and transformed" (Dirks 2001, 10) and "public life became

increasingly defined as Western at the same time that the promise of universal modernity became more and more marked in national and racial terms" (Dirks 2001, 11). To complicate matters further, protectionist colonial policies in Assam cordoned off tribal communities from civil society, seeking to "civilize savages through commercial and educational initiatives without threatening their folklore, languages or community structures" (Chandra 2013, 139).

Some scholars characterize the trajectory of *bihu* music and dance performance as a private-to-public shift coinciding with the spread of a nationalist agenda (e.g. Goswami 2003; Sharma 2013). These scholars emphasize the physical intimacy of *bihu* performances that occurred, for example, within the courtyard of a village residence, before it became common for performers to travel in groups to other villages, towns and to the city to perform. But the sense of intimacy is still communicated through the performance itself, as young female and male dancers caste longing glances at each other, dance side by side with parallel movements, and sing in alternating verses of their desire. The nationalist association *bihu* now carries as the state festival of Assam is identified as the conceptual private-to-public shift that parallels the physical shift of performance context (Sharma 2013).

In contrast, some scholars have moved beyond private-public debates by challenging Chatterjee's famous distinction between an "inside" spiritual sphere which served as a substitute for the lack of agency and political power in the "outside" material sphere (1993, 5-13). Recognizing the distinction between spiritual and political spheres of nationalism as derived from an elite-centric worldview, Anna Schultz demonstrates how alternative nationalist ideologies, such as those that circulate among Marathi *rastriya kirtan* performers, "operate almost entirely outside of post-Enlightenment discourse" (Schultz 2012, 11). She argues that "nationalists of other classes imagined the nation without accepting this essentialist

dichotomization of experience" (Schultz 2012, 10). Performers of the devotional genre *huŝori* incorporate ballads glorifying Assamese nationalist heroes into their competitive *bihutolī* routines, in an entanglement of two processes which Schultz terms "nationalizing devotion" and "devotionalizing the national."

As Schultz argues for *rastriya kirtan*, the combining of the devotional and the political in *bihu* is also especially successful "because of its ritual context, its participatory nature, and the capacity of music to juxtapose vastly different signs and genres in ways that make their connections seem natural and desirable" (Schultz 2012, 4). Those who would characterize *bihu* as a private affair that has been transformed into a public, commercially-driven spectacle fail to recognize the ways in which *bihu* is and most likely has always been relational at its core, and connected to processes of social and environmental change. Whether in the ritual context of a village home, playing over the sound system of a bus or a mobile phone, broadcast over satellite television as part of an election campaign, or resonating in the memory of a nostalgic NRA,[11] *bihu* encompasses the performative dimensions of everyday life and brings into being a politics of sounded practice.

Public Culture and Media

My research also contributes to debates about the role of expressive culture in the ongoing tension between regional affiliation and dominant power centers in South Asia. Recent work about the marginality of Assam within the Indian political formation demonstrates that although India's northeastern states are steadily modernizing, they are victims of uneven liberalization (Baruah 1999, 2005). Although cosmopolitan spaces are rapidly emerging in regional centers such as Assam's capital, Guwahati, and rural populations have increasing access

[11] "Non-resident Assamese"

to media technologies, this development is fraught with the conflict and disjuncture characteristic of borderland regions (Schendel 2005; Scott 1998, 2009), where struggles over resources, land, history, and human rights often dominate the course of everyday life.

Originally applied to South Asia to theorize transnational flows and emergent cosmopolitan cultural forms as an arena or zone of cultural debate (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988), public culture has proven effective as a conceptual framework through which to challenge notions of form, boundedness, connectivity and mobility in public life (Breckenridge 1995; Rajagopal 2009). Though scholars of public culture in India have mainly focused their analyses on the "new Indian middle class" in urban contexts (Fernandes 2006), I extend this work to rural Assam to explore how young women of different classes, castes and ethnic affiliations participate in discursive networks through performance, complicating simple characterizations of folk, popular, and tribal music and dance and mobilizing media in provocative ways. Ethnomusicologists and scholars from related fields of anthropology, popular music studies, cultural studies and history have theorized the relationship between expressive cultural performance and public culture, but they have often avoided the consequences of highly mediatized public culture in rural areas. Ritty Lukose's (2009) work with college students from low caste backgrounds in rural areas of the southern Indian state of Kerala is an important intervention in this direction. I have pursued a similar exploration of young women's experiences with self-expression and media engagement in a very different part of India, where anti-government sentiments are common and separatist groups have a large youth following.

Purnima Mankekar's *Screening Cultures, Viewing Politics* (1999) focuses on Indian television in the late 1980s and early 1990s, articulating the relationship between notions of Indian womanhood central to discourses of cultural nationalism and the expansion of the middle

classes. Before Mankekar's work, anthropologists studying mass media in contemporary India had not considered state television a fruitful site of inquiry. Mankekar asks how television engenders community and how popular mass media helps construct subject positions for viewers. She presents the example of the Indian state-run Doordarshan broadcasts as texts that aim to create a new kind of woman for a modern democratic India. Mankekar shows how the family was reinterpreted as a metonym for the nation, as a unit of reception and consumption (1999, 101).

Lila Abu-Lughod explores similar issues in *Dramas of Nationhood* (2005) through an exploration of Egyptian dramatic television serials broadcast during Ramadan. Abu-Lughod presents the relationship between television serials and their national audiences as a series of encounters between two kinds of subjects: elite producers and subaltern audiences who "not only appreciate and enjoy but critically interpret, select, and evaluate what the elites produce, always in the context of their everyday lives" (2005, 12). Both Mankekar and Abu-Lughod interpret television as a complex and rich technology of nation building because it "works at both the cultural and sociopolitical levels, and it weaves its magic through pleasures and subliminal framings" (Abu-Lughod 2005, 9).

Although the goals of both Doordarshan and All India Radio were first to educate colonial subjects and later to unify postcolonial citizens, neither invested many resources in extending coverage to the northeast region of India, and they certainly did not prioritize creating programs that would be relevant to local audiences (Punathambekar 2010). Since Hindi is not widely spoken in northeast India, the Hindi-language programming reinforced widespread perceptions of the central government's inability and unwillingness to understand the people of the northeastern region. Even after satellite television arrived following economic liberalization

in the early 1990s, Aswin Punathambekar writes, "television networks such as Star, ZEE, and Sony paid no attention to northeast India simply because the region did not represent a commercially lucrative market" (2010, 245).

I join the few scholars working on media in northeast India (Hasan 2009, 2010), taking into account the intersections of television and cinema that engage with regional politics through commentary on and depiction of expressive cultural practices. Daisy Hasan discusses the differing orientations that private and public broadcasting companies have adopted towards depictions of terrorism and insurgency in northeast India (2009). Since the northeast region of India rarely makes national news because of its marginality in the national consciousness, Hasan argues, terrorism "is used as a way to 'sell' a story to commercial television channels which would not ordinarily be interested in this region given its geographical and cultural remoteness from mainland India" (2009, 265). Hasan examines the aesthetics of terror employed by different companies, noting that regional broadcasters in local languages present a more nuanced picture of the political situation than the state-run Doordarshan, which, "more often than not, remained silent or deeply ambiguous about incidents of terror" in the region (2009, 265).

In her historical ethnography of Kandyan dance, Susan Reed (2010) illustrates how a local dance form based on ritual practices was transformed into a symbol of Sri Lankan national culture and Sinhala ethnicity. Reed's work traces these transformations through the 19th and 20th centuries, situating them in relation to British colonialism and the subsequent cultural renaissance in Colombo. In a sense, the similarities of many cultural performance traditions across the Subcontinent are obvious: musical and dance elements are defined and recontextualized outside the original performance context; cultural performance contributes to post-Independence regional and/or ethnic nationalism (Sinhala vs. Tamil in Reed's case, or

Assamese vs. Bengali in my research, for example); state patronage funds institutionalization and performance troupes tour internationally; and gender dynamics change in response to these new performance contexts that are developed around middle-class values of respectability. I draw attention to the possibilities that these transformations create for young female performers — under the right circumstances — to pursue increased social and economic mobility. I argue for the central role of expressive cultural performances such as music and dance in serving as evidence for legitimating claims of national and regional belonging. *Bihu*'s transformation into a "respectable" art form, similar to processes involved in "classicizing" Kandyan dance and the multiple Indian classical music and dance traditions, has created expanded possibilities for women to practice, teach, and perform without the threat of stigma. But I also recognize the limits of these possibilities, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

Scholars working on popular music have also addressed these new possibilities. Amanda Weidman's current project focuses on the new forms of stardom and new opportunities for women to enter the public sphere that developed out of the professionalization of playback singing for cinema. Weidman examines professional playback singing as a site for the creation of ideologies of voice and gender in post-Independence and post-liberalization India (Weidman 2014). Kaley Mason analyzes the subtle techniques Mayalalee playback singer Rajalakshmy Abhiram employs to communicate emotion through her voice, with the knowledge that the film's audience will not see her — a creative process Mason calls "songcrafting femininity" (Mason 2014). I draw on the work of scholars who are thinking about public femininities in new ways and investigating how female performers navigate music and film industries in order to situate the young *bihu* performers I encounter (Booth and Shope 2014).

Intimacies and Publics

An important foundation for recent work on publics was laid by Michael Herzfeld (2005 [1997]), whose concept of cultural intimacy provided a means to link mass-mediated experiences of nationalism to the state as an everyday lived experience. Critiquing the common tendency of scholars who take the relationship between official state ideology and individuals' experiences as citizens at face value, Herzfeld challenges scholars to dig deeper and explore the "possibilities and the limits of creative dissent" (2005, 1). By probing into the use of everyday cultural performances as a container for social action (that for example renders potentially subversive action into conformity) Herzfeld seeks to expose fissures within the nation-state through finding a common ground between people with different levels of access to power. The elites, the middle classes, and the lower classes all share in cultural intimacy, as Herzfeld defines it, because they are joined in self-recognition of alleged national stereotypes that they express as insiders at their own collective expense. An example from Assam: a common stereotype is that Assamese people are lazy. This is exemplified in the common phrase, "*lāhe-lāhe*" which means "slowly," "gradually," "steadily," "gently," or "softly," depending on context. Many Assamese people I have met take pride in this "laid back" attitude towards life (in the sense of "slow and steady wins the race"), but simultaneously decry the slow economic development it fosters.

Cultural intimacy provides a way to examine how the nation-state's official rhetoric is experienced on a personal level, which expands earlier notions of the public sphere as a discursive space for the constitution of citizens. One problem with the Habermasian vision of the public sphere is that the concept allows for the operation of power to recede from analytical view, where only certain privileged members of society are allowed to participate. In *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Michael Warner posits subaltern counterpublics as a remedy for the

exclusionary public sphere, but this formulation risks upholding a false binary that reads resistance into actions that may not be best characterized as such. In *The Republic of Love*, Martin Stokes (2010) addresses the fragmentation of the public sphere, and the proliferation of alternative formations through bricolage. Stokes explores the role popular music plays in sustaining public life in Turkey by focusing on key musicians who evoke nostalgia and index particular political transformations in Turkey's history. By tracing a history of the transformation of intimacy through popular music, Stokes is able to link his analysis of songs to political life through emotion (2010).

Membership in a *bihu* troupe is one of the contexts in which young people seek out intimacy and belonging. In Assam, romantic desire is associated with youth, in that it is meant to be experienced before marriage, since conjugal love is understood to be love of a different sort. Recognizing that youth is a social construction and therefore not delineated by a fixed age range, the concept of youth emerges here as a frame to think about how people learn about their bodies and sensually orient themselves to the world. I approach "youth" as a social shifter that indexes not only the relationships between people of different age groups, but also articulates diverse experiences of personhood and agency within wider sets of social relationships (Durham 2004, 2012). This interpretation of youth that is oriented towards the shaping of subjectivities via relationships of different kinds allows me to explore embodied performances of music and dance in the context of intergenerational alliances (Diamond 2007) through which these performances and subjectivities emerge. In Chapter 1, I focus mainly on one *bihu* troupe as a way to explore in greater detail how relationships operate within the group, and also the wider web of relations including families and friends, taking seriously scholars who caution against reifying the

category of youth by overemphasizing youth culture and youth agency in a vacuum (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Leichty 2003; Cole 2008, 78).

Mass media carry the potential for shared experience and collectivity. But in this dissertation, I take care to remember that collective experience is individually inflected. Laura Pearl Kaya discusses Internet dating among college-aged women and men in Jordan, challenging scholars to consider the liberating potential of new technology (in this case, the Internet) within the terms of local social life. Kaya writes, "While most earlier literature focused on the "liberating" potential of "cyberspace," recent work has emphasized how offline constraints and goals are transferred online" (2009, 268). Kaya's informants, college-aged women and men, use the Internet for particular purposes, mainly flirting with people in the same or nearby towns, and often in the same Internet café. Kaya makes a case for the Internet as simultaneously social and safe enough to satisfy young people bound by societal codes of respectability, creating a "sphere" which fits somewhere between public and private. The Internet café carries signifiers of Western modernity but, as Kaya demonstrates, the way the computers and furniture are organized and the way social codes operate within the café protect chatters from being seen as betraying Islamic values. When conservative religious members of Jordanian society spoke out against cybercafés as indecent or unsafe spaces for young women, they were decidedly not objecting to the Internet or even to the practice of cyberchatting, but to the space associated with the physical proximity of young men and women (Kaya 2009, 263).

Brian Larkin brings together recognition of the instability of media technologies with the historical context of colonial rule in *Signal and Noise* (2008), articulating how technology's uses are informed by the goals and limits of Empire. Larkin's theory of media emerges from his experiences in Nigeria as he recognizes the legacy of the colonial imperative to create

infrastructure that originally brought radio and film to the region and the unexpected outcomes media generate as they are used in everyday life. As was the case in many colonial contexts, British administrators built radio networks in Nigeria in order to educate and develop Nigerians into "modern" colonial citizens. Larkin foregrounds the capacity of media technologies to carry messages ("signals") but also takes into account the technical interference that distorts or prevents the signal's transmission ("noise").

By approaching modern media history through the lens of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, Larkin effectively emphasizes "breakdown" over more commonly referenced narratives of technological development in order to show how "the meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence but something worked out over time in the context of considerable cultural debate" (2008, 3). One example of the situated associations that Larkin addresses has to do with the banning of cinema by Muslim religious authorities. The ban was not related to the content of films, since the images, stories and songs could be found elsewhere. But the concern was focused on the physical space of the cinema hall that provided a context for mixed-gender gathering and the development of other illicit institutions that grew up around and fed off the cinema-going public.

Performance and Ritual

Victor Turner's work on ritual focused on the relationship between bodily practices and social values, establishing the important role symbols (which for him are "social facts") play in binding individuals into the overarching social order in which they live (1967). In demonstrating the connections between different domains of life (bodily, social, natural, and cosmological), Turner showed how people use symbols to negotiate between social demands and individual aspirations and desires, recognizing that age, gender, and social status are factors that govern the

flexible and selective use of symbols in ritual contexts. Turner established an approach to ritual that is processual and performative, and proposed that the transformational potential of ritual performance occurs during passage through a liminal phase, based on Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1960 [1909]). These ideas led to Turner's formulation of *communitas* as a shared experience of transcendence, during which hierarchies and social distinctions are suspended (Turner 1977). Subsequent work on ritual has addressed some of the problematic aspects of Turner's symbolic analysis of ritual by theorizing the potential for resistance in ritual performance (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Lewis 1980; Dirks 1994; Bell 1997; Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998).

As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, the symbolic significance of *bihu* in ritual contexts is transformed when performed on the competition stage. Similarly, Henry Spiller describes how Sundanese cultural reformers in Indonesia attempted to transform the ritual value of participatory music and dance into aesthetic value by staging presentational performances that created a clear boundary between performers and spectators (Spiller 2010). This reference to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction points to the operation of ideology in constructing aesthetic notions of "taste" and imposing control over social behavior (Bourdieu 1984).

Erving Goffman's theory of social interaction contributes to the notion of "performance" as a practice of everyday life in which individuals present themselves in particular ways that can be productively compared to character personas in a dramatic performance (Goffman 1959, 1963). This work draws attention to the ways in which we influence others' perceptions of us through our daily behavior, including both verbal and non-verbal cues, by proposing "face" (acceptable appearance and conduct) as a critical ingredient in marking social categories like class, gender, religion, and nation. For example, some of the young female *bihu* performers I

present in Chapter 1 discussed the way their everyday comportment, eating habits, and educational aspirations were under scrutiny by people in positions of authority such as dance teachers and *bihu* competition judges who attempt to exercise discursive control over what a *bihu* performer should or should not do. Theatre studies scholars expanded on Goffman's and Turner's theories of performance, establishing the discipline of Performance Studies (Schechner (2003 [1988]). From this tradition, I draw on the important links between theatricality in *bihu* performance and everyday life, where the embodiment of an age-old Assamese love drama constitutes a type of play that gives young people a "chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the excessive, and the risky" (Schechner 2003, 52). Writing from this interdisciplinary tradition, Diana Taylor argues that by understanding and studying performance as a "system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge" we can expand the category of "knowledge" itself to include embodied ways of knowing that transcend attempts to reduce bodily expressions to texts (2003, 16).

The *bihu* performer is called upon to embody an idealized, gendered vision for the Assamese citizen. The connections between music and dance performance and citizenship are most apparent in the way *bihu* is framed in competitive arenas such as the outdoor *bihutolī* competitions and the reality television competitions such as DY365's *Bihu Rānī* series. I focus particularly on the solo female contestant, because she represents the high stakes of public femininity on the stage of the nation. As the contestant performs, all eyes are on her moving body, adorned with iconic ornaments and hand-woven cloth. When she sings, she voices the collective desires of the imagined Assamese community, rooted in the metaphorical soil of Assam as she dances with bare feet. And when she speaks in response to the judges' questions, it

becomes clear that not only is her body a site on which social and political anxieties are being played out, but she also plays a critical role in the discursive performance of tradition.

In solo female *bihu* competitions, contestants must demonstrate not only their embodied knowledge of music and dance but must also articulate their discursive knowledge about rural life in Assam, and even provide evidence from personal experience, as I discuss in Chapter 4. In her analysis of the 1994 Miss Kerala competition, Ritty Lukose discusses the beauty contest as a "literal and figurative stage for the enactment of gendered identities" where the inability of many contestants to answer questions about Kerala's history and culture created a dissonance between form and content (2009, 92). This dissonance is one of the central tension-creating factors in *bihu* competitions. Although the *bihu* contest appears to reward conformity to values hinted at and expressed directly by judges, the anonymity of the contestant's rehearsed performance during which she plays the role of a young Assamese woman, is shattered as her name is spoken, often revealing her caste status and other aspects of her identity are exposed by the judges probing questions. While she expresses collective desires through her performance of song and dance, her ability to speak about Assamese culture singles out a particular way of producing knowledge which is meta-discursive but nonetheless performative.

Discourses of the Body and Embodiment

Music scholars have only recently recognized the body as an entity to be seriously considered. The multiple histories of music scholarship which have variously severed musical works and celebrated composers from the conditions of their production, pursued investigations of ideological control and commodification, and exoticized performance traditions in hopes of rationalizing their internal logics, have created a long-standing ambivalence about the role of the body in musicmaking. Although dance scholars were once concerned mainly with aesthetic

categories, descriptions of ephemeral forms, and historical narratives, the 1980s sparked an interest in the critical interventions developed by cultural studies scholars investigating the operation of power and ideology in society (Desmond 2003 [1997]). Dance scholarship contributes a unique perspective on theorizing the moving body. Focusing on dance as product and process, dance scholarship has contributed to developing concepts of materiality, embodied social practice, and kinesthetic subjectivity (Hewitt 2005; Foster 2011).

In this dissertation I do both – analyzing not only the melodies, rhythms, and lyrics of *bihu* songs, but also the movements, poses, and vibrations of dancing, singing bodies. I draw attention to the ways in which bodies sound: by singing, blowing air through wind instruments, clapping, striking percussion instruments, slicing arms through the air, and pressing bare feet onto the earth. I also attend to the discursive constitution of bodies, positing the "sounding body" as a site on which gendered and contested notions of modernity are debated. I engage discourses of performance and embodiment to theorize *bihu* as an "environment" in which creating and affirming relationships is of central concern.

In the social sciences and humanities more broadly, scholars have wrestled with the tendency towards interpreting the body as a representation of universal human physicality. Debates about binary oppositions between nature/culture, and self/other, have often been aligned with problematic distinctions between mind and body. Scholars have faced the challenge of critically reevaluating theoretical lineages that emerge from, for example, Émile Durkheim's ideas about the individual's relationship to society (1912). Scholars in this tradition concerned with social worlds and moral order draw from Durkheim's conception of the body as "double" distinguished between the universal physical body and the moral socialized body of a higher order, suggesting that social phenomena cannot be reduced to the goals pursued by individuals.

A contrasting approach which sought to move beyond the dualism between mind/body and subject/object was presented by phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argued that consciousness emerges from the experience of embodiment (1962). While the body is understood to be both universal and individual – the physical site where meaning and practice originate – the phenomenological approach begins from the subject's point of view, and obscures the bearing of history and society upon lived experience.

Decentering the physical body has been a critical intervention into destabilizing some of the ingrained dichotomies that have long troubled scholars of culture and society. In his seminal essay, "Techniques of the Body," Marcel Mauss theorized culturally patterned uses of the body as "techniques" ([1935] Trans. 1973). Mauss suggested that whether used primarily in ritual or in everyday life, body techniques are aligned with the organization of time and space in social life. Reformulating Mauss' concept of *habitus*, Pierre Bourdieu grounded his influential theory of practice in the repetition of everyday bodily actions (1977). By arguing that these everyday actions are not merely reflections of mental structures, but are deeply social, Bourdieu's work has paved the way for scholars of culture and society to engage with theories of embodiment by grounding embodied experience in dynamic everyday practices.

Expanding on Bourdieu's theory of practice, scholars addressing questions of power and oppression have recognized discourses and representations of the body as primary sites upon which sex, gender, and racial difference are naturalized. For example, Jean Comaroff (1985) moves theoretically from interpreting the body as symbolic and representative of social experience, to a focus on practice which positions the body as socially informed. For Thomas Csordas, embodied experience brings together the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world (perceptual consciousness) with practice theory's socially informed body (collective

practice) to create what he calls somatic modes of attention: "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 1993). Meenakshi Thapan draws on phenomenology to theorize young Indian women's embodied experiences of struggle and resistance as fundamentally social and relational "cultures of adolescence" (2009). Ethnomusicologists have productively combined the paradigms associated with practice theory and phenomenology to explore the lived experience of embodied performance (Berger 2008; Rahaim 2012).

Critics of Bourdieu recognize the limits of his theory in addressing questions of dissent and social transformation, and have expanded on his work to incorporate a critical consideration of agency and political change. For example, Georgina Born (2010) suggests that although practice theory incorporates the possibility for individual agency ("creative invention" which is fundamentally relational), Bourdieu leaves this improvisatory potential for transformation underdeveloped, instead focusing on the power of *habitus* to structure everyday life in a way that tends towards being overly deterministic. Scholars have since expanded the possibilities for theorizing dynamic and contradictory subjectivities by pluralizing the body. While "the body" as a universal category based in a shared human physicality reinforces normative assumptions about lived experience, ethnographic investigations into specific contexts have grounded interpretations of bodily experiences and subjectivities in everyday life (Tsing 2005; Farquhar 2005). When understood as assemblages of practice and discourse, it becomes essential to recognize bodies and lives as historically contingent, and inseparable from the spaces in which they move (Farquhar and Lock 2007, 1).

Agency, or the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act," (Ahearn 2001, 112) has become of central concern in body-centered research. Guilbault (1997) working from Anthony

Giddens' (1993) definition interprets agency as always in flux, focusing on human practices as interventions in the stream of events that constitute the world. Ingrid Monson also associates agency with practice, distinguishing agency from either free will or resistance by framing her interpretation as "the conscious focusing of sensory attention that can yield differing experiences of the same event," and articulating a theory of "perpetual agency" that emphasizes the continuity of choice agents enact within particular constraints (2008, S37). Philip Bohlman proposes the concept of "aesthetic agency" to articulate the ways in which music affords agency because it "sustains mobility by itself never ceasing" (Bohlman 2011, 150). Dance scholars Randy Martin and Felicia Hughes-Freeland locates agency in the material expression of dancing bodies (Martin 1998; Hewitt 2005; Hughes-Freeland 2008). These formulations of agency foreground the creative potential of dynamic human relationships to create connections and identities, affect change, and localize a sense of place (Stokes 1994) through music and dance.

Jocelyne Guilbault uses the concept of "points of articulation and rearticulation" to refer to the processes involved in the continuous reformulation and realigning of cultural products and meanings, which makes room for understanding identity as performative and fundamentally relational (Guilbault 1997). This framework clarifies, for example, why the alignment of *bihu* with other folk and popular music genres in fusion contexts, for example Brazilian Samba and Bollywood folk rhythms like *khemtā* explored in Chapter 4, function as critical junctures variously inciting public controversy or celebration depending on the perceived stakes of collaboration. These moments expose the shifting nature of boundaries between "we" and "they" during which Guilbault challenges scholars to locate "affective alliances" (Grossberg 1984) between individual performers and between communities.

By focusing on alliances, I move beyond prioritizing identity as the dominant analytical frame, taking up Beverly Diamond's challenge to recognize the potential of sound to both enact and transcend social divisions (2007). Lawrence Grossberg's conceptualization of affective alliances brings attention to relationships between people in a "network of empowerment," which serves as a nexus of practices, cultural forms and experiences that has the potential to expand and structure "the space of our affective investments in the world" (Grossberg 1984, 227). Thinking in terms of alliances helps to bring together the experience of pleasures and desires of collective musicmaking and participation in ritual performance within the larger contexts of music production and entertainment industries, while still recognizing the limits of collaboration. People take on different roles as they move through the performative spaces of *bihu* production: the ritual space of the courtyard, the competition stage, the television studio, the classroom, and the spaces in between.

Performing bodies are often discussed in terms of physical disciplining. As evidence of physical labor, sweat betrays the Indian classical dancer striving to project an image of grace (Srinivasan 2012). Callouses on the cuticles of the *sarangi* player prove that the performer has devoted hours to music practice (Neuman 1990). Music and dance training and performance not only leave traces on the body – they shape the body – and carry over into everyday life (Wulff 2006; Hahn 2007). Someone "looks" or "acts" like a dancer or a singer. This becomes complicated when we consider so-called "folk" genres, because they are believed to be "of the people." By definition, these forms that emerge from the masses are assumed to require no formal training, but purported to be learned during participation in the performative contexts of everyday life. The institutionalization of folk genres and professionalization of performing roles means that distinctions emerged between expert and amateur performers, and those who enjoy

participating but have no officially recognized skill. The communal roots of folk performance emerge in tension with nationalist efforts to standardize and professionalize traditions. In this dissertation, I draw attention to the ways in which tensions surrounding the performing body are linked to a heightened awareness of the everyday comportment of individual performers.

Ethnomusicologists working in South Asia have recently begun to incorporate the study of gesture into their analyses of performing bodies. Martin Clayton (2007) demonstrates how Hindustani classical musicians use a conventional repertoire of gestures to communicate with each other and with audience members. Matthew Rahaim analyzes spontaneous gestures which Hindustani classical singers use to articulate melody in motion, introducing the concept of the "musicking body" which he describes as "a trained body in action, engaged mindfully in singing and/or playing an instrument" (2012, 143). Similar to the characteristic patterned gestures performed by sitarists and other instrumentalists in order to articulate melody (Tzanetakis et al. 2007), *bihu* drummers play rhythmic patterns in an expressive style that amplifies their movements for dramatic effect.

Although the movements of Rahaim's "musicking bodies" are not codified, in contrast to Clayton's communicative gestures, they emerge from the Indian classical context which he studies. For example, during my experiences studying folk songs in urban classrooms in Assam, I could identify who had pursued classical vocal training (or desired to be seen as classically trained) by the way they gestured with their hands while singing. Rahaim's musicking body is important for my study because it is an embodied theorization of voice and gesture, drawing attention to the physicality involved in singing. But it is limited in that the gestural vocabulary of the musicking body does not move beyond the seated position, rooted as it is in the Hindustani vocal tradition. What happens when this musicking body begins to dance? Recent efforts to

theorize the inextricable relationship between popular music and dance have brought us closer to articulating the embodied experience of performing (Cook and Dodds 2013). In this dissertation, I posit sounding bodies as integrated sites for moving through the performative domains of everyday life, which encompasses *bihu* music and dance, while also drawing attention to the intersecting ways in which bodies are raced, classed and gendered.

Sounding *Bihu:* The Rural As Lived and Imagined Experience

Featured on state television programs, public competition stages, and in intimate village courtyards alike, *bihu* music and dance performances provide some of the most visible, gendered, and embodied examples of public culture in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. In a society where over half the population works in agriculture (Saikia 2008, 45), the lyrical texts of *bihu* songs resonate profoundly, describing human love as deeply connected to the natural world. Some *bihu* songs carry a nostalgic tone, as the singer remembers village life as simpler and more plentiful than his or her current urbanized existence. And yet other songs express a longing to leave the village where daily toil in the fields is a heavy burden and urban life promises a better future. *Oxomīyā bihu* melodies are recognizable by their pentatonic contours, rising and falling around a minor triad, as men call out and women respond, dancing to the swinging beat of the *ḍhul* drum.

Recent work has drawn attention to the marginalization of sound as an object of study in the social sciences, calling for a consideration of how sound structures daily life via soundscapes, and challenging scholars to recognize how sound operates in relation to personhood, aesthetics, history, and ideology (Hirschkind 2006; Samuels, Meintjes, Ochoa, and Porcello 2010; Wood 2013). Pioneers of theories that have coalesced around the theme of "Sound Studies" brought attention to the ways in which sound structures space (Feld 2012[1982]), and music scholars

have demonstrated how music creates place and structures temporality through movement (Bohlman 2011). The sound of *bihu* can be recognized by its iconic rhythms and melodies as they reverberate from the ritual spaces of village courtyards and as they are blasted from loudspeakers in urban Guwahati. Performers and sounds travel in processions through the streets, across television screens, and on buses and trains as they move through the spaces in between.

In contemporary Assam, advertising media agencies use *bihu* songs, images of women in iconic *bihu* dance poses, and symbolic *bihu* instruments (like the double-reed buffalo horn "*pe̊pā*") to market products to consumers for whom regional affinity often replaces the social relations afforded by geographic proximity. During the past few decades, *bihu* has become an even more powerful symbol of Assamese nationalism through the increased intensity of advertising, which caters to an upwardly mobile Assamese consumer public. *Bihu* sounds and symbols, once confined to the springtime festival season, create "concrete resonances" (Mazzarella 2003, 20), which have become part of an everyday politics of identity.

State-managed, protectionist economic policies were transformed through reform efforts that opened up the Indian economy to global market forces in the early 1990s, making a wide variety of items such as cell phones, cars and fashionable clothes available to consumers wishing to project an upwardly mobile lifestyle (Lukose 2009; Jeffrey 2010). The emergence of a new middle class accompanied this transition, resulting in new cultural forms of consumption (Fernandes 2006). Economic liberalization facilitated the arrival of satellite television, adding hundreds of channels to the previously limited, state-run Doordarshan programming (Mankekar 1999), which created a new platform for *bihu*. Live *bihu* performances and competitions continued to be broadcast across the state, but romantic, *bihu*-themed dramas also emerged in feature-length soap opera-style series, music videos, and more recently as reality television. The

village love stories featured in these dramas contrast distinctly with the very serious mood surrounding public *bihu* competitions where young women and men perform under the critical eye of judges.

In my analysis of *bihu* competitions as an important component of public discourse on national belonging in Assam, I draw on Philip V. Bohlman's work on European nationalism (2004a) and the Eurovision Song Contest (2004b, 2007, 2012). Bohlman describes nationalism as a process that can be powerfully experienced, articulated, and analyzed through music. Struggles for political recognition, shifting constructions of identity, and accompanying language politics that Bohlman describes in the context of the Eurovision Song Contest resonate with the issues that I examine in *bihu* competitions in Chapters 1 and 4. Cultural competitions provide one arena where television, cinema, and "live" performance come together and complicate each other. Scholars have only recently begun gathering fieldwork data on the popular reality television-style dance and song competitions in South Asia (Rudisill 2009; Punathambekar 2010; Chakravorty 2013). My research contributes ethnographically and theoretically to this new field of inquiry, through an investigation of how news media and cinematic representations in Assam constitute particular youth femininities, and how young women from rural areas respond in creative and complex ways. My project engages with both live and broadcast music and dance competitions, and contributes to theorizing social relations that emerge through everyday interactions with media.

The political economy of music emerged as a serious topic of research among ethnomusicologists working in South Asia in conjunction with studies of the impact of technology on musicmaking and circulation of recordings (Manuel 1993; Qureshi 1999, 2000, 2002; Weidman 2006; Neuman 2009; Booth 2008; Mason 2014). In *Cassette Culture* (1993),

Peter Manuel documented the shift from record players to cassette technology in India during the 1980s — a change that made recording and playback more accessible to a wide range of people because it was cheaper, more portable, and easier to operate. Manuel examined the rise of recording industries in different regional dialects, positing that the audiences for these musical products already existed, and that the media technology emerged to fill the entertainment gap. Others have since argued that media address — whether in the form of broadcast media, film, or audio recordings — constitutes its own audience by depicting, addressing, and defining it in ways that are classed, gendered, and otherwise politically marked (Mankekar 1999; Hardy 2010). Thus, the rise of *bihu*-themed feature-length serial films and accompanying sound tracks since the early 2000s that depict the pressures of family life, work, and young love (almost always in a village setting) demonstrates the process of multiple audiences coming into being. These audiences — including people in villages who identify with the struggles and joys represented on screen, as well as urban migrants who long nostalgically for village life — exist at least in part because of the fact of their address through Assamese cinema.

I present some of my discussions with young female *bihu* performers in order to examine out how they articulate their relationship to mediatized representations of beauty and success. I contrast the explosion of media in post-liberalization India and the growing gap between the haves and have-nots — the so-called cosmopolitans and provincials — with an exploration of how young women express agency at the local level. I ask how they embody *bihu* in response to media agencies, on their own terms in local competitive arenas. My project theorizes the disjuncture between these media worlds (Ginsburg et al 2002). Youth in rural areas are aware of global youth culture with its signature consumer-driven aesthetics and shunning of "traditional" cultural forms (Saldanha 2002), but to what extent are they able to participate? Some young

performers are creating new styles of *bihu* through music and dance, incorporating lyrical political messages, thicker orchestrations, electronic sounds and beats, and modified choreographies. These are explicitly banned from competitions judged mainly by folklorists who prioritize particular representations of authenticity including acoustic instrumentation, unembellished lyrical structure and content, and modesty with regards to the moving female body. This dissertation moves between villages, towns, and cities, following performers as I did during the course of my fieldwork research in Assam.

Unlike many other festivals in South Asia — for example *Holi*, *Muharram*, the Punjabi festival *Vaisakhi*, the Rajasthani festival *Gangaur*, or the Tamil harvest festival *Pongal — bihu* is understood to be "secular" and not marked primarily by rituals and traditions of one religious community. Even *Onam*, the post-monsoon festival famously celebrated in Kerala by people of all religions, castes and classes, has its roots in Hindu mythology, annually marking the homecoming of King Mahabali who was sent to the underworld by an avatar of Vishnu. Cultural authorities in Assam and abroad continue to contest *bihu*'s origins, but many claim that indigenous groups in the region celebrated it before the *Āhum*-s arrived from Burma in the thirteenth century. Agricultural practices are commonly cited as the basis for *bihu*'s associated rituals rather than myths or practices associated with one of India's recognized religions.

Comparing this springtime festival to the Holi festival which is popular across North India, and the world, there are similarities in that erotic themes are part of songs and social stigmas are lifted during festival time (Jassal 2012). But Holi is recognized as a Hindu festival with specific Hindu mythological significance, whereas *bihu*'s Hindu connotations are obscured in official public discussions and descriptions of the festival. Although the Xongkoriya Vaishnava tradition that has become fused with *bihu* looks to Krishna as the one true divine

figure, the imagery of romantic desire evoked by Krishna's relationship with his many *gupī* maids and his consort Radha, which is the main erotic force behind Holi, is strikingly absent from *bihu*. In contrast to the Vaishnava devotional tradition in Bengal, the Xongkoriya reform movement in Assam de-emphasized the role of Radha in its interpretation of Hindu scripture, most likely due to the rejection of the Shakta traditions which at the time incorporated sexual union and blood sacrifice as part of the worship of the female aspect of the divine (Urban 2010, 151). Despite the dominant presence of Xongkoriya Vaishnavism in Assam, the Tantric center of Kamakhya, located on the outskirts of Guwahati, still attracts devotees in pilgrimage seeking the divine feminine power of the mother goddess. In Chapter 2, I discuss Tantra and the Shakta traditions in Assam and explore how they relate to conceptualizations of *bihu* as a fertility festival, the disciplining of bodies (Peabody 2009), feminine power (Raheja and Gold 1994) and social stigma regarding purity and pollution taboos (Douglas 2005 [1966]).

As Assam's state festival, *bihu* has been touted as secular, in the sense that people of any "caste or creed" are welcome to participate. In this context, the agrarian roots of *bihu* are cited as the core unifying link between all peoples of Assam, regardless of religion or class, because the farmer is held up as the hard-working dedicated citizen, cultivating the plains of Assam's fertile Brahmaputra valley. Bhangra is another music and dance tradition associated with a springtime harvest festival, *Vaisakhi*, which is similar to *bihu* in that it has grown beyond its traditional time (spring) and place (the village). From its origins in rural Punjab, Bhangra gained popularity in the UK via the Punjabi diaspora community, and is now popular across the world, incorporated into hip-hop DJ sets – a sound that indexes Punjabi culture (Roy AG 2012). In contrast, as *bihu* has become increasingly produced in urban studios and incorporated into the broader Assamese entertainment industry, the "rural" has maintained its discursive power in *bihu.* Assamese

cultural identity is wrapped up in the idea of the rural. The *māṭi ghor*, the village home constructed from bamboo and mud, is prized as the true Assamese home; the wide-brimmed *jāpi* thatched bamboo hat is presented to honored guests, especially visitors to the state, while it is still being worn by rice farmers to shade them from the blazing sun; the shapely *kolox* water jug is immortalized in songs, paintings, and tourist-oriented displays of village life, while many women still use the *kolox* to collect river water for cooking and bathing in the absence of running water.

Research Strategies

> A feminist perspective recognizes that the hierarchical organizing of the world around gender is key to maintaining social order; that to live lives marked 'male' and 'female' is to live different realities. But simultaneously, to be a feminist is to imagine occupying the marginal, relatively powerless position with reference to every dominant framework that swallows up the space at the centre…Feminism is thus not about individual men and women, but about understanding the ways in which 'men' and 'women' are produced and inserted into patriarchies that differ according to time and place (Menon 2012, 1).

Nivedita Menon's provocative call to "see like a feminist" has challenged me on multiple levels. As an ethnographer working in a marginalized region of India, I am attuned to the ways in which regional sensibilities emerge from fraught histories of exclusion. My decision to direct the resources bestowed upon me for this research towards a constellation of cultural practices that are associated with a dominant (sometimes called 'chauvinist') ethnic community within this region became a serious ethical issue as I began to recognize how my activities might be interpreted as promoting a particular political agenda. When I faced criticism from local academic authorities because of the research methodologies I employed, I felt justified in pursuing this project as a way to make a provocative contribution to ongoing debates about gender, performance, and belonging in contemporary Assam. The body became a critical

presence early on in the project, as people directed me towards feelings, movements, sounds, discourses, and materials that emerge from the embodied experiences of everyday life.

I envision this dissertation as a response to Philip Bohlman's call for a politically engaged musicology (1993). Familiar categories which at first appear to be discrete – song, dance, rural, urban, girl, woman, lover – become strange when experienced from different perspectives, and when infused with different stakes. My own positioning as researcher, performer, foreigner, and white unmarried woman, has afforded me opportunities to inhabit different vantage points at different times, and the following pages have emerged in an endeavor to make sense of my accumulated experiences over the past eleven years since I first visited Assam.

A quick browse through my Table of Contents will reveal no section on "gender" because this is a concept that runs throughout my dissertation, receiving ethnographic and theoretical attention at points of juncture, in between. As scholars who critically analyze the experiences of women who participate as active members of conservative Hindu political parties have argued, it is crucial to consider the way women experience empowerment within sexist patriarchal structures (Bedi 2016; Menon 2010). I do this by focusing on how young female performers create alliances with their male co-performers, family members, teachers and mentors, and with me, in a dialogic process that is dynamic and will continue well beyond these pages. I take up Chandra Talpade Mohanty's challenge to pursue a "feminism without borders" (2003) (c.f. Leonard, et al. 2010; Banerjee and Ray Chaudhury 2011; Loomba and Lukose 2012). This includes engaging in the apprenticeship central to relationship-building and embodied learning as a performer myself, which is essential for music and dance research (Weidman 2012).

Research in music and dance is taxing on many levels, because it often involves training and performance in physically demanding contexts. I began this project working in Guwahati, Assam's largest metropolitan city, the center of its media and culture industry. The experiences I gained from living in people's homes in Assamese villages have also deeply influenced this project in ways I could not have anticipated. In the quiet moments when there was no electricity or water, when I was completely dependent on others for my safety and health, when I was disconnected from the communication networks around which my daily life revolves, I learned to let go and to listen and feel in a new way. Things that originally frightened, shocked, offended, and disgusted me started to make sense. I came to terms with the feeling that my body and comportment were constantly under intense scrutiny. I recognized that I was accustomed to having an escape route, a way out of any uncomfortable situation. I became acutely aware of my various kinds of privilege. I learned many lessons during moments when I could not escape.

In her discussion of her own fieldwork experiences in the Malaysian rainforest, Marina Roseman proclaimed, "You must live the life of a people, follow their paths, dig in the dirt, gut a fish, ford a stream, and always be alert for the links between daily life and ritual activity" (1993, 8). On the one hand this methodological practice, often quippantly referred to as "going native" could be identified as one of the basic principles of fieldwork. But on the other hand, as fieldwork methodologies and research sites proliferate in ethnomusicology, the experience of extended research under physically and emotionally strenuous conditions is not a prerequisite for producing meaningful, legitimate work. On the contrary, much groundbreaking, critical research has emerged via work in urban music and dance studios, archives, performing arts venues and urban residences. In this dissertation, I move between these spaces in order to weave together narratives of *bihu* as sounded practice in people's everyday lives.

Dissertation Overview

In Chapter 1, I follow a group of young *bihu* performers from the village of Betoni Pam in northeastern Assam as they move between the ritual space of the village courtyard to the competition stage. In villages like Betoni Pam, where the main source of livelihood is agricultural cultivation, and the rituals associated with fertility and prosperity are integral to the continued sustenance of the community, *bihu* provides a context for young people to participate in the continued prosperity of their communities through ritual performances of music and dance. They pay ritual visits to village homes, singing and dancing in order to bring blessings to each family for the new year. Throughout the dissertation I demonstrate how *bihu* is more than a temporal marker of the beginning of spring and a new calendar year, the ushering in of a new planting season in the agricultural cycle, and a celebration of fertility. *Bihu* is an environment — a context in which relationships are cultivated and affirmed between families and friends, between humans and the natural world, and between individual selves and multiple imagined communities.

Bihu performance is one of the contexts in which in which young women learn about expectations for their participation in community life, and also the challenges and dangers they might encounter as they imagine lives outside of their community, in the city, or outside Assam. I focus on young women because many of the insights I have gained emerge from the relationships I was able to cultivate with young female performers in Assam. As a woman myself, I had opportunities to share intimate and candid conversations with these performers, and their stories compel me to convey the celebrated aspects of *bihu*, while also recognizing the dangers that accompany this festive season. I engage with issues of concern to performers that came to my attention during our interactions by presenting excerpts from our conversations and

reflections on my observations. These concerns center on the movement and visibility of young bodies, and the ways in which the changes that happen to these bodies during adolescence are expected to be managed. Late night performances and excessive drinking require young performers and their families to be especially vigilant during *bihu.* The freedom to push boundaries creates a context in which young women are especially vulnerable to threats of bodily harm. I argue that young people learn how to navigate these risks through participation in *bihu* performance as part of a tight-knit group of young people with the support of their families and communities. My goal in this dissertation is to attend to the gendered dynamics of everyday life in Assam by focusing on relationships. This includes beginning to understand how inter-generational relationships, inter-class and -caste relationships and inter-ethnic relationships are gendered.

In Chapter 2, I explore historical discourses regarding the female body that are linked to pre-colonial associations of Assam with magic, erotic excess, and danger. I argue that the incredible stories which circulated and persisted as part of anxiety surrounding the containment of female sexuality during the colonial period have consequences for Assamese women's lives in contemporary India. By focusing on how rituals related to fertility, both in agricultural cultivation and in human reproduction, are experienced by young female performers and their communities, I show how the paradigm of creativity and destruction associated with cosmological feminine power and the idea of the woman as representing fundamental Assamese values consolidated during the nation building period across India has created an uneasy relationship between the sexual license associated with *bihu* and competing social expectations of respectability.

Chapter 3, I trace the emergence of the "rural" as a conceptual arena for debating social values and ideas about nation and community in contemporary India. As the subject of highly gendered debates about cultural authenticity, *bihu* constitutes an arena in which the sounding, moving body serves as evidence of regional belonging. Urban music and dance schools, university folklore departments, and state cultural institutions situate *bihu* as constitutive of a broader folk sensibility that spans seasonal and life cycle ritual contexts, commercial music markets, and university student politics. Packaging the "rural" for mass consumption has served as a critical strategy in creating a modern Assamese identity, for example, by embedding gendered labor practices associated with rural livelihoods into folk performance practice. I analyze various manifestations of these actions by focusing on "sounding bodies" as vehicles through which modern citizens embody rural subjectivities. While efforts to police public performance presents a powerful form of social control, this dissertation demonstrates the multiple ways in which *bihu* performance creates possibilities for multiple visions of society to coexist. The stock characters everyday people take on through performance become multidimensional through ethnographic investigation which highlights the uneasy relationship between the sexual license associated with *bihu* and competing social expectations of respectability.

In Chapter 4, I focus on Indian reality shows that feature contestants performing *bihu,* engaging with scholars of popular media who have become attentive to the role of competitive "reality" television shows featuring music and dance performance in creating platforms for talent discovery and fueling aspirational desires that cross class and ethnic boundaries (Turner 2004; Kraidy 2010; Ouellette 2013). In addition to competitive performance sessions, these shows incorporate scenes of finalists on location in their homes. Often depicting hardworking village

girls conducting daily chores, these scenes narrate the journey from everyday anonymity to celebrity stardom, highlighting the ability of contestants to embody certain idealized values associated with Assamese womanhood. These values are also embedded in the performance of *bihu* music and dance, and are heatedly debated by judges.

I conclude this dissertation by attending to recent debates about racist discrimination and violence against people from the northeast in Indian metropolitan centers which brings into relief the enduring legacy of colonial policies of isolation and sexualization of so-called tribal communities. This legacy has contributed to an environment which is especially hostile for women from northeast India whose mobility challenges patriarchal modes of control. I argue that *bihu* music and dance, while grounded in intimate local experiences, provide young people with opportunities to experiment with socially determined boundaries of gender and sexuality, to learn how to navigate risks, and to bridge seemingly incommensurable media worlds.

Chapter One – Intimate Encounters: Dancing with the Crescent Moon

She proceeds onto the stage with a wide, captivating smile, the hand-woven silk *sādor* pinned just so around her torso and across her left shoulder, hugging the emerging curves of her body but bearing no skin to the gathering crowd. Arms outstretched, bent at the elbow, hands cupped and twirling at the wrist, bare feet peeking out from below the bright red design at the fall of her *mekhelā* – she dances, stepping sideways first with one foot, then bringing the other to join. She lightly impresses the rhythmic pattern of *bihu* onto the earthen floor of the proscenium stage designed to look like a scene from an Assamese village. The two gold-colored pendants that adorn her neck clink together, echoing that rhythm as she dances *koṅkāl bhāngi*, "breaking" her waist – contract – release – contract – release, hands nested in the iconic palms-up position at her lower back. She steps closer to one of the seven young men surrounding her in an arc that stretches across the stage, coquettishly gazing into his eyes as he brandishes a slim wooden stick in his right hand, his biceps undulating as he strikes the leather skin of the *ḍhul* drum with his left hand. He moves with her, returning her gaze, circling around her, the cylindrical drum suspended horizontally at his torso by a hand-woven *gāmusā* cloth tied to both ends, stretched tightly over his right shoulder and across his back. He plays the *bihu* rhythmic pattern *taki dighen khiti gheni, ghen ghirr, ghen ghirr*, and sings to her:

O nāsoni — mātilu, āhilā	Oh dancer — I called for you, you came
Ājir bihutolī loi	To today's *bihutolī*
O nāsoni — bihu nu nāsiboloi	Oh dancer — to dance *bihu*
Hāṅsoti tāmul khon o nāsoni	The piece of *tāmul* in the cloth around your waist
Kākei nu diye jābā toi	To whom will you give it?

She spins around on the ball of one foot and then the other as she moves her outstretched arms, contracting and releasing her wrists and elbows to the *ḍhul* drum beat, arriving at the microphone center-stage just in time to strike a pose and sing her reply:

O senāiti — mātila, āhilu	Oh my beloved — you called for me, I came
Ājir bihutolī loi	To today's *bihutolī*
O senāiti — tumāke log pāboloi	Oh my beloved — to meet you
Hāṅsoti tāmul khon o senāiti	The piece of *tāmul* in the cloth around my waist
Tumākei diye jām ei buli	I will give it to you only

Late one night in April 2014, Sima Gogoi and Moina Baruah performed the iconic *nāsoni-bihuwā* pair (*jur*[1]), two characters in a romantic drama that unfolds in village courtyards, on festival stages, and on television screens across the state of Assam. As *nāsoni* and *bihuwā*, Sima and Moina represent an idealized potential relationship between a young Assamese woman and man that emerges through the coming together of material culture and embodied performance. A virile, dominant, and sometimes melodramatic male figure, the *bihuwā* is literally an embodiment of *bihu* ("he who *bihu*-s"). The *nāsoni* is a dancer (*nās* is Assamese for "dance"[2]), but like the *bihuwā*, as she moves, she also sings, claps, and plays instruments as part of the sounded practice of *bihu*. An embodied symbol of *Oxomīyā*[3] femininity, the innocent but tentatively flirtatious *nāsoni* is just becoming a woman. The *nāsoni* and the *bihuwā* flirt cautiously, within the confines of the performance genre, never actually touching, but sounding and moving in sync.

The stage on which Sima, Moina and the other *bihuwā*-s perform frames *bihu* as both traditional and modern. The *bihutolī* is an outdoor proscenium stage, sheltered by a large tent suspended by bamboo posts that covers an area for audience members and performers to congregate.[4] The *bihutolī* gained popularity and has been thriving as a site for cultural production and pageantry since the 1980s in Assam, coinciding with a political movement designed to spread fear of immigrants and increase solidarity among Assam's diverse communities. The

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1 *Bihu* songs that feature the *nāsoni* and *bihuwā* singing alternating stanzas back and forth teasing each other are called *jurā-nām* (pair-song).

2 There is a critical difference between *nās*, which refers to *bihu* and other folk dances, and *nrityo,* a word that entered the Assamese language via Sansrkit which refers to "classical" dances like *Xotrīyā* (Sattriya), Manipuri, and Bharata Natyam. Therefore, the *nāsoni* is marked as a folk dancer who performs *bihu*. Another important distinction is that the *nāsoni* sings, while in modern "classical" performance practice, dancers no longer sing. I address the history of the modern separation between artistic traditions of classical song and dance in Chapter 3.

3 *Oxomīyā* refers to the "ethnic Assamese" community, discussed elsewhere in this dissertation in more depth.

4 This type of outdoor venue is common across South Asia, sometimes called "*pandal,*" featuring events ranging from political rallies to religious festivals to theatre performances.

transformation of *bihu* performance practices for the proscenium stage is evoked through the *bihutolī*'s discursive presence in *bihu* songs, such as the song presented above, which I will refer to as "*O nāsoni*."

Bihu songs like "*O nāsoni*" create an important sense of reflexivity, where young men and women sing about meeting at a *bihutolī* while performing in a *bihutolī*. The performance of *bihu* songs like these go beyond the common didactic function where people learn about *bihu* by singing *bihu* songs explicitly about *bihu* traditions and rituals (e.g. a *bihu* song which reminds us, "We wash our cows on the first day of *bihu*"). Songs about the *bihutolī* create a meta-discourse which emplaces the *bihutolī* into the modern history of *bihu*, naturalizing its presence and asserting its importance as a gathering place and context for maintaining a connection with a shared past and common cultural heritage. This lyrical strategy becomes even more fascinating when we consider that the *bihutolī* itself is a staging of the *sutāl* ritual performance, which is posited as having a longer, pre-modern history.[5]

In the first stanza of "*O nāsoni*," the *bihuwā* sings, "I called for you, and you came to today's *bihutolī* to dance *bihu*," and the *nāsoni* replies, "You called for me, and I came to today's *bihutolī* to meet you." This *bihu* song identifies the *bihutolī* as a place where young women and men meet. This song positions the *bihutolī* as a site of public intimacy where couples can exchange "pieces of *tāmul*" (betel nut) in order to convey their secret desires. The *nāsoni* carries a piece of this betel nut in her *hā̆soti*, a thin red cloth tied around her waist. As we learn from this song, she can communicate her desire for or romantic interest in a young man by handing a piece

[5] According to Assamese historians and *bihu* scholars, the before *bihu* reached the *sutāl*, women and men performed together in fallow rice fields under a tree (*gos-tolot bihu* or "beneath-the-tree *bihu*"). Before *gos-tolot bihu*, women and men are said to have performed in separate secluded areas of the forest. It is difficult to know whether the general Assamese population learned about this history through oral narrative or from staged *bihu* programs, competitions and television broadcasts where the history of *bihu* is articulated in a pedagogical mode in order to educate the *rāiz* about their cultural traditions.

of the betel nut to him, embodying a discursive mode of romantic courtship, which I discuss further in Chapter 2.

In this chapter, I go beyond an exploration of romantic intimacy, which is the most obvious relationship that *bihu* evokes through lyrical themes and embodied performance. I examine the ways in which *bihu* as sounded practice constitutes community beyond the intimate relationships that unfold in the ritual space of the village courtyard and the public intimacies of the festival stage. What happens when we attend to the various relationships that are involved here, besides the obvious relationship that embodies romantic pre-marriage love? What are the relationships that are not so obvious? When we consider them, how do they change and expand the interpretation of *bihu* as a flirtatious, sometimes erotic form of music and dance? What might these insights tell us about the power of intimacies to bridge rural and urban worlds? And how might this influence a broader understanding of adolescence in contemporary rural India?

During the spring of 2014, I worked closely with the members of Kāsi Jun (Crescent Moon), a *bihu* performance troupe based out of Betoni Pam village (Figure 1.1). The families of these performers, who belong to different scheduled castes that fall under the general umbrella of *Oxomīyā* ("ethnic" Assamese), rely on a combination of agricultural cultivation, private enterprise and government office jobs for their livelihood. Kāsi Jun's members, including *nāsoni* Sima Gogoi (15), director and leading *bihuwā* Binanda Boruah (28), and *bihuwā* Moina Baruah (26) live with their families in Betoni Pam and surrounding villages. While Betoni Pam serves as a kind of base for Kāsi Jun, members are also recruited from surrounding villages to form a critical mass of around 20 to 30 performers at any given time.

Figure 1.1 – Kāsi Jun *nāsoni*-s prepare for *bihu* competition backstage at the end of a long night, Baruwoti village, near Silapathar, Assam. Left to right: Bondita Das, Gudu Gogoi, Dulumoni Saikia, Pallabi Konwar, Rinkumoni Saikia, Sima Gogoi, Mousumi Das, Poppy Gogoi. April 28, 2014. Photo by the author.

Betoni Pam is located around ten kilometers from Silapathar, the nearest town in Dhemaji District on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. With a population of just over 22,000 according to the 2001 India Census, Silapathar is larger and more important as a transportation hub than Dhemaji, the district's headquarters. I chose to work in Betoni Pam because it is located in Dhemaji District in the northeastern corner of Assam, which some believe to be one of the areas where *bihu* originated. As Kāsi Jun rehearsed for the month-long *bihu* season that stretches from mid-April to mid-May each year, I spent time learning to sing and dance some of the choreographed routines they had prepared to perform at village homes and in stage competitions. Through conversations and participation in performance with members of Kāsi Jun and their

families, I learned about how performers move between these spaces, which are marked as distinct because of their function, location, and audience, but draw on the same material, *bihu* songs and dances, in order to accomplish different goals.

Figure 1.2 – Kāsi Jun performs at the *sutāl* of a family in Betoni Pam village. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

While living in Betoni Pam in the homes of troupe members, I became aware of how pervasive *bihu* performance culture is in the region. On the 14th of April, the first day of the month of *bohāg* and the Assamese New Year, Kāsi Jun begins an evening tour of Betoni Pam and surrounding villages, performing a ritual function by offering song, dance and blessings to the members of each household they visit (Figure 1.2). These performances happen in the *sutāl*, or courtyard in front of a village home. The *sutāl* is usually a wide, earthen area, compressed by weekly applications of mud, hardened by the heat of the sun, and swept clean multiple times in a day. The particular socialities that emerge from interactions in the *sutāl* during the *bihu* season

serve to strengthen intergenerational relationships between families and friends, and articulate the shared sense of community that *bihu* represents. Donna Lee Kwon describes a similar process of collective participatory performance that happens in village courtyards (*madang*) in South Korea, which bring about what she calls the "*madang*-oriented way-of-being" which heightens an "awareness of the body in both place and space" (2015, 33).

More than just a place to visit and greet friends and relatives, the *sutāl* is a ritual space where blessings associated with health and agricultural productivity are exchanged for *tāmul* (betel nut) and small amounts of money, especially during the month of *bohāg* (mid-April to mid-May) when the fields are being prepared for a new season of planting. The *bihu* troupe's presence, performance, and blessings transform the *sutāl* from an ordinary place to an auspicious space during this season of planting new crops, and springtime rejuvenation of the natural world emerging from winter's rest. Kāsi Jun performs this ritual function for residents of Betoni Pam and surrounding villages. I learned that for many of these performers, it is a special joy to perform in one's own *sutāl*, with parents beaming, proud of their son or daughter.

In the early morning on the first day of *bohāg,* I joined families from Betoni Pam for the ritual washing of livestock at the small river that flows through the village. Members of Kāsi Jun who live in Betoni Pam participated with their relatives and friends in throwing pieces of gourd (*lāu*) and eggplant (*bengenā*) at the cows and at each other (Figure 1.3). As the cows were directed out to pasture, we continued pelting each other with the vegetables, chasing one another up and down the earthen lane that connects Betoni Pam to other villages. More than once, I felt a sting at the back of my neck and turned around to see an older woman grinning at me from behind a tree, skewer of vegetables in hand.

Figure 1.3 – Children throw pieces of gourd and eggplant on during the ritual washing of cattle on the first morning of *bohāg*, the Assamese New Year. Betoni Pam village. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

As the sun began to set that evening, I joined Kāsi Jun members on their tour of Betoni Pam as they performed in the *sutāl*-s of respected families in the community, sometimes joining in performance with the troupe at the request of the *grihosto* (host). Although each *sutāl* performance is unique, Kāsi Jun follows a general sequence marked by musical transitions that structure each event. In a typical *sutāl* performance, the men of Kāsi Jun perform first without the women, singing and dancing a Hindu devotional genre called *huṅsori*. The men join hands, moving counter-clockwise in a circle as they stomp vigorously and shout loudly in between songs. After about ten minutes, the men summon the women with a *bihu* song, and the women dance into the *sutāl* (Video 1.1).

The particular song Kāsi Jun sings to summon their *nāsoni*-s is a four-phrased *jāt-nām*, a *bihu* song with a fixed refrain. The *jāt* (indicated in bold typeface below) begins with "*Nāsoni oi*" (Oh dancer). In each stanza, the second half of the first two phrases (underlined) are changed, often improvised by one *bihuwā* and then repeated by the group in unison:

***Nāsoni oi**, <u>ākou āhil boxonto</u>*	**Oh dancer**, <u>spring has come again</u>
***Nāsoni oi**, <u>mon āmār ānondo</u>*	**Oh dancer**, <u>we are in good spirits</u>
Ḍhul pe̯pā bājile	**When the *ḍhul* drum and *pe̯pā* horn are playing**
Robo moi nuwāru	**I can't keep from joining in**
Nāsoni oi, tumār nu kumoliyā	**Oh dancer, your mind is tender**
Āmār nu sengeliyā mon	**And our minds are also young**

Four or five of the *bihuwā*-s play *ḍhul* drums and others play *tāl* cymbals, which provide rhythmic structure for the performance, invigorate the scene with their powerful sounded energy, and notify people within earshot that *bihu* has arrived. The rhythmic patterns (*sāpor*) played on the *ḍhul*-s also provide critical transitional cues that mark the beginning of a song, instrumental interludes following the sung stanzas, as well as corresponding changes in choreography. The *jāt-nām* form provides a structure that allows the performance of one song to continue on for an extended period of time, as *bihuwā*-s lead out with new stanzas sung to the same melody until the time comes to transition to a different song. For example, after the above stanza is completed, and a break in the *sāpor* rhythmic pattern indicates the beginning of another stanza, one *bihuwā* might sing out a prolonged "O" on the same pitch as the beginning of the song and lead into another stanza. The other *bihuwā*-s wait until he has completed the first two phrases and join in singing, repeating the two new phrases in unison and continuing with the *jāt* refrain.

During this song, the *nāsoni*-s combine short sequences of mirrored dance movements which are organized into groups of two, four or eight measures of three beats each. The order of these sequences are sometimes fixed ahead of time, and other times improvised by the *nāsoni*-s,

led by those dancing closest to the area of the *sutāl* where the *grihosto* family is seated. The flexibility of these short movement sequences allows the *nāsoni*-s to maintain synchronized form for as long as the *bihuwā*-s continue singing. The *sāpor* rhythmic patterns that the *bihuwā*-s play in between songs often have pre-determined choreographed movements that facilitate the smooth transition from one song to another. I provide a more detailed analysis of the intersections between sound and movement later in this chapter.

As the *sutāl* performance continues, Kāsi Jun performs metered *bihu* songs, like the one above, interspersed with unmetered *bihu zuzonā* song and transitional *sāpor* rhythmic patterns. An interlude played on the *pe̊pā*, a double-reed buffalo horn marks a transition to a particular choreographed sequence, after which the women leave the performance area of the *sutāl.* The men close the performance by offering a prayer to the *grihosto* family who bow low to the ground to receive the group's blessings (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4 – *Grihosto* (host) family receives blessings from Kāsi Jun, Betoni Pam village. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

Performance Venues – The *Sutāl* and the Stage

When Kāsi Jun performers enter a *sutāl,* singing and dancing, the everyday activities that happen in the *sutāl* cease, transforming the area into a ritual space. But the *sutāl* is porous, allowing for people to move in and out of the performance space without interrupting the flow of events. As the dark night sets in, members of the *grihosto* family chat with Dulal Boruah, Binanda's elder brother who serves as a kind of booking agent for Kāsi Jun, and Mintu Gogoi, the troupe's "guardian" who is also Sima's father. Residents of nearby homes hear the beat of the *ḍhul* drum and walk over to join in the festivities, which are illuminated by kerosene lamps and the headlights of Kāsi Jun's rickety tour bus. The hosts brew tea and distribute it to guests and performers in small plastic cups. Performers also enter and leave frequently, using a transition sequence to discreetly dance away from the performance area to drink water or greet guests. Kāsi Jun's *sutāl* performance can go on for over an hour and is not strictly predetermined in terms of which songs and choreographies are included. Sometimes members, hosts, and guests call out songs and the troupe follows. Hosts and other guests occasionally join in the performance, dancing in between the Kāsi Jun performers and singing along. The *sutāl* atmosphere is spontaneous, marked by ebbs and flows of energy and excitement. At the *sutāl*, performers know they are fulfilling a role that is deeply valued, surrounded by friends, family and guests.

Kāsi Jun also performs *bihu* in regional group and solo competitions that take place during the *bihu* season each year in Assam (Figure 1.5). In contrast to the relaxed, spontaneous atmosphere of the *sutāl*, the competitive stage exudes pageantry and hierarchical cultural authority. At the *bihutolī* competition, performers are judged by a panel of critics and hope to win cash prizes. The competitive performance is strictly limited to a fixed time frame, often ten or twenty minutes, and the stage routine is carefully choreographed to incorporate specific

elements required by the judging committee, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. Large numbers of spectators come to watch these competitions, which last all night, and some of the more advanced level competitions are broadcast live on television across the state.

Figure 1.5 – Kāsi Jun competes at Baruwoti *Bihutolī*, Baruwoti village. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

As I learned through observing Kāsi Jun's rehearsals and competitive performances, the village *sutāl* performance is vividly portrayed on the *bihutolī* stage. At the very beginning of the competitive *bihu* routine, a man playing the role of the *grihosto* (host) walks out onto the stage and welcomes the troupe into his imaginary *sutāl* (the stage). The *bihuwā*-s process onto the stage, entering the imaginary *sutāl*, and begin performing *hŭsori*, continuing as they would in a typical *sutāl* performance. The *grihosto* dances freely at the stage's periphery throughout the routine as a host might at his own home, but in this case he refrains from joining in the troupe's choreography. He takes center stage near the end of the performance, bowing low to receive the

group's blessings and offering *tāmul* (betel nut) in exchange (Figure 1.6). After the prayer has been offered and the gifts have been received, the troupe faces the panel of judges to be critiqued and answer questions about the performance, and about the history of *bihu*.

The relationship between the *sutāl* and the stage is complex. During the past few decades, as *bihu* performance practices have been transformed for the stage, *bihu* music and dance have become infused with notions of musical form and choreography, entering the realm of artistic practice. But at the same time, *bihu* performance at the *sutāl* still functions as participatory ritual practice, especially for those who rely on agricultural cultivation as their main source of livelihood such as the families of Kāsi Jun performers. Ritual performances at the *sutāl* have in turn absorbed many of the aesthetic conventions born on stage such as standardized choreography and matching dress. Not surprisingly, there seems to be more room for creativity and spontaneity in ritual performances that happen in the *sutāl* where performers, hosts and guests interact and respond to the dynamic context with ease.

Figure 1.6 – *Grihosto* (left) offers *tāmul* (betel nut) and money to *bihu* performers during Kāsi Jun Bihu Troupe's competitive routine at Silapathar Regional *Bihutolī*, Silapathar town, Assam. April 28, 2014. Photo by the author.

Scholarship on festivals has drawn from Victor Turner's formulation of *communitas*, which articulates the experience of liminality people experience when they move "outside" their everyday social roles (Turner 1977). The experience of liminality that may result from participation in communal festival activities creates the ground on which a powerful shared sense of community identity emerges. Building on this work, scholars have recognized the operation of power in festival contexts that mediate identities in ways that create disjunctures, and have theorized festivals as ritual events that move beyond identity to articulate concepts of value (Cooley 2006; Harnish 2006; Hughes-Freeland 2008).

Bihu competitions and stage performances are conducted in the Assamese language, which creates a critical difference between festivals oriented towards tourists. These events are discursively oriented towards an Assamese-speaking audience, not a foreign or even domestic tourist audience. This orientation changes, however, when *bihu* troupes leave Assam to perform, staging events in other parts of India and abroad. The work that goes into preparing troupes within Assam during *bihutolī* performances plays a critical part in the continued stylization of *bihu*, which is a prime feature of tourist-oriented performance.

Intimacy, Space and Performance

The concept of "framing" is helpful to understand the way space is constituted through the processual experience of performance (Goffman 1974; Turner 1982). For example, a distinction can be made between stylized and spontaneous *bihu* performance, by analyzing sounds, rhythms and movements that point to a particular context and emerge in dialogue with judgments about appropriate behavior. During a *bihu* competition, audience members do not normally jump up and dance, but instead focus on the contestant's performance in order to assess certain aspects as good or bad, and wait for the judges to assign a winner. Alternatively, some

people ignore the proceedings completely until a favorite contestant appears, using the time instead to socialize with friends. During a *bihu* concert by Papon, Zublee or Zubeen, Assam's three most famous folk-pop singers, many audience members dance uncontrollably, in their role as active contributors to the festive environment. In both cases, the audience plays an important role, but the behavior they exhibit changes according to the circumstances of the performance context, even if the same *bihu* song is being performed.

The concept of public intimacy is useful in this context to understand how romantic desire might be expressed between young people outside cosmopolitan urban centers in contemporary India. For example, anthropologist Ritty Lukose identifies the college campus as one of the few spaces available to many young people in India for heterosocial or mixed gender interaction, recognizing that "the construction of romantic intimacy, more often than not, must be initiated and sustained in public" (2009, 19). In Assam, many of the spaces created in order to facilitate *bihu*-related activities are spaces where young people find opportunities to cultivate romantic intimacy. I articulate the "publicness" of the *bihutolī* as a site of public intimacy not in opposition to an imagined "domestic" sphere, which is often considered uncritically as the gendered domain of feminine action and subjectivity (Sugarman 1997; Silverman 2012). As Carol Silverman suggests, "The configuration domestic-public obscures rather than illuminates because the domestic arena is not always private and subordinate but is instead a part of community life" (2012, 89). I invoke the concept of publics in order to emphasize the part the *bihutolī* plays in the constitution of the *Oxomīyā* community as a shared, but semi-exclusive space of belonging.

Beyond interpretations of intimacy that constitute romantic or sexual relationships and notions of domesticity, which are a central part of the narrative and embodied power of *bihu*, I

expand the concept of intimacy in this chapter to encompass a broader understanding of the connections and alliances that transform place into a nationalized space by linking rural and urban sensibilities through performance. By valorizing the ritual space of the *sutāl* through staging in public venues such as the *bihutolī, bihu* has become an embodied and discursive link between Assamese people across rural-urban contexts, incorporating the village into the modern nation-state.

As sounded practice, *bihu* constitutes an embodied discourse that travels beyond the *sutāl* and the *bihutolī*, bringing identities into being. These discursive effects are dynamic forces that bond people together even though they may never meet, creating "public intimacies" (Guilbault 2010). Similar to *bihutolī* performances, *soca* dance shows in Trinidad gather large crowds of over 20,000 people, while deep-rooted notions of respectability derived from colonial-era criticism of publicly expressed sexualities have been adopted by middle- and upper-class cultural authorities who deny the legitimacy of pleasure and bodily expression as critical public discourse. I discuss the impact of colonial anxiety about public sexualities and resulting stigma against Assamese women in Chapter 2, critically examining how young women today reckon with tactile powers and their intangibilities in what Ann Stoler describes as being "haunted by empire" (Stoler 2006, 1).

Social intimacies cultivated during *sutāl* ritual performances which create community bonds and a shared sense of belonging emerge as public intimacies on the *bihutolī* stage, resignifying the meaning of community as one of "common sociality" (Stokes 2010, 33; Herzfeld 2005, 3) that goes beyond face-to-face interaction to incorporate forms of "stranger sociability" (Warner 2002). These discursive forces are especially powerful in Assam, where policies of governance are articulated along ethnic lines that pit communities against one

another. In 2016, as the current election season unfolds, the constant reiteration during campaign news coverage that "ethnic" Assamese, (or *Oxomīyā*) are minorities in their own state points to the critical need for a continuing examination of how public performances of expressive culture operate as embodied modes of political discourse. The transformative capacity of live performance is enacted through what Guilbault calls a "politics of pleasure," formed from both the social intimacies and antagonisms that *soca* produces which nurture skills, knowledges and values that transfer to other domains of experience (2010, 281).

Byron Dueck demonstrates how changes in rhythm create modes of public and intimate sociability by analyzing how meter facilitates musical intimacies (2007). Dueck argues that the relationship between intimacy and publicness is dynamic and ongoing by showing that "musical closeness" can occur through face-to-face interactions and also between strangers (2007, 38). The iconic *bihu* rhythm serves on different levels to facilitate intimacy: through co-present movement when the pleasure of kinesthetic connection creates a feeling of closeness, and through signification of an iconic sounded representation of community. *Bihu* grooves, sounding a call to participation, sometimes in support of community solidarity, and other times as a strategy of exclusion.

Bihu as Sounded Practice

The *bihu* song "*O nāsoni,*" which opened this chapter, provides a fruitful example of how romantic desire is evoked through sounded practice. Through the concept of sounded practice, I propose a holistic approach to analyzing sounded movement which has most often been separated into binary categories of music/dance, and melody/rhythm. My earlier lyrical analysis of this song is expanded here, as I demonstrate how the body sounds through performance, and how movement is implicated in sounding. The fact that *bihu* singing and dancing are

traditionally performed simultaneously is significant, because it demonstrates that performance involves the whole body and requires an incredible amount of stamina. Male and female performers align footsteps, waist-breaks and wrist-breaks with the cyclical *bihu* rhythm, and creatively adjust song lyrics in order to fit the rhythmic and melodic contexts of different songs. The relationship between lyrical texts, melodies, rhythmic patterns, and body movements provide clues about how music and dance emerge together as co-constitutive events in the performer's body. I have incorporated a combination of transcription techniques in order to demonstrate the interconnectedness of sound and movement in *bihu* performance.

I begin with a linear transcription of the first stanza of "*O nāsoni*" in order to demonstrate the relationships between rhythm, movement and melody (Diagrams 1.1 and 1.2, Audio 1.1).

Phrase 1:	*O nāsoni — mātilu, āhilā* *Ājir bihutolī loi*	Oh dancer — I called for you, you came To today's *bihutolī*
Phrase 2:	*O nāsoni — bihu nu nāsiboloi*	Oh dancer — to dance *bihu*
Phrase 3:	*Hā̊soti tāmul khon o nāsoni*	The piece of *tāmul* in the cloth around your waist
Phrase 4:	*Kākei nu diye jābā toi*	To whom will you give it?

The four phrases of the first stanza are arranged in vertical sequence, each moving from left to right through time. Each line contains five dimensions of representation: numbered beats, drum syllables, body movements, lyrical text, and melodic contour.

1) Numbered beats: The numbered beats are derived from my interactions with performers, who consistently describe *bihu*'s rhythm as three-beat units, although two units are most often combined in order to create a six-beat pattern. I have maintained three beats as a basic unit for analysis, and combined three-beat units into six-beat and twelve-beat patterns when appropriate.

Figure 1.7 – *Ḍhulīyā* Arup Nath poses with *ḍhul* drum. Guwahati. Photo by the author.

2) Drum syllables: *Ḍhul* players (*ḍhulīyā*-s) have developed sophisticated drumming techniques that incorporate strokes played with the bare hand as well as the wooden drumstick. The cylindrical *ḍhul* hangs in front of the *ḍhulīyā*-s torso, suspended by a cloth strapped over the left shoulder and across the back (Figure 1.7). These drumming techniques produce a variety of sounds with different pitches, timbres, resonances and durations that are combined into the rhythmic patterns mentioned earlier, called *sāpor* (also *seu*). Similar to other South Asian drumming traditions, each stroke in a *sāpor* pattern has a corresponding onomatopoeic syllable, a name, such as *ta*, *ki*, *di*, and *ghen*. Therefore, *sāpor* patterns are often recited during teaching sessions, rehearsals, and less

often during performance. These syllables are essential for the purposes of coordinating with others in the performance troupe and planning choreographies. Although there are few female *ḍhulīyā*-s in Assam, accomplished female *bihu* performers can normally recite long *sāpor* passages, because *sāpor* recitation has become a critical path towards embodying the *bihu* groove. In the diagram below, I have transcribed one of the basic *bihu* rhythmic patterns over six beats (*ghen taki di ghen, tak taki di ghen*), although in performance, *ḍhulīyā*-s embellish this basic rhythm, incorporating counter-rhythms that result in groovy hemiola patterns.

3) Body movements: The most iconic *bihu* dance movement is unquestionably *koṷkāl bhāngi* ("waist-break"). Although both men and women perform *koṷkāl bhāngi*, the *nāsoni*'s performance of this movement is generally more stylized. In the starting position, the performer bends forward slightly at the waist, maintaining a straight axis along the length of the spine. The *koṷkāl* refers to the lower back – the fulcrum point around which the performer contracts the abdominal muscles, tucking the pelvis forward and under the upper body without disturbing the straight axis from the lower back to the top of the head. Aligned with the three beats, the performer contracts on beat one, releases on beat two, and holds the release position on beat three. In order for the knees not to bend, the feet should lift only slightly when alternating steps, pressing onto the ground with one foot on beat one, the other foot on beat two, and pausing on beat three with both feet on the ground. I address other movements, including arms, hands, and spins, in Chapter 4. For the purposes of this transcription, I include only the *koṷkāl*-oriented movements here.

4) Lyrical text: The singing voice in *bihu* is not only melodic – it is rhythmic. The voice is used percussively in order to mark the *bihu* rhythm through the use of breath pressure (*he̍sā,* meaning pressure or stress), a technique that approaches the effect of a glottal stop, which I discuss in Chapter 3. In this transcription, I mark the use of *he̍sā* by surrounding extended sung vowels with parentheses. For example, the vowel that begins the song "O" is rearticulated on beat 2 using *he̍sā.* In this song, "r" is also extended as a diphthong to which *he̍sā* is applied.

5) Melodic contour: *Bihu* melodies are pentatonic. The horizontal dotted line represents the tonic home of the pentatonic melody. *Bihu* songs normally hover around the tonic and a minor third above, moving up to the fourth and fifth scale degrees and returning back to tonic by the end of the stanza, as in this example. Occasionally the seventh scale degree appears, but not in this song. All stanzas of a *bihu* song share the same melody, but there is considerable room for ornamentation. Also, the text of a *bihu* song may sometimes be sung to a variety of different tunes.

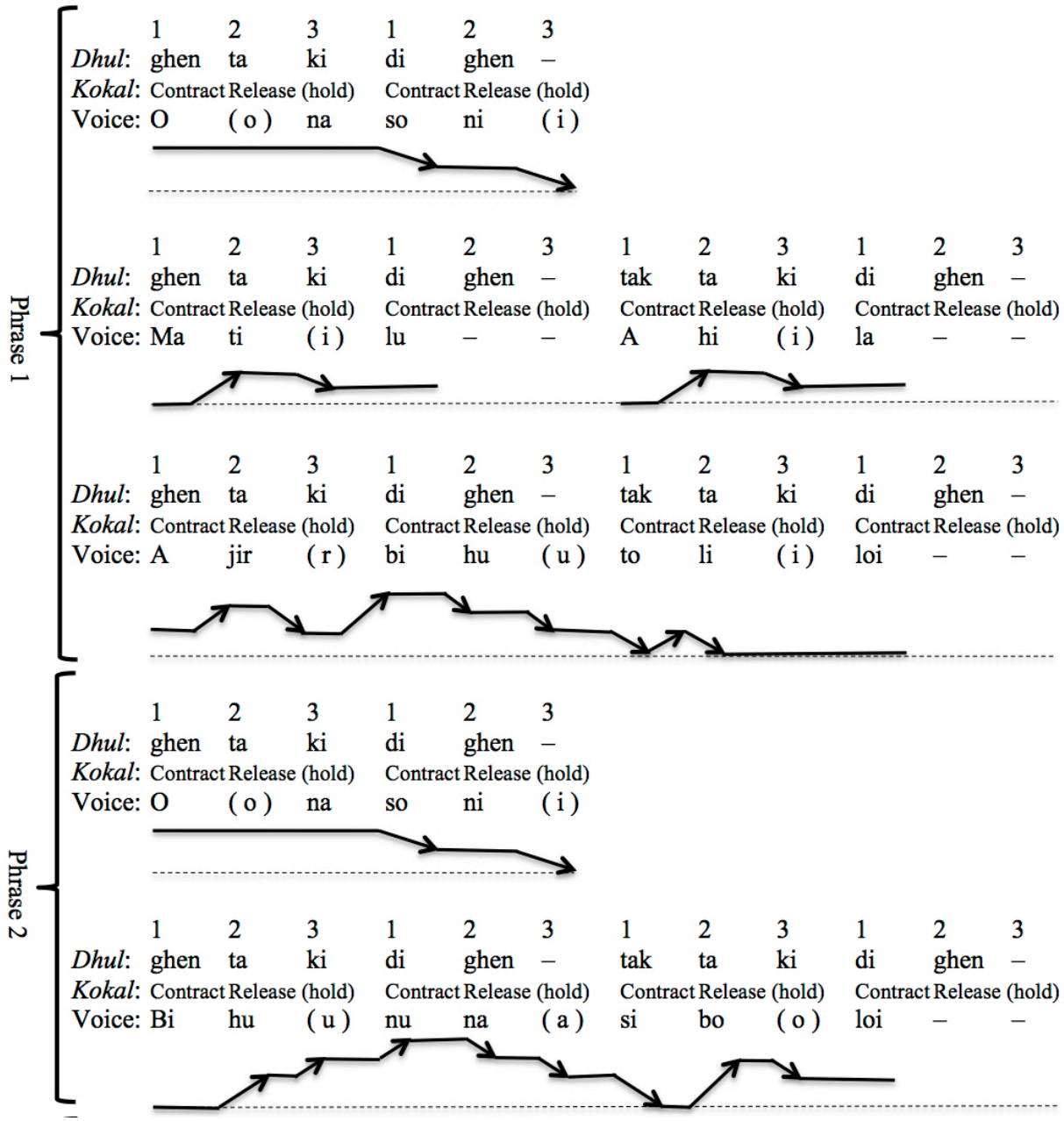

Diagram 1.1 – Linear diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, lyrics, and melody.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrases 1 and 2.

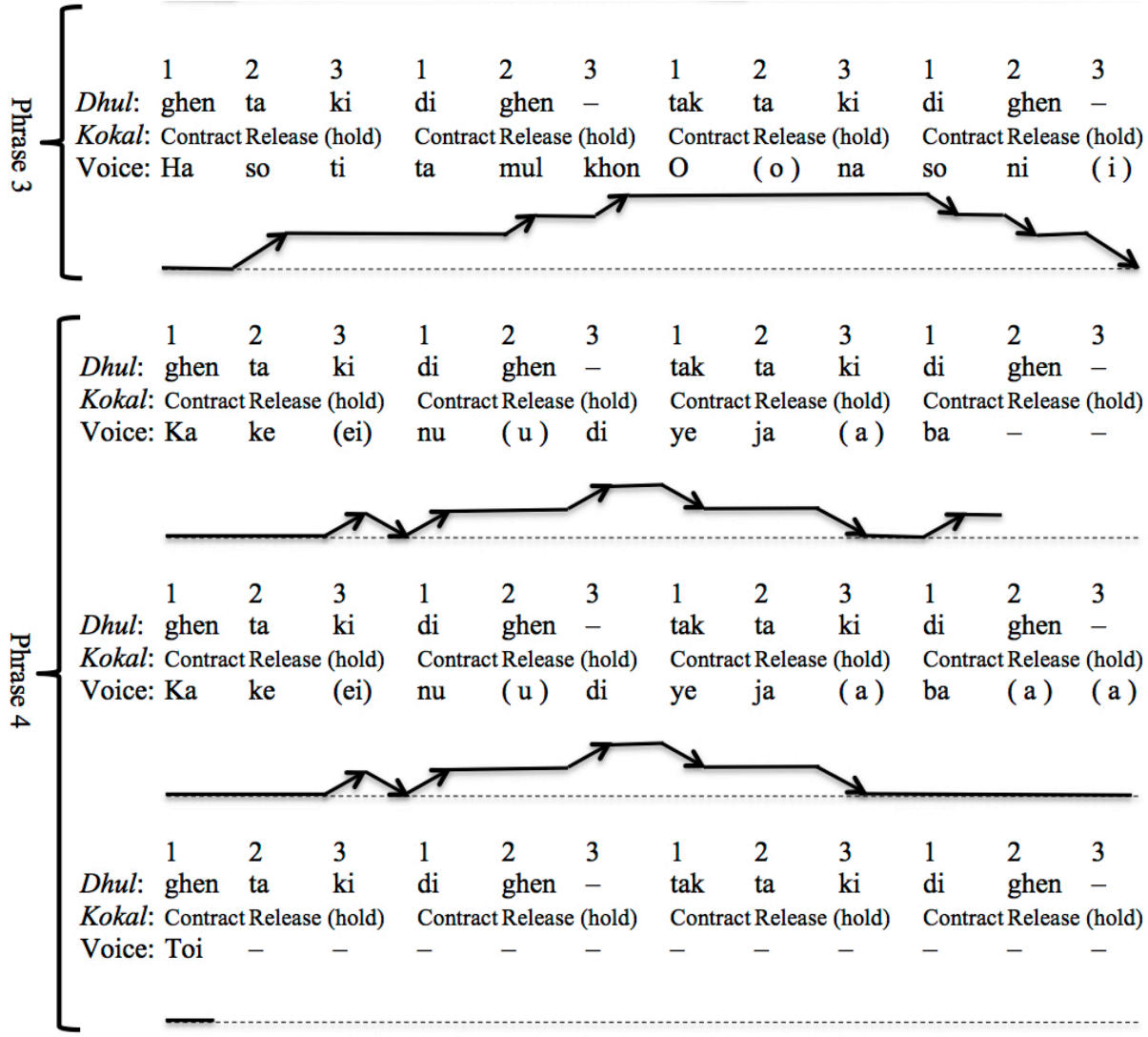

Diagram 1.2 – Linear diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, lyrics, and melody.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrases 3 and 4.

While this linear transcription should be helpful in demonstrating how rhythm, movement, and melodic contour emerge together through time during the first stanza of this song, it does not capture the cyclical nature of the rhythmic pattern. In order to convey this cyclical groove, I have transformed the first phrase of the first stanza into three separate circles, wrapping each linear progression around into a circle. The first of the three diagrams represents

the first six beats (*ghen taki di ghen*) with two *koṷkāl bhāngi* contractions, represented as six triangles within a hexagon, and the sung text "*O nāsoni*" (Diagram 1.3). The second of the three diagrams represents the following twelve beats (*ghen taki di ghen, tak taki di ghen*) with four *koṷkāl bhāngi* contractions, represented as twelve triangles within a hexagon, and the sung text "*mātilu, āhilā*" (Diagram 1.4). The third of the three diagrams is the same as the second, except the sung text has changed to "*Ājir bihutolī loi*" (Diagram 1.5).

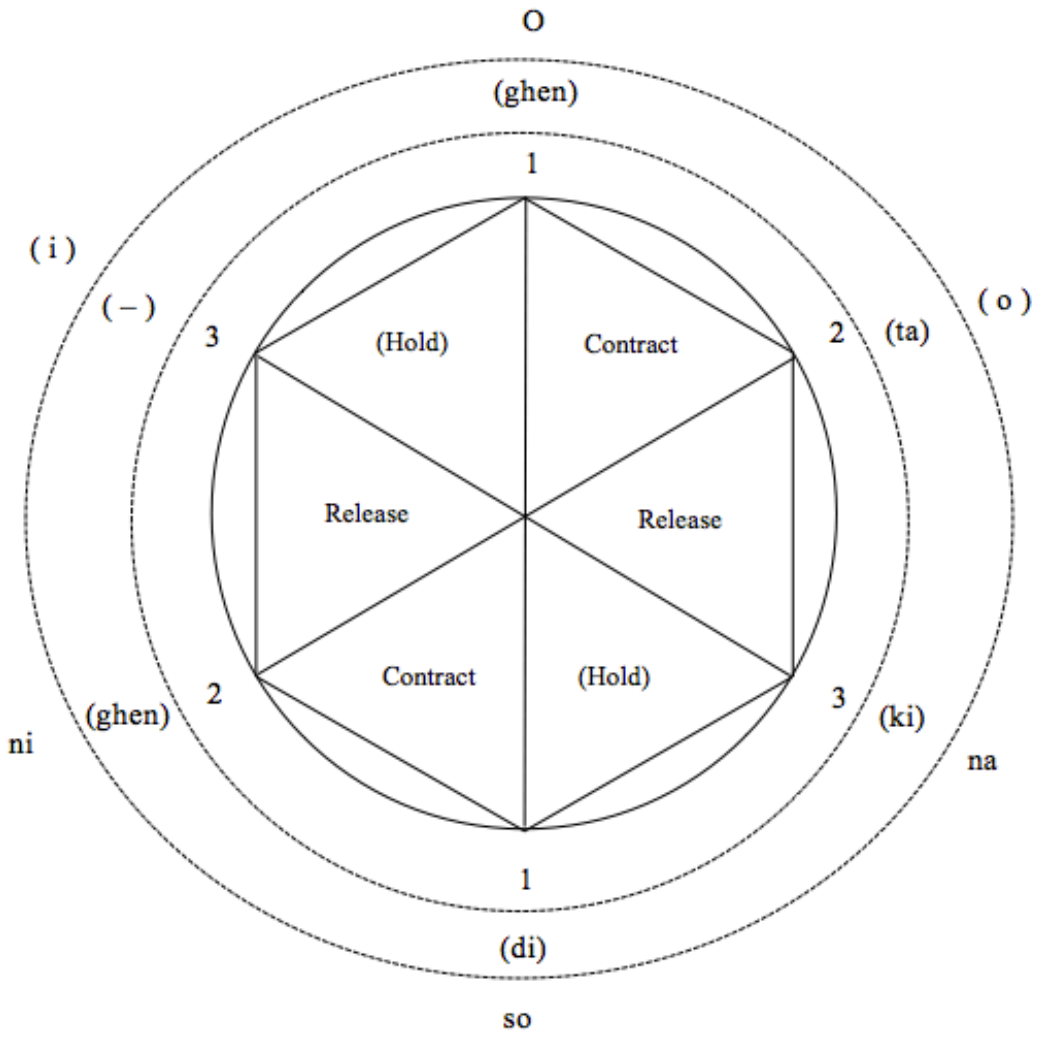

Diagram 1.3 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Part 1.

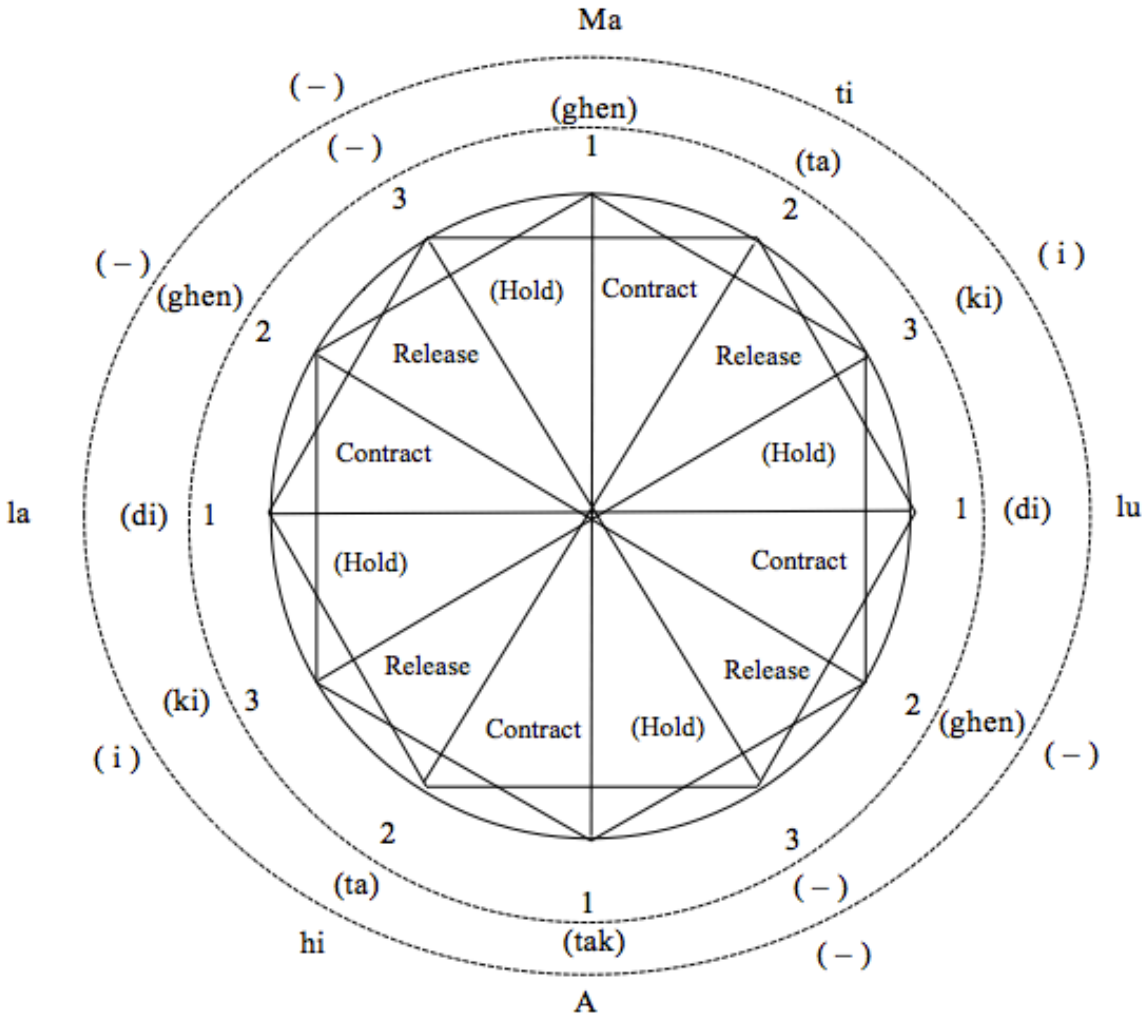

Diagram 1.4 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Part 2.

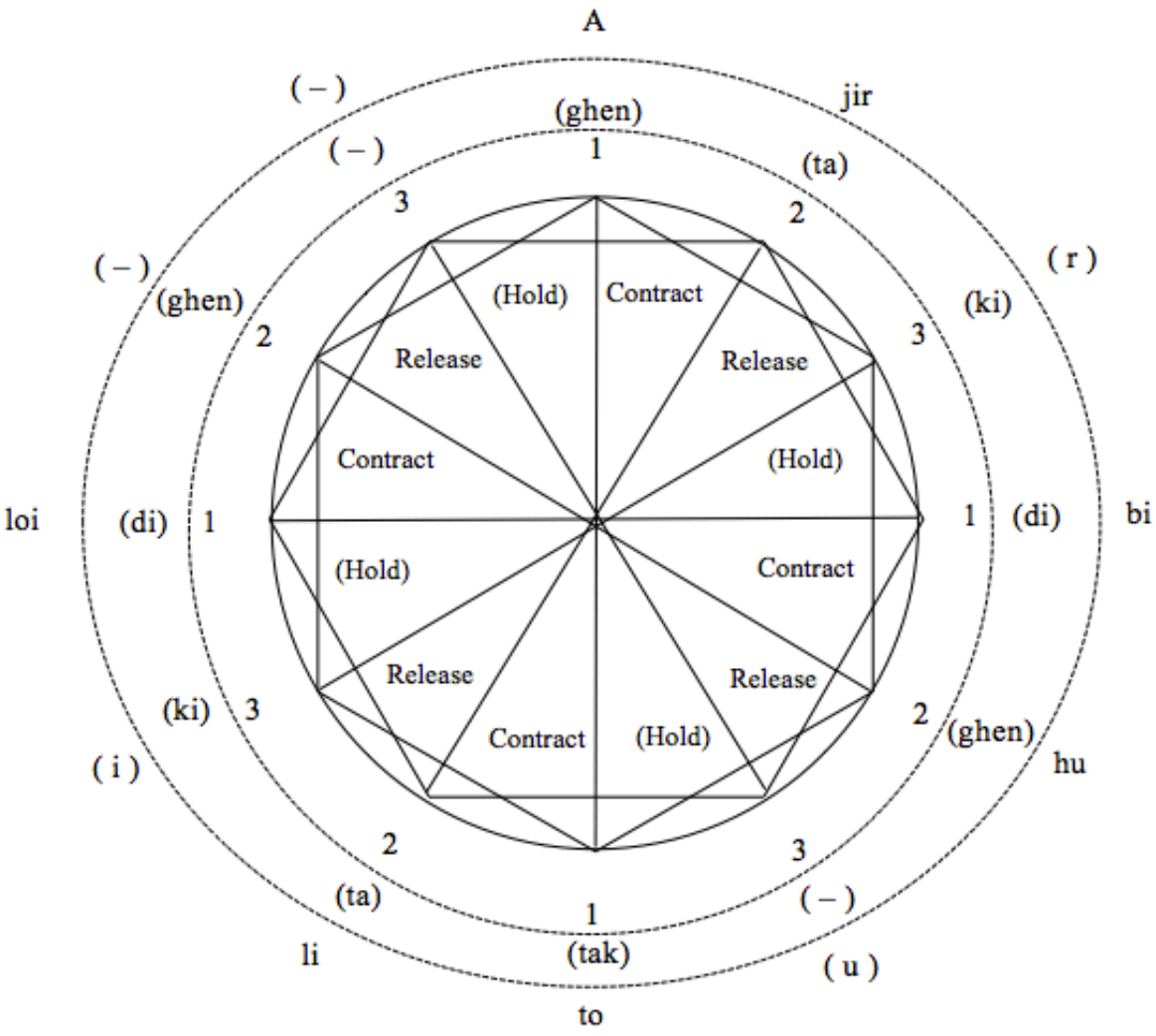

Diagram 1.5 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Part 3.

These three individual circles combined make up the first phrase of the first stanza of this song. In the following diagram, I have used arrows to show the flow of sounded movement to give the reader a sense of the complexity of events happening in the performer's body during this first phrase of 30 beats length (Diagram 1.6).

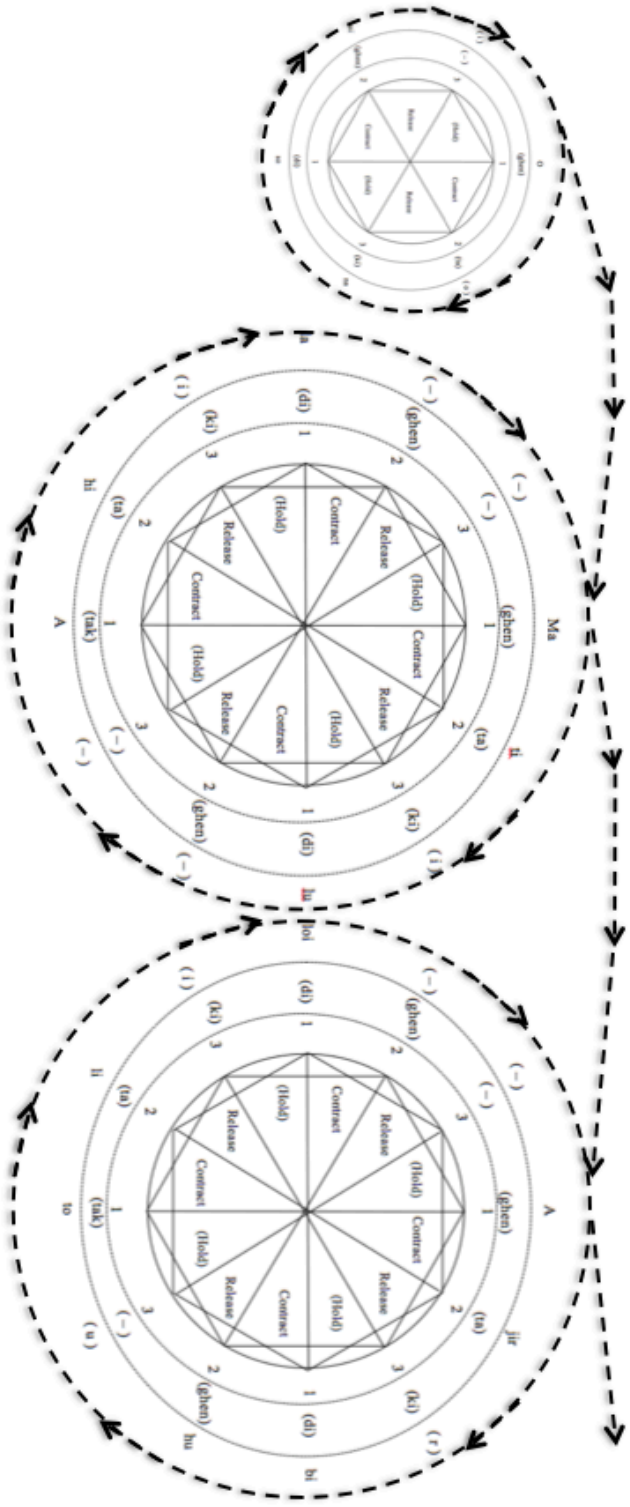

Diagram 1.6 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Parts 1-3 combined.

The subsequent diagram incorporates melodic movement into the circular diagram, where lower pitches are located closer to the inside of each circle and higher pitches are located increasingly outside of each circle (Diagram 1.7).

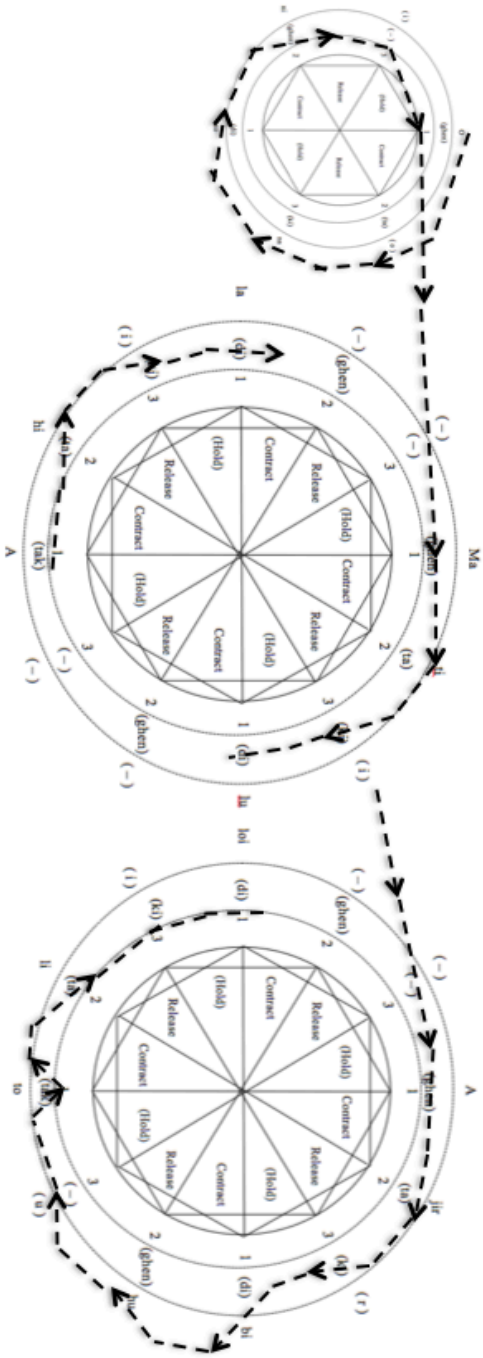

Diagram 1.7 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, lyrics, and melody.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1, Phrase 1, Parts 1-3 combined.

The final diagram in this transcription example represents the entire stanza, progressing through all four phrases to match the original linear diagram (Diagram 1.8).

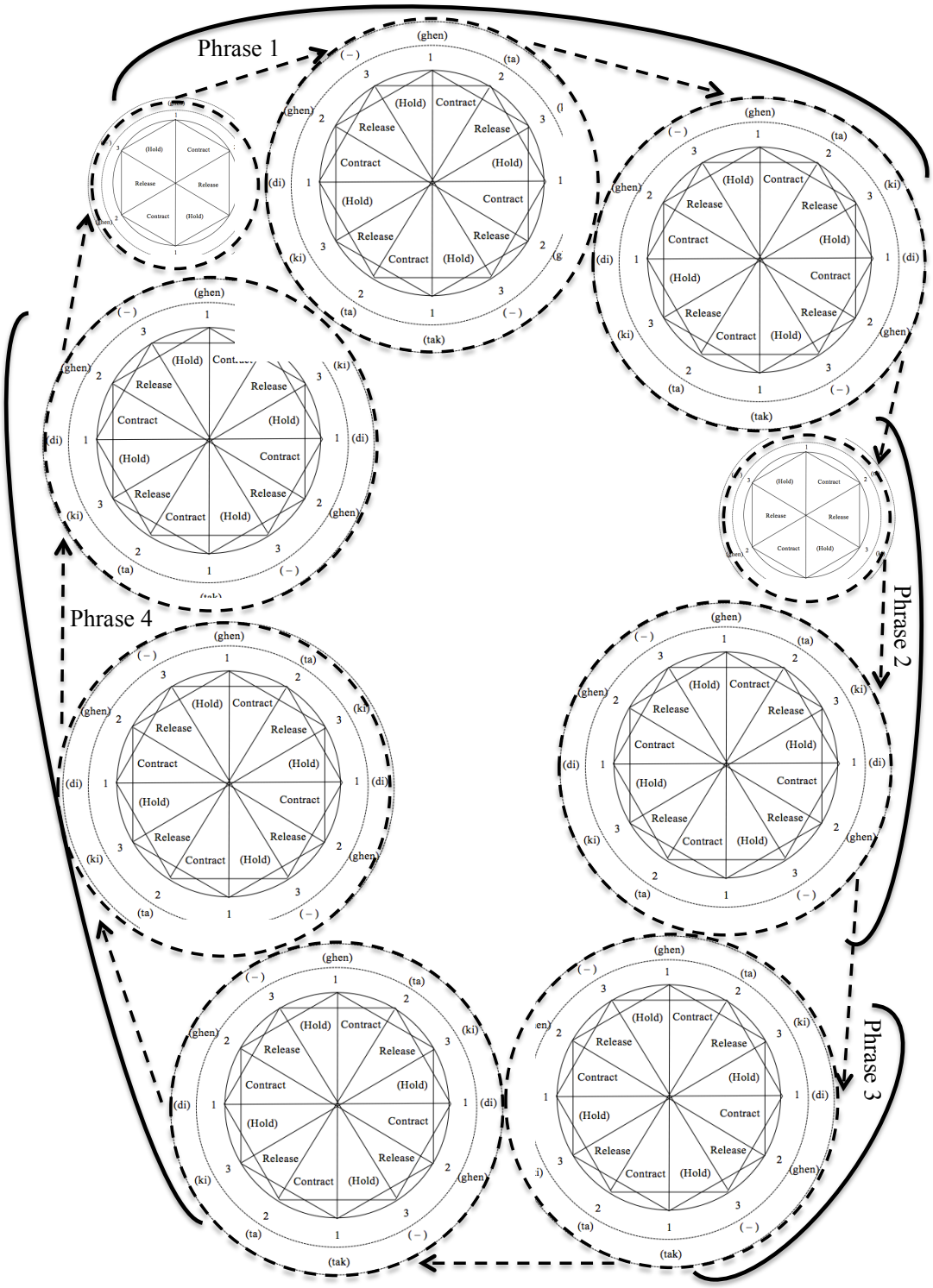

Diagram 1.8 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm, dance movements, and lyrics.
"*O nāsoni*" *bihu* song, Stanza 1.

I find this last diagram the most useful because it depicts the truly cyclical nature of *bihu* performance, which could feasibly go on for hours as this pattern shows, stanza after stanza. The last twelve beats of the stanza are reserved for the transitional rhythmic sequence that marks the beginning of a new stanza of the same song, a new song, an instrumental interlude, a *bihu zuzonā* song, or the end of the performance.

In performance, singers normally adjust *bihu* song lyrics in order to align them with the rhythmic pattern by adding small filler syllables that also add emphasis to the song's meaning. For example, in the song "*O nāsoni*," the phrase "*bihu nāsiboloi*" (to dance *bihu*) becomes "*bihu nu nāsiboloi*" (to dance bihu) and "*Kāk diye jābā*" (To whom will you give it?) becomes "*Kākei nu diye jābā*" (To whom will you give it?). In contrast to the above example, the *bihu zuzonā* song style is accompanied by a drumroll (*rogor*) instead of the typical rhythmic pattern, and the lyrics are sung in four melismatic phrases. *Zuzonā* usually functions as an introductory piece that opens a *bihu* performance, and also as an interlude that connects a sequence of metered *bihu* songs in performance. The same stanza from "*O nāsoni*" can be performed in *zuzonā* style, but since there would be no rhythmic pattern, the extra filler syllables ("nu" and "ei") would not be needed to mark the beat. Those syllables would be dropped, and instead few extra "o" and "oi" syllables could be added to prolong the phase. I have transcribed "*O nāsoni*" in *zuzonā* style below in a linear diagram (Diagram 1.9) and a circular diagram (Diagram 1.10, Audio 1.2).

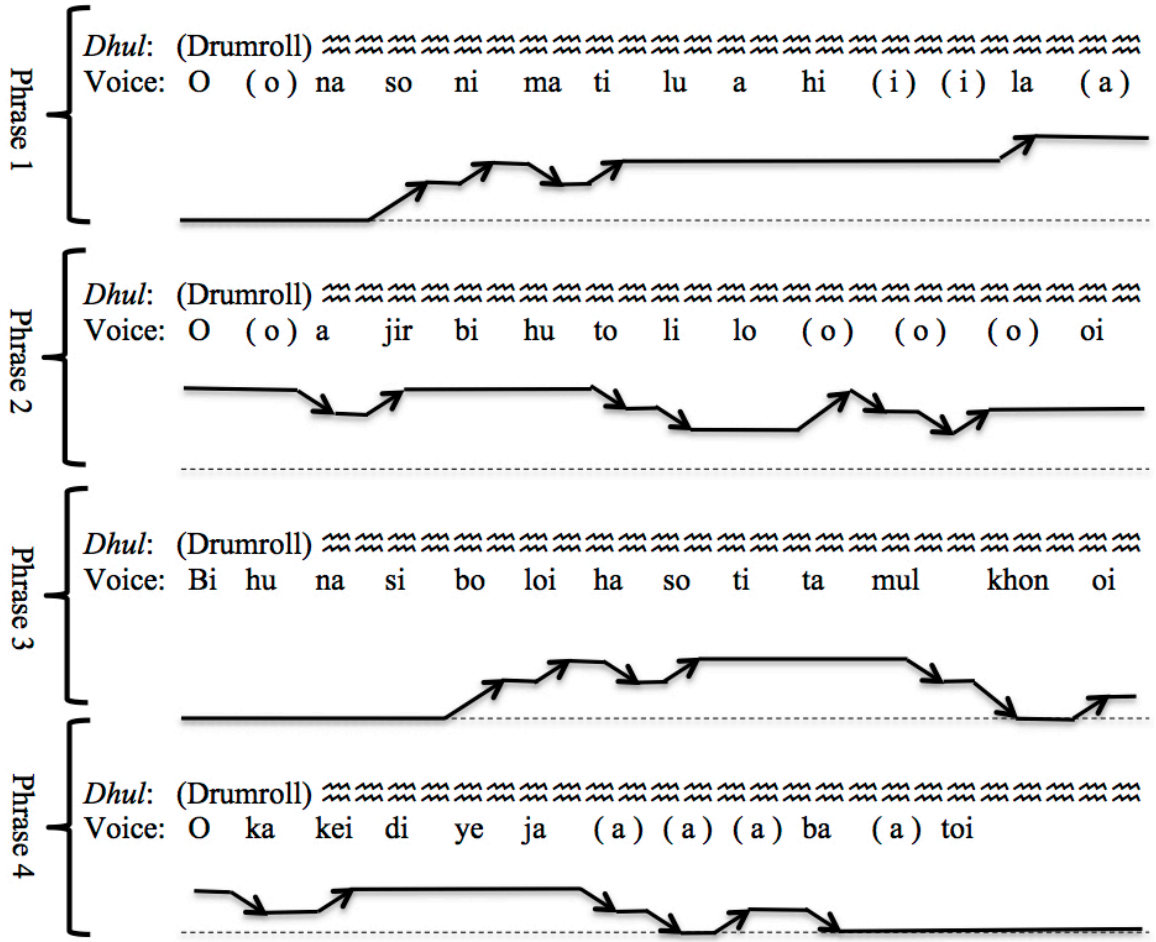

Diagram 1.9 – Linear diagram of "*O nāsoni*" in *bihu zuzonā* form.

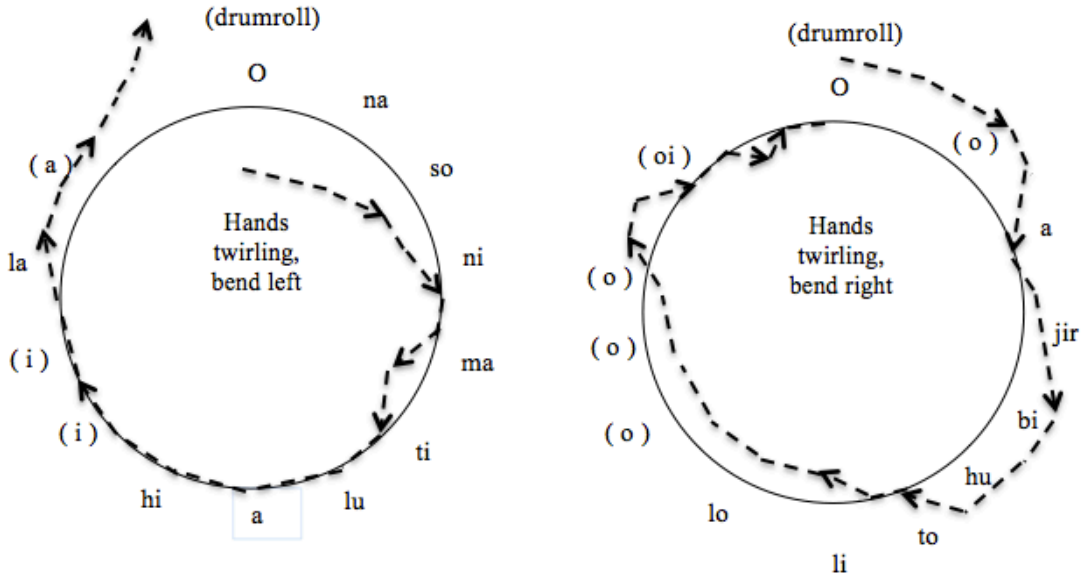

Diagram 1.10 – Circular diagram of "*O nāsoni*" in *bihu zuzonā* form.

Animating Bodies: Feminine "Attraction" and Athletic Masculinity

I woke up on a warm morning in mid-March at Dulumoni Saikia's home, a two-room structure with smooth, hard-packed earthen floors and thatched bamboo walls weatherproofed with mud and an aluminum roof. As soon as Dulumoni and her friend Priyanka Das realized I was awake, they joined me cross-legged on the bed, clearing away the mosquito net. I knew they were both members of Kāsi Jun, and I asked about their experiences performing with the group. Our conversations often started with my asking a question but ended up spiraling into a full-blown gossip session where Dulumoni and Priyanka would retell stories of past interactions with *bihuwā* and *nāsoni* friends, parents, *bihu* judges, and other authority figures (Figure 1.8).

Figure 1.8 – Priyanka Das and Dulumoni Saikia at the Saikias' home in Kenduguri village near Silapathar, Assam. March 16, 2014. Photo by the author.

For both Dulumoni (16) and Priyanka (17), this was the third *bihu* season performing with Kāsi Jun. We spoke about rehearsals, which normally begin around one month before the first day of *bihu* at a large grassy field next to Silapathar High School. Due to the outdoor location of these

rehearsals, passersby often wander in to observe, drawn by the sound of the *ḍhul* drum and the sung melodies that carry across the school field out into the streets of Silapathar. It is in this context that onlookers often speak to the performers, interacting casually as routines are worked out, as choreography is arranged to match songs that are selected, and vice versa. For Priyanka, this exchange was an important moment of seeking validation, since as a group, the performers do not usually receive individual attention when performing on stage. The *nāsoni*-s and *bihuwā*-s are more visible as individual performers during these public outdoor rehearsals as they debate about movements, *sāpor* rhythmic patterns, and song lyrics. During a stage performance, especially at a competition, *nāsoni*-s are expected to perform as a unit, adhering to the predetermined choreography.

During our conversation, Priyanka complained that even though she practices and performs all the dance movements correctly, she does not get positive feedback from onlookers during rehearsals. She dances *kok̆āl bhāngi* (breaking the waist), but somehow it fails to catch the attention of the passersby that come to watch the group rehearse. She compared herself to a friend Porismita who used to perform with Kāsi Jun, noting that everyone loved Porismita and praised her during rehearsal because she showed the moves so clearly (*sposto*). But when it came time for the stage performance, Porismita made mistakes and forgot the choreography. The informal rehearsal time where outsiders would wander in, observe, and comment, seemed to matter more to Priyanka than the staged performance because of the individual attention given to specific *nāsoni*-s. Porismita's performance, although technically inconsistent, conveyed a kind of expressivity that attracted the attention and praise of onlookers, while Priyanka's technically accurate performance earned no special praise. This experience led Priyanka to an important insight, which I believe is a central tension in the contemporary *bihu* performance industry.

While judging committees have endeavored to enforce standardized choreographic and musical conventions in order to present *bihu* as a sophisticated, modern folk art, everyday people in Assam have not necessarily bought into this agenda. For many people, like the spectators at Kāsi Jun's rehearsal, individual expression and passion are more desirable than precision and conformity. But these are more difficult to evaluate on a quantitative judging scale. *Bihu* performers are constantly balancing competing demands of technical ability and expressivity.

In addition to concerns about a balance between technical ability and expressivity in performance, Priyanka and Dulumoni's comments during our conversations were often focused on others' perceptions of their bodies. After speaking with directors of a few different *bihu* troupes, it became apparent to me that Priyanka and Dulumoni might have been responding not only to mediatized ideals of beauty featured in advertisements and serials broadcast over their small television sets (explored in more depth in Chapter 4), but also to the particular ideal qualities that *bihu* troupe directors look for in participants. Mridul Chutia, who directs a *bihu* troupe based in nearby Dhemaji town called *Dhemaji Oikāntik* told me after a rehearsal that a few of his troupe's *nāsoni*-s would not return to perform because they were engaged to be married. As the *bihu* season approached, Mridul began a search to replace these "lost" girls.[6] He described what he had in mind: "Round face, not too fat but not skinny. She should be healthy. Tall is a good thing. She should be beautiful. She needs to have that attraction." When I asked if it also matters that a boy should be good looking, Mridul replied, "No, he should be healthy, he should mainly be spontaneous." While both male and female participants should be "healthy," meaning not skinny, the emphasis for *nāsoni*-s is on beauty and attraction, while *bihuwā*-s must stand out through the spontaneity of their performance technique. These local discourses of

[6] This is a common euphemism expressed in *bihu* songs – girls who leave the *bihu* troupe to get married as are referred to as "lost" – *Āmāre nāsoni keneke herāle? Bihutolī mukoli hol.* (How did our *nāsoni* get lost? The *bihutolī* is empty.)

gendered expectations for the performing body resonate with scholarship on dance more broadly that demonstrates the gendered problematic of "muscularity" (Albright 1997) and the "profundity" of seemingly superficial physical categories (Liu 2013).

I asked Binanda Boruah, Kāsi Jun's director, to compare three of his troupe's *nāsoni*-s — Priyanka, Dulumoni and Sima — in order to find out what criteria he used to distinguish desirable attributes, since all three girls had joined Kāsi Jun three years earlier and were around the same age. Binanda told me that Dulumoni has a good dance technique but is too skinny, Priyanka has a good voice but is too short, while Sima has good "body looks" – meaning her height, the shape of her body, combined with the shape of her eyes and face make her an ideal *nāsoni*. According to Binanda, there was only one problem that needed to be resolved before the beginning of the *bihu* performance season in mid-April. I learned about this issue as I sat at a small table with Binanda and Sima's mother late one evening while Sima slept in the next room. I wrote about my impressions from this discussion in my journal the next day:

> *Sima's mother kept saying these things to Binanda about Sima while she was sleeping in the next room, and I felt like Sima could hear, because you can hear everything in these houses from room to room. Sima's mother was saying, "Oh she doesn't do anything, she just eats and sleeps, she doesn't put effort into anything. She eats a whole kg of meat, she's getting really fat, what should I do?" She was apparently asking Binanda for advice on how to raise her teenage daughter. I felt really uncomfortable. At one point I thought that her expressing concern over her daughter's appearance and ambition seems like she is actually expressing her desire for others to know that she's trying her best, but her daughter isn't self-motivated – playing the role of the helpless, concerned parent with the fat, lazy daughter. I just feel so bad when I hear such things, especially when the girl is within earshot.*

Therefore it seems, beyond technical and expressive ability and the form of the physical body that performs these abilities, another kind of performance is indexed here. The everyday comportment of the *nāsoni* is under scrutiny even outside the context of rehearsal and

performance of music and dance. She must not only strive to embody certain ideal qualities through singing and dancing, but also through her ambition for success and restraint in consumption. My discussion thus far reveals how peers and elders reinforce these ideals. Following Mridul Chutiya's above formulation for *bihu* performance, where the ideal *bihuwā* is spontaneous and the ideal *nāsoni* embodies a certain "attraction" while maintaining choreographic form, it becomes clear that this expectation that boys should stand out while girls should blend in applies across the performative domains of everyday life. In recent years though, for young women, the goal of performing as one *nāsoni* among many in a *bihu* troupe like Kāsi Jun or Dhemaji Oikāntik has become trumped by the higher aim of performing as a competitive soloist (*bihuwotī*).

The *Bihuwotī*: Solo Female Competitive Performing

Bihuwotī competitions are open to individual *nāsoni* contestants of a certain age, usually 13 and above (i.e. *gābhoru* –menstruating but not yet married). *Bihuwotī,* and other solo female competitions for younger girls (*xoru* "small" *bihuwotī, konmāni, semonīyā*, etc.) are distinguished from other competitive categories which include all *bihu* troupe members. These all-night competitions are held across the state of Assam during the month of *bohāg* (mid-April to mid-May), but are mainly concentrated in the northeastern region known as Upper Assam *(Ujoni Oxom*). This region is widely agreed to be the historical site of *bihu*'s origin. Many people who live in Upper Assam also consider it to be the place where the Assamese language is spoken most clearly and authentically, in contrast to the western region of Lower Assam where proximity to West Bengal and Bangladesh has resulted in mixing between Assamese and Bengali languages.

In *bihuwotī* competitions, the *nāsoni* is expected to mask the effort she expends during her performance. One of the first questions a judge asks is often phrased as, "*Bhāgor lāgise ne*?" Are you tired? The correct answer is no. Judges often comment on how the solo female competitor needs to work on her stamina in order to maintain the proper poise and pace in her dancing as well as the fluidity of breath flow and tunefulness of melody as she moves between dancing around the stage and singing at the microphone. In contrast, the performance of the group of *bihuwā*-s who accompany her is meant to display and celebrate their effort in an athletic embodiment of idealized masculinity. Jumps, hops, squats, and twirls of the drum stick mark the bihuwā's performance as his arms fly in a frenzy. *Bihuwā*-s call out to each other during the performance, shouting and hollering with wide smiles.

I spoke at length with Priyanka and Dulumoni about their experiences competing in the solo female *bihuwotī* competitions. Their enthusiasm and excitement about bihu were palpable during these conversations as they narrated encounters with other *nāsoni*-s, *bihuwā*-s, parents, and other authority figures. They also critically and creatively reflected on gender and sexuality during these conversations. During a particularly memorable conversation, Priyanka and Dulumoni talked about the change they experienced crossing over from the children's category (*konmāni*) into the *bihuwotī* category for *gābhoru* or mature girls. Dulumoni lamented, "In *konmāni* competitions, wherever I competed, I would win. Now I'm getting *ḍāngor* (big, older), and my body is getting…" She lifted her hands as if cupping a large ball and waved them side to side, indicating her emerging curves, and continued, "Now I don't feel like dancing in front of the boys." It is harder for Dulumoni to win in the *bihuwotī* category because her body is under more scrutiny on stage, and she doesn't feel like dancing in front of the boys who would be watching her.

Priyanka recalled a bihu song in *jurā-nām* (pair-song) style which she once performed in a *bihuwotī* competition. In *jurā-nām*, women and men sing alternating stanzas to each other in a flirtatious, teasing style. After the first line of a *jurā-nām*, the singer pauses and everyone around shouts "*Hoi*!" ("Yes!" or "It's true!") to affirm the claim made in the *jurā-nām*. A *jāt-nām* section normally follows after the second line – the song refrain that is repeated at the end of each stanza. In this case the *jāt-nām* was "*Seleng bākor oi, rāngoli modāror pāt*" ("Oh beautiful dress, oh colorful leaf") and is unrelated to the meaning of the *jurā-nām*, but functions as a link between different stanzas. Since it is a very well-known *jāt-nām*, everyone around can join in singing together, as the other women in the room did when Priyanka sang during our conversation (Video 1.2).

Eii — pāsfale jeurā kune āxā kore posile suri ni khāi [Response: *Hoi hoi hoi!*]
(Who will trust an old bamboo fence? Thieves will use it for cooking!) (Yes! True!)

Ei posile suri ni khāi [Response: *O hoi!*]
(Thieves will use it for cooking!) (So true!)

Pokiyā lorāloi kune āxā kore? Du dinote pāhori jāe!
(Who will trust a "mature" boy? He will forget you in two days!)

Seleng bākor oi, rāngoli modāror pāt
(Oh beautiful dress, oh colorful leaf)

When Priyanka sang the phrase "*pokiyā lorā loi*" (mature boy) she paused to exclaim "*Rā rā kenekuā*!" (What how?!) before she continued singing. This break and exclamation marked a particularly poignant moment in her spontaneous performance, which was otherwise sung without much flourish or embellishment. Priyanka's exclamation communicated a sense of embarrassment at having been required to sing the phrase that literally translates to "ripe" boy, in public as part of the competition, since it was chosen not by her, but by the *bihu* troupe's

director. Priyanka described this competitive performance experience as an uncomfortable one, where she was required to sing an embarrassing phrase, asking us, "Can you believe it?!" She went on to explain that a boy approached her after her performance and asked for her mobile number. The significance of the song's meaning and the following story struck me an example of how the narrative themes of *bihu* are creatively interpreted by performers in their daily lives. The song Priyanka performed at this competition argues that an old bamboo fence is like a mature boy (i.e. a teenage boy) because both are unreliable and untrustworthy. Young bamboo is stiff and makes a sturdy fence, while an old bamboo fence becomes dry and brittle, and therefore is easy for thieves to steal and use for their cooking fires. Similarly, the song argues that teenage boys can't be trusted, because one day they will love you and two days later they will forget you. Priyanka narrated her interaction with the boy who asked for her number, saying, "I told him, 'I don't know you!' Give him my number? Whatever!"

My interactions with young women like Priyanka and Dulumoni is influenced by the work of Jennifer Coates (2013) who demonstrated how the talk of adolescent girls (ages 12-15) takes on a widening range of discourses and voices as they mature. While these discourses emerged as conflicting rather than liberating in Coates' study, she showed how girls are social agents who resist and subvert these discourses instead of merely being shaped by them (Coates 2013). Priyanka's discursive use of song in the example above demonstrates how *bihu* serves not only as a way to role-play romantic intimacy through the performance of music and dance, for example by moving in sync with a young man, but also as a mode of voicing "adult" themes in everyday speech. When Priyanka reflects on the experience of singing an embarrassing phrase in discussion with Dulumoni and I, she is engaging in what Laurel Kamada refers to as the "fun-play of femininity" (Kamada 2010, 198).

Only recently has an intense focus on individual female *bihu* performers gained momentum, most likely in tandem with competitive modes of performance made possible by new arenas such as state-sponsored and corporate-sponsored festival stages, the comingling of acting careers, celebrity stardom and *bihu* performance, and more recently *bihu* reality television competitions. These recent developments in infrastructure and the associated shift in ideology related to modes of consumer citizenship, which I explore in more detail in Chapter 4, have opened up possibilities for young women and men to imagine different paths for their futures (Lukose 2009). But the pursuit of these possibilities also increases young women's vulnerability in a patriarchal society where threats to normative power hierarchies are often met with violence, and therefore young women's parents, friends, and peers often take up protective roles (Ram, Strohschein and Gaur 2014).

The Guardian: Protecting and Promoting the *Gābhoru* Performer

Most parents of the *nāsoni*-s in Kāsi Jun grew up in this region in the 1970s and '80s, when *bihu* was just emerging as a respectable pursuit for people of all classes to perform, having suffered from considerable stigma under colonial rule. This shift coincided with the emergence of the *bihutolī* as a venue for *bihu* performance. Sima's mother Dipali Gogoi spoke to me about what it was like during her childhood growing up in a village near Betoni Pam. Dipali described to me how, like many other girls at that time, she dreamed of dancing *bihu* but her parents did not allow it. Other women of Dipali's generation told me similar stories featuring parents who were suspicious of this emerging form of public femininity that was not yet sanctioned by cultural authorities who drove public discourse on maintaining the purity of Assamese womanhood. As parents, Dipali and Mintu Gogoi wholeheartedly support their own daughter and younger son's participation in the *bihu* industry. They invest financially by purchasing costumes

and ornaments, paying for instrument repairs and petrol for Mintu's motorcycle, and by regularly feeding the entire troupe in the early morning after all-night performances. They invest their time, as Mintu accompanies Sima to rehearsals and performances, acting as guardian for the troupe (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9 – Mintu Gogoi (far right) acts as guardian during Kāsi Jun *bihu* rehearsal at Silapathar Bohagi Utsav field. March 27, 2014. Photo by the author.

Every spring, leading up to the *bihu* season, Kāsi Jun experiences a change in membership. One of the major obstacles *bihu* troupes face is the high turnover of female participants. Every year some participants return, some do not, and some new members join. Some factors influencing a young person's decision to participate relate to how much time a person has to rehearse and perform, how good a voice someone has, or how well they dance, or how attractive they are. Debojoni "Moon" Konwar left Kāsi Jun when she started pursuing a college degree, and her younger sister Pallabi joined soon after in order to take her place. But

this year Pallabi was only able to participate in the stage competitions that happened at the very end of the season, because her exams were scheduled later than the previous year.

Simimoni Borgohain also left Kāsi Jun. When I spoke to her about it, she told me it was because her mother would not allow her to continue performing. I assumed she had left after beginning her studies in education at Silapathar College. But when I brought up the issue with her mother, asking why she had asked Simi to leave Kāsi Jun, she told me that after Simi's father passed away, it wouldn't be right for Simi to continue performing. This highlights an important issue: that a young person's participation in a *bihu* troupe is often a source of pride for the performer's family, but it can also be considered disrespectful to celebrate publicly when a family is mourning. The performer's responsibility to represent not only him or herself but also the reputation of his or her family is also reflected in concerns about the proximity of the person to a marriageable age or marriage arrangement. During these times, it becomes clear that the performing body, especially in the case of young women, can become a source of shame because of the unbridled exuberance expressed during *bihu* performance, which might be interpreted unfavorably by families of potential marriage matches as immodesty.

Because of the high turnover of female participants, when rehearsals start in early March, Kāsi Jun's recruiter Moina Baruah scouts out which girls have become *gābhoru* (literally "body-filled," meaning mature or adolescent) and visits the home of each prospective *nāsoni*. He enters the *sutāl* of each young woman's home, and formally asks her parents for permission to invite her as a member of Kāsi Jun. In this community, a girl's first menstruation is a public affair that is celebrated in the style of a wedding accompanied by coming-of-age seclusion and purification rituals (discussed in Chapter 2). Everyone in the girl's family and village are made aware of her transition to adolescence. As the mother of one *nāsoni* told me with pride, "Everyone gets to

know." Therefore it makes sense that Moina could easily find out which girls have become *gābhoru* or mature, and their families might likely be expecting a recruitment visit from him.

Some parents refuse to allow their *gābhoru* daughters to join Kāsi Jun because rehearsals happen in the evening, and once the performance season begins, the troupe travels and performs almost every day until the early morning for the whole month of *bohāg* (mid-April to mid-May). Not only are parents anxious about allowing young women to socialize, dance and sing with young men they *know,* but also the getting-to and returning-home-from these meetings are of concern. Media attention to violence against women has amped up discussions about safety, even as young women are increasingly being encouraged to pursue higher levels of education. Attending college, for example, often requires a great distance of travel. Silapathar College is around 1.5 hours via bicycle from Betoni Pam – one of the only modes of transportation a young woman may access without needing a companion traveler. Anxiety about safety is mitigated by the presence of a guardian, be it a parent, an elder sibling, an extended family relative, or an elder trustworthy friend.[7] For Sima Gogoi, her father Mintu acts as guardian, accompanying her to every rehearsal and performance with Kāsi Jun.

Dulumoni's elder brother Dulen Saikia performs with Kāsi Jun, so he looks out for Dulumoni's safety, but Priyanka has only a younger brother who is too young to serve as her guardian. Priyanka instead relies on a stand-in elder brother, Likhon Gogoi, who plays *ḍhul* with Kāsi Jun and whom her mother has approved. This season brought considerable doubt regarding whether or not Likhon would be able to return to perform *bihu* with Kāsi Jun from Kerala where he had found employment, making Priyanka's chances of performing very slim. As I spoke with Priyanka about her relationship with her guardian, she brought up her experience of living in a

[7] *Abhibhawok* is the Assamese word for guardian, but those I spoke with used the English word (pronounced "gār-djen") in everyday speech.

hostel a few years ago, which presented another layer of restriction to her mobility during the *bihu* performance season. Although the hostel and school were near her home in Santipur, a small village near Silapathar, her parents arranged for her to live there because the hostel offered to subsidize room and board for resident students and to supervise their evening studies. Priyanka recounted that during *bihu* season, the hostel warden wouldn't let her out at night to rehearse with Kāsi Jun. She narrated the story in a fast, tumbling stream of words, conveying the distressed emotional state she experienced at the time to Dulumoni and me (Video 1.3):

> When I hear the sound of the *ḍhul*, I can't stay! I cried so much I felt like dancing but in front of Madam I couldn't say anything! She just wouldn't let me go and that was it. After that my mother came to take me, I cried and cried but Madam wouldn't give me permission. Many, many days I didn't get to dance, isn't it true? [to Dulumoni] I didn't get to dance during that time. Crying and crying, the *ḍhul* was playing on and on, and I kept trying to sneak out from there. There was a struggle with Ma'am. "Please let me dance, won't you, I'll go I won't stay in school I feel like dancing!" I cried, so much I cried, she didn't give permission. I said, "I'll go Madam!" I put clothes in a bag, opened the gate... "Let me go won't you, I just want to dance!" I said something or the other. She stopped me....

Themes including risk for young women performers and the anxiety surrounding this liability emerge here. Through Priyanka's story, we learn that even though her mother was in favor of letting her participate in *bihu* rehearsals, she had already turned over guardianship to the hostel warden, who decided against letting Priyanka go out. At the beginning of the excerpt, Priyanka poetically voices her frustration by using the phrase "*Ḍhulor māt xunu moi thākibo nuwārim!*" (When I hear the sound of the *ḍhul*, I can't stay! i.e. I can't sit still) a common phrase in *bihu* song. In fact, the third phrase of the *bihu* song Kāsi Jun performed during a *sutāl* performance which I described earlier in this chapter featured a similar phrase, "*Ḍhul pe̍pā bājile, robo moi nuwāru*" (When the *ḍhul* drum and *pe̍pā* horn are playing, I can't stop, i.e. I can't keep from joining in). By intoning this phrase, Priyanka frames her emotional desires

through *bihu* lyrics in everyday speech. I take from this interaction with Priyanka a sense of the recursive temporality for which *bihu* provides discursive space. This space, the *bihu* atmosphere, certainly emerges during the month of *bohāg*, but is also evoked throughout the year when people gather, sharing an intimacy that resonates through bodies, sounds, and memories.

Āmār Suwālī: "Our Girl" Competing on the Proscenium Stage

As Kāsi Jun members move through the *bihu* season each spring, their *nāsoni*-s compete against each other in *bihuwotī* competitions at *bihutolī*-s in the villages and towns surrounding Betoni Pam. The *bihuwā*-s of Kāsi Jun support the individual *nāsoni*-s as per competition rules, performing on *ḍhul*, *tāl,* and *pe̍pā,* and singing and dancing in an arc around her, as her performance is evaluated by the panel of judges. Sima Gogoi, whose *bihuwotī* performance was featured in the vignette that opened this chapter, competed at around ten different *bihutolī*-s during the 2014 *bihu* season. I traveled with Kāsi Jun to root for Sima on many of these occasions. The anxious excitement surrounding the *bihuwotī* competition was palpable late one night as Sima prepared to go on stage at a nearby village called Khona Mukh:

> Sima is nervous, wringing her hands and pacing around on the grass at the back corner of the *bihutolī* field. The stage looms large in the distance in front of us. Amplified *ḍhul* drum, *tāl* cymbals, *pe̍pā* double-reed buffalo horn, and voices boom from the speakers. Sima looks to her father Mintu Gogoi who holds her shawl, cardigan and a cloth bag containing her instruments — *gogonā* bamboo mouth harp, *xutulī* clay flute, and *ṭokā* bamboo clapper — the three instruments she will play during her routine. She reaches into the bag hanging on his arm and takes out the *gogonā*, touches it to her lips, strikes it with her thumb a few times to test its sound, and then inserts it into the space between her head and her tightly wound *khupā* (bun). The next competitor is announced, and her father starts walking across the field towards the stage. We follow, dodging people wandering around the field, some watching the stage, others lost in conversation. I am focused on Sima, wondering if I should wait until after she performs to ask her the myriad questions swirling around in my head, when Mintu turns to me and points towards the stage. Still focused on Sima, I don't pick up on Mintu's cue, and he says, gesturing this time with his head, "*Eijoni āmār suwālī*." (This is our girl.) I then realize that another member of Kāsi Jun is also competing for *bihuwotī* this evening. Gudu Gogoi has just taken the stage.

In my haste to learn more about Sima's experience as an individual *bihuwotī* contestant, I had overlooked the greater context in which her talent emerged — through growing up with Gudu and Dulumoni, her best friends, who learned to dance and sing *bihu* together under the care of Mintu Gogoi. His ownership of Gudu as "our girl" helped me to see the importance of Kāsi Jun as a locus of many different kinds of relationships. This ownership is poetically rendered in many *bihu* songs when the *bihuwā*-s sing in unison "*āmār nāsoni*" – our dancers. The same *bihuwā*-s that performed in support of Gudu's *bihuwotī* routine also performed for Sima. The consideration of these other relationships, Mintu as guardian, Sima and Gudu as childhood friends, and *bihuwā*-s as protectors and supporters of "our girls," changes the picture I imagined when beginning this project. The spontaneous, virile, sometimes naughty *bihuwā* and the blossoming, innocent, tentatively seductive *nāsoni* that I described earlier in this chapter as stock characters become multidimensional when situated within these webs of intimate relationships.

The families and wider communities of *bihu* performers emerge in this chapter as sites of intimacy that create seemingly contrasting discourses of individual freedom and social constraint. While I acknowledge to the importance of attending to how the intersection of these discourses exposes the ways in which intimate events reproduce gendered inequalities, I also seek to move beyond an interpretation of men and women, elders and youngers, and other binary opposing positions solely as structural antagonists. The spaces and moments of intimacy I have chosen to explore in this chapter, therefore, are oriented towards thinking about families, peer cohorts, and wider communities both as sites of pleasure and sharing, as well as sites of exploitation and inequality (Padilla et al 2007).

Patriarchal modes of control that limit young women's mobility must be understood as complex, dynamic and contingent in order to recognize the ways in which young women express

creative agency through building alliances, as I have demonstrated in this chapter. After spending time with Kāsi Jun, I recognize the ways in which guardians can also be critical advocates in facilitating young women's mobility. I originally considered Mintu's role in Sima's budding performance career as "chauffer," because he carries Sima on the back of his motorcycle to rehearsals and stays with her until the time comes to take her back home. But after spending time with Mintu and Sima at rehearsals, performances, and at home, I realized that the connotation of a "disengaged driver" did not adequately characterize his role in her performance activities. On the contrary, not only are Mintu and other guardians engaged, but they also care deeply about supporting and protecting the young women they 'guard.' Mintu Gogoi is an integral part of Kāsi Jun. He has seen the members grow up from childhood, and his presence is essential to their continued engagement in the troupe.

As sounded practice, *bihu* facilitates these dynamic alliances. Moving between the *sutāl* and the stage, the members of Kāsi Jun learn to navigate not only expectations for music and dance performance, but also social expectations regarding gender and sexuality as they spend late nights together and form intimate connections during this season. During a *sutāl* performance late one night, I got a sense of how the members of Kāsi Jun work together to protect each other at a festive time when home-brewed rice wine is flowing and young women are particularly vulnerable (Video 1.4):

> After about forty minutes at one *sutāl* in Junaki Nagar, Sima Gogoi and Bondita Das, Kāsi Jun's two best *nāsoni*-s, move to the center of the semicircle created by the *bihuwā*-s. All the other *nāsoni*-s have left to take a break. A man in a light blue security personnel shirt wanders in and starts dancing, making his way through the *bihuwā*-s into the middle of the *sutāl*. I watch from my seated position amidst the hosts and guests, noticing the man's slurred speech and unbalanced gait — he has been drinking. He dances his way closer to Sima and Bondita. Ever so subtly, three of the *bihuwā*-s, Debojit, Moina, and Dulen, surround him with wide smiles, positioning their bodies between him and the two girls as they continue dancing. The man takes a quick stride away from the *bihuwā*-s and ends up directly between the two girls, but

> they don't miss a beat. In sync, Sima and Bondita shift the orientation of their bodies to face away from him, while Debojit and Dulen smoothly corral the man in a different direction. Sima and Bondita share a knowing look, ever-smiling and poised.

This moment impressed me not only because of the flexibility of the *bihu* genre to accommodate such a wide variety of venues and contexts, but also the way in which events that might be considered "interruptions" become incorporated into the performance and even mobilized as opportunities to demonstrate skill. At the same time, the relationships between the members of Kāsi Jun not only functioned to maintain the pace and intensity of the music and dance, but also to shield the *nāsoni*-s from unwanted proximity to a drunken man. The troupe emerges as a dynamic network of belonging, embedded in local community relations, where young people from a small group of villages come together to fulfill a ritual function but also to pursue their own individual aspirations.

Moving Beyond the Village: *Bihu* and Ethnic Politics

Membership in a *bihu* troupe affords certain benefits beyond those discussed thus far — a sense of belonging, intimacy and self-confidence based on personal accomplishment. In addition to these important opportunities, the possibilities for mobility are significant, because the *bihu* performance industry has established certain channels that some young people can access, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. But the consequences of this mobility are also important to recognize. Exposure to new places and people often launch performers into complex situations that are difficult to navigate. Performance troupes are often split up as the best performers are lured away by opportunities that surpass what is available back home.

Assam's metropolitan center Guwahati, which is located in the western part of the state (Lower Assam), attracts many up-and-coming *bihu* performers. During the 2013 *bihu* season, Kāsi Jun traveled the overnight bus journey to Guwahati to perform in a series of stage shows,

and many of the *nāsoni*-s were able to participate in solo *bihuwotī* competitions in the big city. This experience opened up doors for Binanda Boruah, the *dolpoti* (troupe leader). In fact, the next year, Binanda was offered an opportunity to perform with a Guwahati-based troupe called Brahmaputra Husori Dol led by well-known performer and *bihu* competition judge Dreamly Gogoi. He decided to take the offer because it offered him more social and financial benefits than staying at home and performing with Kāsi Jun, even though it meant he could not spend *bihu* with his family. As a group of *Oxomīyā* performers, traveling to the city exposes them to new social contexts and interactions with people from other ethnic communities.

Alliances are complicated in a place where so many different communities live near to each other but speak different languages and have different ways of living. Because of the violent history of identity politics in Assam, building alliances across ethnic and caste boundaries is a process that even at the interpersonal level carries the burden of political implications. Among the *nāsoni*-s of Kāsi Jun, Priyanka's experience is unique because she lives in Santipur, a village created over the past few decades since the establishment of Rural Volunteer Center (RVC), an NGO that developed the area which earlier was uninhabited jungle terrain. RVC recruited residents to populate the newly created Santipur and Ayengia Chariali villages in the larger area called Akajan, which include *Oxomīyā* and Mising families respectively. A Sino-Tibetan language, Mising is written using a modified Roman script standardized by the Mising literary organization, Mising Agom Kébang, after its establishment in Dhemaji in 1972 by English Professor Tabu Ram Taid. When I spent time in Mising homes and in large Mising gatherings, like the 6th Annual Mising Youth Festival in Akajan, people would speak to each other in Mising, and speak to me in Assamese.

The *Oxomīyā* and Mising communities in Akajan are distinguishable not only by the languages they speak, but also the way they move about in their daily lives. For example, Mising homes (*sāng ghor*) are constructed on raised platforms with thatched floors, which leaves room underneath for the pigs many families breed. Many Mising women wear a style of dress that is distinct from the *Oxomīyā mekhelā sādor*, with a cloth tied under the arms instead of across the left shoulder. Priyanka attends a high school in Akajan where the majority of students are Mising, and two of her maternal uncles married Mising women, which is not common among other families I interacted with. Because Priyanka's uncles are *Oxomīyā*, and follow the Xongkoriya Vaishnava tradition, the two Mising women that married into her family underwent a ritual transformation (*xoron luwā*), symbolically renouncing their tribal heritage in order to become fully *Oxomīyā*. Through interacting with Priyanka, I learned about how ethnic tensions play out in people's everyday lives, and how the springtime festival season is a particularly conspicuous time for performances of community affiliation, especially through music and dance.

While I have described *Oxomīyā bihu* songs as pentatonic, I would contrast Mising *oi-ni:tom* songs by characterizing their melodic contours as having a pentatonic base, which incorporates other notes but does not dwell on them. Comparing and contrasting the performance practices associated with the Mising community's springtime New Year's festival *Āli-āi-Ligāng* to those associated with *bihu* is helpful because although the melodies are easy to distinguish, the rhythmic patterns are very similar. Both are conceptualized as having a repeating cycle of three beats, expressed by clapping on the first two beats and pausing on the third beat. The dance movements of the Mising dance *gomrag* are also similar to *bihu* in that dancers' feet alternate stepping on beats 1 and 2, and pause on beat 3.

While I stayed in a guest room at RVC during a few weeks in March of 2014, I started hanging around a field in the adjacent Ayengia Chariali village where a group of Mising women were rehearsing during the evenings for an upcoming performance. After a few days, I began speaking with one of the women, Aneng Morang, about my interest in learning *oi-ni:tom* songs, and she invited me into her *sāng ghor* to meet her 15-year-old daughter Monika (Figure 1.10). Since neither Aneng nor Monika had a mobile phone, it was difficult to arrange meetings, so I would often walk by periodically to see if they were home. One day Monika and her friend Ronjita taught me the following *oi-ni:tom* song, in which a young man reflects on the sweetness of his relationship with a young woman, addressing her lovingly and asking her not to cry although their love has ended, and describing how he weeps bitterly every day for her.

Figure 1.10 – Monika Morang and Ronjita Taid at 6th Annual Mising Youth Festival, Akajan High School Field. March 29, 2014. Photo by the author.

Oinok binam du:mérdém, pírsi mo:sila: aína létungai o:
Gídí sipé ado:dom gélen, bompé aína me tungai o:

Lagimíl bilat yeku nokké du:mérdém
No:sin bipa:yeku ayangkídídem
Atérong gipa:yeku mé:dír saggídém
Odo:pak lubiyeku lutér agomdém

Ru:né pénébím kumma:bong, sedí melo:msim kumma:bong o:
Atír ongé du:yébong, ménamémsin a:rape méma:bong o:

The first and third stanzas share the same melody, while the second stanza is a repeating refrain. Each of the first two lines begins on the tonic note and spans a full octave, rising swiftly and descending back to tonic. In contrast to *bihu* singing style, which marks the rhythm with *heṧsā* breath pressure, Mising *oi-ni:tom* is more fluid, and sung syllables slide around as if avoiding strict alignment to the beat. The long "o" vowel sung at the end of each line (marked in conventional Mising orthography with a colon) is iconic in *oi-ni:tom* songs. During the refrain, the first three lines share the same melody, sliding from mid range to the upper octave and settling below tonic. While the fourth line begins repeating the same melodic line, the last half of the phrase brings the melody back to tonic, where another verse begins.

One significant difference between *gomrag* and *bihu* dance, which is often pointed out by instructors in workshops and dance lessons, is the movement of the hips. While *bihu*'s iconic *koṦkāl bhāngi* (waist break) movement requires the dancer to contract and release the abdominal muscles in order to tuck the pelvis forward and under (contracting on beat 1, releasing on beat 2, and holding the release position on beat 3), *gomrag*'s iconic hip movement requires the dancer to engage in sideways contractions, alternating between the left and right hip on beat 1 and 2, and holding the slight sideways bend on beat 3. The clear difference between the *bihu* dancer's forward-backward pelvic movement and the *gomrag* dancer's side-to-side hip movement is

amplified by the way the *bihu* dancer's hands mark the rhythm by contracting and releasing on 1 and 2 in sync with the waist, while the *gomrag* dancer's hands twirl consistently at the wrists without marking the rhythm. The angle of "lean," which David Kaminsky (2014) uses to refer to the "degree and direction of tilt over the dance axis," is also distinct, with *Oxomīyā bihu* featuring a slight forward or side lean as part of the basic posture, and Mising *gomrag* featuring a straight vertical axis with forward bends only during specific choreographed movements.

While *Oxomīyā bihu* has become recognized as the state folk festival, Mising *Āli-āi-Ligāng* and the associated traditions of *oi-ni:tom* and *gomrag* performance have mostly remained confined to the Mising community, performed by non-Misings only in workshops, classrooms, and multicultural stage presentations. In other words, *bihu* has been established as the springtime performance genre of the normative Assamese community, of which tribal communities form sub-groups. In contrast to competitive *bihu* arenas, Mising *gomrag* competitions have not been stylized in the same way, instead retaining much of the collective spirit of the ritual context. While solo female *bihu* competitions have proliferated, *gomrag* competitions have prioritized the female group competition. This disparity is also evidenced in economic terms, since *Oxomīyā bihu* committees pour hundreds of thousands of rupees into *bihutolī* events, while the Mising community has struggled as a minority group with a very small middle class and a large population of relatively uneducated people living in poverty concentrated around flood-prone areas in the northeastern region of Assam.

While attending a Mising *Āli-āi-Ligāng* stage celebration with Priyanka, her uncle and her two Mising aunties, Priyanka was invited to sing an *Oxomīyā bihu* song. I experienced this encounter as a fascinating reversal of power dynamics, because in the context of the Mising celebration, *Oxomīyā bihu* stood out as exotic. This critical re-framing of *bihu* was so obviously

strange and uncomfortable for Priyanka that she was not able to finish singing the song she had chosen. Standing on the stage in front of hundreds of Misings, holding the microphone attached to its cable, she was not able to move her arms like she normally did when she sang. The heavy reverb applied to her voice made it hard for her to keep time with her own clapping as the sound reverberated back to her unevenly, confusing her further. She was clearly struggling. In a burst of embarrassed laughter, Priyanka ran off the stage without completing the song, and returned to sit with us, covering her face. In this context, Priyanka's *bihu* song drew attention to her difference from the Mising community that surrounded her. Her performance stood out as almost parochial amongst the other performances that evening which included Mising modern songs, Mising folk songs, and energetic performances by crews of teenage boys dancing to Bollywood hip-hop remixes.

Both *bihu* and *Āli-āi-Ligāng* are spring festivals that mark the beginning of the New Year, but they also mark the distinctions between these two communities, linguistically, socio-culturally through ritual practices, dress, dance, and music. Since Mising communities continue to face social, economic, and political marginalization in Assam, it is not surprising that these communities seem reluctant to interact. I became keenly aware of my privilege as an outsider to move between these two communities in Akajan, especially when *Oxomīyā* residents began asking me to teach them songs I had learned from their Mising neighbors. These experiences revealed to me an everyday politics of suspicion and curiosity that seemed to keep people from pursuing relationships across community lines. In this context, Priyanka's family was unique indeed. Understanding Priyanka's positionality in relation to Monika Morang's, for example, requires a broader consideration and theorization of what Laurel Kamada, working with young women in Japan, calls "ethnically embodied adolescent girls" (Kamada 2010).

The deep-rootedness of ethnic tensions in Assam struck me as I walked back to my room from the Mising Youth Festival on March 29, 2014, chatting with RVC employee Tapan Dutta and Anurag Rajkhowa, a social work[8] student at National Education Foundation College of Management and Technology in Guwahati who was based at RVC for a field study project. Anurag commented to Tapan in Assamese, "Man, these Mising people are really taking over. They've taken Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, they're everywhere!" When Tapan shrugged ambivalently, I asked Anurag in Assamese, "What do you mean, is that a bad thing?" "Obviously it's a bad thing!" he replied. Thankfully the shock on my face was disguised by the darkness that surrounded us as we walked down the earthen lane, passing by Mising *sāng ghor* homes to our left and right. Anurag and I had discussed many social issues during the previous week with the other social work students based at RVC as we shared meals in the small canteen, but this blatantly hateful speech was uncharacteristic of our interactions thus far. I pushed him, "Did you listen to what you just said? Doesn't that sound like a racist comment?" Anurag replied, "Well, there are *Oxomīyā* people and there are tribal people, and the tribal people are demanding land, and their culture is just different, and it's really becoming a problem because the *Oxomīyā* people are losing power."

At this point I was getting angry, which made it difficult to continue speaking clearly in Assamese, but I attempted to point out that the *Oxomīyā* people are the dominant community, and the tribal communities have been marginalized, so now that the tribal communities are gaining increased political power, education, and socio-economic status, the *Oxomīyā*-s must necessarily share some of their power, for the benefit of a more equal society. Although I was flustered, Anurag and Tapan listened patiently as we walked along in the dark, and Anurag stated

[8] In Assam, the field of "social work" is similar to what I would call "development studies," featuring field research into village resource management, education, and health, for example.

calmly, “Ok but tribal people don’t really think too much. They just do things without thinking.” Furious, and almost in tears, I repeated his statement and asked, “Do you really mean that?” He said yes, and repeated again, “Tribal people just do things without thinking.” In a last-ditch effort to shame Anurag into taking back his statement, which was undermining my hope in the supposedly enlightened young generation who would one day lead Assam to a better future, I said, “Wait a second. You are doing a master’s degree in social work. Hasn’t your training given you any perspective?” Showing no signs of remorse, he replied, “Yeah I know what I’ve learned, but then there is the personal thing, which you can’t let the training bear on that. It’s your own experience.” We reached RVC soon after and our conversation was interrupted, but a feeling of deep disappointment haunted me for days.

In this chapter, *bihu* has emerged as a context for understanding how relationships emerge through performance in rural Assam. Through interacting with members of Kāsi Jun, I became aware of their concern with the movement and visibility of young bodies, and the ways in which the changes that happen to these bodies during adolescence are expected to be managed. *Nāsoni*-s poetically voiced their frustration regarding the restricted mobility they experience, and directed me towards the intense scrutiny regarding their comportment on and off-stage. I learned that the expectation that boys should stand out while girls should blend in applies across the performative domains of everyday life, but I also found that the stock characters evoked in *bihu* narratives become multidimensional when situated within the webs of intimate relationships which I was able to investigate through ethnography.

I have come away with a sense of the recursive temporality for which *bihu* provides discursive space. This space, the *bihu* atmosphere, emerges during the month of *bohāg*, but is also evoked throughout the year when people gather, sharing an intimacy that resonates through

bodies, sounds, and memories. The flexibility of the *bihu* genre to accommodate a wide variety of venues and contexts, from the *sutāl* to the modern *bihutolī* stage, provides a context for troupe members to skillfully respond to unexpected events and incorporate these into performance, as *bihu* animates their bodies. The troupe emerges as a dynamic network of belonging, embedded in local community relations, where young people from a small group of villages come together to fulfill a ritual function but also to pursue their own individual aspirations.

Spending time in the homes of the *nāsoni*-s and *bihuwā*-s allowed me to recognize that behind the pageantry of the competition stage, genuine care and concern is expressed between friends and between people of different generations. Conventional kinship relationships such as father-daughter and brother-sister were extended to members of the group that were not related by blood. Where I expected to find individual competitive drive creating tension between friends, I instead found a distribution of the excitement and anxiety associated with competition across the group in moments of solidarity. At the risk of focusing on these strong relational bonds at the expense of those moments of conflict that inevitably did arise, I seek here to communicate a profound sense of embeddedness that could be glossed over in a study of individual aspirations and actions. In Chapter 2, I will extend this discussion of intimacy and agency through alliances in order to argue that *bihu* also creates a space for experimenting with socially determined boundaries of gender and sexuality.

Chapter Two – Youthful Desires: The *Gābhoru* Body as Creative Force

Bihu songs create lyrical links between blooming flowers, ripe tomatoes, and the newly fertile adolescent girl (*gābhoru*). The word *gābhoru* describes feminine youth in a way that is grounded in the body. Referring to the swelling tissues that reveal a budding fertility, *gābhoru* combines "*gā*" (body) and "*bhoru*" (filled, swollen), conjuring up the image of ripe fruit. *Ḍekā*, the word used to describe masculine youth, has no such physical connotations. *Gābhoru* refers to specific period in a woman's life – the years between her first menstruation and her marriage. The terms *gābhoru* and *ḍekā* also index a particular repertory of *bihu* songs and dance movements associated with adolescence. *Ḍekā-gābhoru bihu* is distinguished from the *bihu* songs and dances associated with other life phases such as childhood and married life.[1]

Beyond the evocative physical connotations of the *gābhoru* body, I focus also on the social responsibilities and risks associated with female adolescence in this chapter. Especially apparent in contexts of aspirational mobility related to education and career opportunities, women in the global South are routinely characterized as embodying the transformation of risk into responsibility (Roy A 2012, 140). *Bihu* songs narrate this transformation by incorporating folk proverbs that articulate the challenges associated with becoming a woman. One song warns, "Don't get born as a *gābhoru*. Others will make you work while they eat," expressing the plight of the woman who labors first for her parents and later for her husband and his family. Flirtatious *bihu* songs called *jurā-nām* (pair songs) provide opportunities for young women and men to role-play by teasing each other and expressing desire openly through performance. As I demonstrate in this chapter, encounters narrated in *bihu* songs often end up happening in real life. For

[1] There are different *bihu* repertories associated with childhood (especially regarding pre-menstrual girls), with adolescence (*ḍekā-gābhoru bihu*), and with post-marriage life (for example *buwārī* "daughter-in-law" *bihu*).

example, illicit affairs and elopements often come to fruition during the springtime *bihu* festival season, contributing to the diverse and complex embodied experiences of love in South Asia (Orsini 2006).

In this chapter, I consider the significance of *bihu* song narratives that romanticize interactions between the *gābhoru nāsoni* and the *ḍekā bihuwā* in contemporary Assamese social life. As young men and women take on the roles of *nāsoni* and *bihuwā* through performance, are they experienced as rehearsals for the everyday encounters embedded in the dramaturgy of adolescent life? Discussions amongst and about young women and men create a heightened awareness of the physical and emotional changes that are happening and the accompanying responsibilities and new roles to which these young people will be recruited.

I focus on the *gābhoru* body as a site on which debates about gender and sexuality are played out in everyday life. I argue that *bihu* creates a context for experimenting with socially determined boundaries of gender and sexuality, specifically focusing on the role the *gābhoru* woman plays in *bihu* narratives and the experiences of the Assamese women with whom I have interacted. I consider gender and sexuality not as fixed at birth, but as components of our identity that we learn to inhabit. This means gender and sexuality are not concrete facts, but fluid and contingent on our experiences as our bodies and identities grow and change. For many of the women I work with in Assam, becoming *gābhoru* is marked by rituals associated with the onset of menstruation. I situate this coming-of-age ceremony alongside other contexts in which girls learn what it means to inhabit the *gābhoru* body by incorporating *bihu* song texts and conversations with performers. My discussion focuses on taboos and ritual practices surrounding menstruation, as well as anxieties and expectations regarding love and marriage. These issues not only coincide with conversation topics that emerged in everyday conversations with the

performers I worked with in Assam, but they also intersect with themes that are central to the *bihu* festival. I incorporate a discussion of the ways in which contemporary ideas about gender and sexuality are influenced by stereotypes about Assamese women circulated during colonial rule, because these discourses have persisted and continue to influence contemporary perceptions of Assamese women.

Fertility in *Bihu* and Assamese Cultural Reform

As Assam was being reinvented after Indian Independence in 1947, cultural reformers and urban performing artists recognized *bihu* as a form of music and dance with the potential to represent a modern Assamese identity. *Bihu*'s links with agricultural rituals and lyrical themes related to everyday life in rural Assam provided an ideal constellation of elements to serve as the statewide folk festival – Assam's ticket into the Nehruvian mosaic of Indian "unity in diversity." But in order to recreate *bihu* as a respectable performance tradition, *bihu* had to be disassociated from a widespread colonial stigma that characterized the festival as frivolous, erotic, and barbaric. As Uddipana Goswami writes, "Attempts were also made to sanitise all those elements considered too 'indecent' for popular consumption" (Goswami 2014, 5). Part of this transition entailed distinguishing singing and dancing as two separate artistic pursuits while maintaining a folk sensibility evocative of rural life. These changes have been implemented slowly and haphazardly by self-proclaimed experts, university accredited folklorists, state-appointed cultural authorities, and performers from all walks of life who are mainly men, but women are increasingly visible in these roles – a process discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

According to Assamese folklorist Prafulladatta Goswami, the sound of the *ḍhul* drum played by men during *bihu* mimics the sound of thunder announcing rain, while the female performer is responsible for "suggest[ing] the union of the male fertiliser and the female, fruitful

earth" (Goswami 2003, 38). Depictions of fertility in the natural world and parallels in human sexuality also emerge in ethnomusicologist Henry Spiller's work with Sundanese performers in Indonesia who perform *angklung*, which he describes as an ensemble of shaken bamboo rattles. Spiller writes that in *angklung* performance, "the conflation of agricultural and sexual imagery, with the shared theme of fertility and continuity, is striking and suggests that dance events are a ritual enactment of human interactions with the cycles of nature" (Spiller 2010, 84). Spiller echoes Goswami's *bihu* imagery, describing the rice goddess Dewi Sri as summoned by *angklung* performers and the "masculine heavenly powers that inseminate her via the rain" (2010, 21). Beyond the sound and metaphorical significance of the instruments and rhythmic patterns of *bihu,* the way the body moves is also significant, as bare feet pound the earth in order to awaken the goddess. Goswami identifies specific *bihu* dance movements, characterizing them as mimicking sexual intercourse:

> The [female] dancers at first keep their hands on their hips, then sway their trunks, gradually opening out the arms and vigorously pushing out the pelvic region as well as the breasts. Even the male dancer exhibits a similar form. The steps are simple and seem to be unstudied, but the movement of the hips, the swaying arms and the protruding breasts easily catch the eye of the onlooker. The dance is rhythmic and invigorating (Goswami 2003, 38).

Goswami suggests that *bihu*'s origins lie somewhere between a "springtime fertility cult of ancient times" (2003, 38) and worship to the Hindu goddess Lokhimi (Hindi: Lakshmi) in her form as a rice goddess governing agricultural prosperity (2003, 40). Goswami's reference to both Lokhimi and the goddess of an ancient "fertility cult" draws on a common trope relating to the tension between different representations of female sexuality in contemporary India. Anthropologists Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold argue that the linked perceptions of "women's sexual potency and their procreative and nurturing capacities as respectively dangerous and

essential to men" has created a split image, where Hindu women are torn between contrasting forms of the great goddess (1994, 30). One the one hand, the "stately, beautiful, and well-groomed" Lokhimi with her male partner brings prosperity to the home, and on the other hand, the cosmic order is threatened by the solitary and wild dance of "blooddrinking, gruesome disheveled Kali" (Gold and Raheja 1994, 30).

Assam's Tantric Legacy and Feminine Power

By referring to a cult of "ancient times," Goswami distances *bihu* from the enduring legacy of Kali worship at Kamakhya, a temple on the outskirts of Assam's metropolitan center Guwahati. Kamakhya is believed to be a site where the *yoni* (vulva, womb or source) fell from the body of the powerful goddess Shakti, also known as Kali. This famous temple enshrines a sacred place that is "affirmed to be the creative orifice of a goddess whose larger body is the earth itself or at least the local mountain and region" (Kinsley 1988, 187). The Kamakhya temple continues to draw devotees in pilgrimage from near and far, especially during her yearly menstruation when liquid flows from the *yoni,* in order to partake of this creative and destructive power (Figure 2.1). The annual Ambuvaci festival, which commemorates the divine menstruation at Kamakhya, combines pre-Hindu traditions with Tantric influences in its close connection to the "coming of the monsoon rains, to the agricultural cycle, and to larger fertility rites that probably long predate the arrival of Hinduism in Assam" (Urban 2010, 56). The history and contemporary practices associated with Kamakhya worship provide insight into the complex ways in which *bihu* also emerges as a dynamic, syncretic embodiment of divine creativity.

Figure 2.1 – Devotees visit the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. January 14, 2016. Photo by Benita Mahanta.

The Tantric center of Kamakhya is often associated with the mythical place Kamarupa (form, image, or shape of desire) which is mentioned in Sanskrit Hindu religious texts. Historian Bodhisattva Kar writes about the early period of Assamese national consciousness when many middle-class educated people in Assam engaged in passionate searches for hints of their own localities (region, province, district or village) as mentioned in Sanskrit texts in order to "inscribe their preferred places into the organic core of the nation-space" (Kar 2008, 297). But the enduring consequences of mapping the ancient and/or mythical Kamarupa onto the location of the contemporary Kamakhya temple is that Kamarupa's central presence in the Tantras created

an association with what early Indologists considered to be a low point in the history of Hindu religious practice. According to Hugh Urban, "within the colonial imagination, Tantrism was quickly identified as the very worst and most degenerate aspect of the Indian peoples under imperial rule" (Urban 2001, 162).

The legacy of this association circulated in stories about the dangerous feminine power that emanates from Kamakhya and manifests in rumors about the suspect moral character of Assamese women. Kar identifies "allusions to the erotic excess and magical prowess of Assamese women" which were common in colonial India, particularly in colonial Bengal, and describes the widely shared belief that "voluptuous and sexually insatiable women of the perilous frontier could – and in many instances actually did – turn male strangers into sheep" (Kar 2008, 288). Kar argues that stories about "Kamakhya's sheep" continue to play a role in the marginalization of Assam in the Indian imagination. His archival research shows how 19th and 20th century interpretations of these stories set the standard for locating Assam as an "ill-connected frontier" that "constituted a kind of *terra incognita* mirroring the ignorance and psychosis of the neighbouring people and states" (Kar 2008, 291).

These stories were well-entrenched even before the East India Company annexed the independent *Āhum* Kingdom which would become Assam in 1826. When Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, heralded as one of Assam's anti-colonial heroes, published his *Asam Buranji* (1829), which many regard as the first modern vernacular history of Assam, he made a point to clarify the justification for his project by saying:

> Many are vaguely aware that there is a country called Assam Kamarupa etc. But leave alone proper information or news, the people from other countries hardly know how that country is or *even where it is located*… Kamakhya of Kamarupa is famous in all countries. But nobody actually possesses any proper knowledge of it. Everywhere there exist numerous stories about making trees walk and turning males

> into sheep, casting magic charms, etc. That is why persons willing to visit Kamakhya shy away (Phukan 1962 [1829], 79).

While Phukan dismissed the stories as "mere legends" (1829, 84), Kar cites many examples confirming the wide circulation and persistence of these stories. For example an article in the Bengali magazine *Mau* confirmed, "Till now, the belief was current in Bengal that the Bengalis turn into goats and sheep when they come to Assam. The belief might be true or false, but it is ingrained in the mind of the Bengalis that Assam is an out-of-the-way place" (1887, 54). In 1895, Bengali travel writer Panchkari Ghosh described the "objectionable moral character" of Assamese women. He wrote: "The beauties are very hospitable, generous and caring. Moreover they are free. They do not bother much about the male injunctions. Nor are they entirely behind veils. To act as a good host, they do not even desist from massaging the feet of an unknown male guest" (Ghosh 1895, 28). It was common for women to appear in public wearing veils as a mark of respectability in colonial Bengal (Raychaudhuri 2000).

As travel between the colonial administrative center of Calcutta and the frontier province of Assam increased, these improbable stories did not simply disappear. Instead, as "active elements within the world of colonial modernity, they continued to travel and proliferate along the axis of modern communication" via tea plantation laborers migrating from Jharkhand and Orissa, as well as job seekers and lower division clerks traveling back and forth from West Bengal (Kar 2008, 311). Even as late as 1925, in his writings on Santal medicine and folklore collected in Chhotanagpur, Christian missionary P. O. Bodding mentions the stories Santals would tell about Assamese women (1986 [1925], 126). By this time, Chhotanagpur had become a major site for recruiting laborers to work on tea plantations in Assam, and stories about the dangerous magical practices of Assamese women circulated widely there.

In his 1972 autobiography, Krishnanath Sharma describes his memories of joking with other students during his school days in Calcutta in 1915-16 about his own capacity for magic as an Assamese boy. He remembered joining other Assamese boys in taunting classmates who would respond with pleas to refrain from turning them into sheep. While Sharma's account treats the issue lightly, these stories and their contemporary descendants have played a role in the continued marginalization of people from the northeast region of India. The combination of a general lack of education in other parts of India about the northeast region and the legacy of these stories have created a situation in which Assamese women are particularly vulnerable to threats of emotional and physical violence when they leave Assam. This is related to the reason why these sources do not draw distinctions along caste lines in their descriptions of women. These women are collectively imagined as tribal, savage, wild and powerful – associations that continue to circulate beyond colonial period in gendered, racialized forms. Although this topic will be discussed in more depth in the Epilogue, here I wish to emphasize that these stories have real life consequences for Assamese women.

Links between *bihu* and the magical powers of Assamese women appear in Benudhar Rajkhowa's book *Assamese Demonology* (1905), a fascinating account of spirits, spells, and the ritual specialists who interact with them. This collection also identifies some of the cosmological forces at work in *bihu.* Rajkhowa describes a "sprightly female spirit" called *parooa* who specializes in disorienting male travelers at the meeting of three roads as follows:

> She plays on a musical instrument called *taka* which the Assamese girls use, the sound being distinctly audible by men. The traveller losing his way mistakes her voice for that of a man in a distant place and follows it only to find himself forlorn and lost the more, there being none to welcome him. When she wishes to lead a man away she creates a thick mist all around him, which makes him see everything indistinct and lose his way (Rajkhowa 1905, 10).

The *ṭokā* is an unpitched percussive instrument created out of a piece of bamboo, split length-wise from one end and clapped together with a hand gripping either side. Usually played by women, the *ṭokā* is often invoked as one of the original instruments used to accompany *bihu* songs and dances because it is portable and easy to construct. According to *bihu* scholars such as Prafulladatta Goswami (2003), Jayakanta Gandhiya (1988) and Lila Gogoi (1994), groups of women used to sing and dance *bihu* together in the forest at night, secluded from men. Goswami writes, "It is because the core of the dance is sexual that womenfolk dance a little away from the sight of malefolk" (2003, 38) and continues, "When young men want to have a sight of the girls dancing, they look from a certain decent distance" (2003, 39). This female-only *bihu* is referred to as *jeng bihu,* marked by a sense of feminine power and freedom linked to fertility and homosocial bonding. Hinting at the interventions of social reformers into traditional performance practices, Goswami also remarks that "at one time the girls perhaps danced deep into the night but nowadays they close by evening" (2003, 39). On various occasions, performers have suggested to me that playing the *ṭokā* in the forest could also serve as a warning to men to stay away from the area where women are celebrating *bihu* together. But there is another layer of meaning associated with *jeng bihu* that connects with broader discourses of gender and sexuality in Assam.

First of all, this passage is interesting because Rajkhowa identifies the *ṭokā* as a "musical instrument" which the "Assamese girls use." This language is distinct from 19th century colonial accounts that characterize *bihu* performance as outside the realm of respectable behavior, especially regarding women (Robinson 1841; Butler 1855). The reference to the *ṭokā* as a "musical instrument" does the performative work of articulating *bihu* as a respectable artistic pursuit, and the invocation of "Assamese girls" fits with a budding nationalist framework which

positions these girls as a group that is important, constitutive of tradition and values. Setting these assertions in a frame of magic and myth, Rajkhowa characterizes the *ṭokā*-playing girl-like spirit as a siren of sorts. She lures men towards her in order to assert her power by undermining their authority and making them weak and disoriented. This story shares many common elements with the stories of Kamakhya's sheep. The *ṭokā* is portrayed as an instrument with a sound "distinctly audible by men" that Assamese girls play in order to mesmerize and confuse them, prohibiting them from reaching their intended destination. This example draws together ideas of modern respectable artistry with mythical feminine power grounded in local history, the combination of which are important for reinventing performance traditions for the modern stage.

Colonial Accounts of *Bihu*

Intimate and illicit encounters are part of the story of the *bihu* festival, which is understood to be a season of license. This history has proven to be problematic for Assamese folklorists who seek to accurately represent the history of *bihu*, while distancing the festival from the stigma it attracted during colonial rule. Nineteenth century colonial accounts characterize *bihu* performance as outside the realm of respectable behavior and associate the festival with sexual excess, in line with colonial concern for managing bodies, dispositions, and "racialized thinking about them" (Stoler 2006, 5). These accounts interpret *bihu* celebrations as evidence for the questionable moral character of Assamese women. For example, in his *Descriptive Account of Assam,* missionary William Robinson writes about his impressions of *bihu*, when "large groups of people parade about, attended by numbers of dancing girls, who pause from time to time to exhibit their wanton movements, and charm the audience with their lascivious songs" (1841, 269). In *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, tea plantation manager George Barker wrote, "A nautch is impossible of description, no pen can describe the weird, wild, creepy sensation that

steals over a European watching for the first time these strange people, twisting, writhing, wriggling about, to the sound of the most unearthly forms of music, the tum-tum always the chief offender" (1881, 176).

These ideas were echoed by well-educated Assamese elites who distanced *bihu* from respectable Assamese social practices, locating festivities in the domain of the "common people." In his 1829 *Asam Buranji*, which was introduced above, Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan described *bihu* as a non-religious rural festival during which "womenfolk of the common people and dissolute men get together and perform dance and music of a very objectionable type" (Phukan 1962 [1829], 103). Debates among elites about the controversial sexual nature of *bihu* and the freedom associated with the *bihu* season, especially regarding women, have continued in Assam from colonial times.

Through the post-Independence period into the present, the growing middle class, concerned with respectability, has carried on these debates. For example, Anil Saikia, a recognized *bihu* scholar and competition judge, describes a series of political and religious changes that have transformed *bihu*. He identifies *Āhum* king Rudra Singha (1696-1716) as the first ruler to organize public *bihu* performances. Known as a patron of Hindustani music, Singha is credited with lifting sanctions on the Xongkoriya *xotro* monastery system while also increasing the enforcement strict of Brahmanical caste boundaries which the *xotro*-s originally were created to dismantle. Saikia writes, "When Bihu started to be performed in front of public audiences, the obscene content was selectively and carefully taken out from Bihu songs. Objectionable words and phrases were once again purged out with the coming of the Vaishnative wave in Asom" (Saikia 2012, 1). From a contemporary vantage point, it is tempting to interpret all research on the topic of *bihu* as in revisionist conversation with early disparaging accounts.

Scholars and cultural leaders have faced the great task of excavating *bihu*'s origins while skirting around the uncomfortable moments that would seem to blemish the history of a festival so beloved and important to contemporary constructions of Assamese identity. This process resonates with wider debates about elevating hereditary music and dance forms to the status of middle-class respectability across South Asia, described in more detail in Chapter 3.

The Changing *Gābhoru* Body

The nascent fertility of a young woman is indexed in everyday references to her as *gābhoru*. Many *bihu* songs celebrate this fertility by comparing the girl's changing body to a new moon or a blossoming flower. These changes in the natural world are associated with the springtime *bihu* season, and the glowing moonlight and smell of new flowers are compared to the intoxicating presence of the newly fertile young woman. As the following song declares, like the new moon, and the tree's new leaves, something about our female friends has changed.

No junti ulāle, boronti xolāle	The new moon appeared, its hue has changed
Xolāi bore gose pāte	The Peepul tree changes its leaves
June beli, kiyo puhor dili?	**Oh moon, why did you reflect the sun's light?**
Mure mon boliyā korili	**You made me crazy**
Boxonto lāge mon ānondo	**Springtime makes us feel happy**
Bihuti āhise, bihuti āhise buli	***Bihu* is coming**
Āmār lāhoriye, boronti xolāle	Our (female) friends, their hue has changed
Mugā rihā mekhelā gāte	On their bodies, silk *rihā mekhelā*
June beli, kiyo puhor dili?	**Oh moon, why did you reflect the sun's light?**
Mure mon boliyā korili	**You made me crazy**
Boxonto lāge mon ānondo	**Springtime makes us feel happy**
Bihuti āhise, bihuti āhise buli	***Bihu* is coming**
Junore logote torāti ulāle	Along with the moon, the stars also emerged
Porebot xuwoni kori ***june beli***	**The moon**'s light makes the mountain beautiful
Kiyo puhor dili?	**Why did you reflect the sun's light?**
Mure mon boliyā korili	**You made me crazy**
Boxonto lāge mon ānondo	**Springtime makes us feel happy**
Bihuti āhise, bihuti āhise buli	***Bihu* is coming**

Āmāre logote senāiti ulāle	Along with us, the young men also came (to dance)
Ālibāt xuwoni kori ***june beli***	**The moon**'s light makes the path we walk beautiful
Kiyo puhor dili?	**Why did you reflect the sun's light?**
Mure mon boliyā korili	**You made me crazy**
Boxonto lāge mon ānondo	**Springtime makes us feel happy**
Bihuti āhise, bihuti āhise buli	***Bihu* is coming**

This song was recorded with the Gramophone Company in 1974 by Khagen and Archana Mahanta (Figure 2.2, Audio 2.1). The Mahantas were well-known for their beautiful renditions of Assamese modern songs, but their musical legacy has also deeply influenced the way folk music has developed in Assam. While I discuss their contributions in more detail in Chapter 3, here I draw attention to the way the songs they chose to perform and record present a particular representation of sexuality in *bihu*. This song is a *jāt-nām*, where the first two lines of text in each stanza change (underlined above), and the remaining lines are repeated like a chorus (transcribed in boldface text).[2] The first two lines of the first stanza and the second stanza create a metaphorical comparison between changes in nature and the cosmos, and physical changes in young women. The word "*boron*" (color or hue), when used in the first stanza to describe the changing moon, refers to the image of the new waxing crescent illuminated by the light of the sun. As the new moon emerges from darkness, its shape changes from a sliver, gradually increasing in fullness. In the second stanza, *boron* is used to describe the female body, emerging from childhood into a new, fuller shape, adorned with the silk woven *rihā mekhelā*. The *rihā mekhelā* is an Assamese dress traditionally worn by women only after menstruation begins. The narrow *rihā* cloth is wrapped around the upper body of the *gābhoru* woman, as an additional layer on top of the *sādor* cloth covering her torso and left shoulder. While many *bihu* songs emphasize the iconic minor third, the pentatonic *bihu* melody in this song is focused around the

[2] A *jāt-nām* can also be thought of as a combination of two *bihu* songs. For example, the first two lines of each stanza can be combined and sung independently of the remaining lines (Audio 2.2).

fifth scale degree, featuring more descending passages than in other songs, which gives a sense of expansiveness that parallels the song's celestial imagery.

Figure 2.2 – *Bihu* Album by Khagen and Archana Mahanta. Gramophone Company. 1974. Photo by the author.

These subtle metaphors are common among the *bihu* songs that have become part of the folk canon, made popular by respected artists like the Mahantas. While this 45rpm recording has survived in a large stack of albums kept in a corner of the home of Anil Saikia, where I digitized the audio and photographed the disc image, the recording has also circulated on YouTube and other more dubious sites for mp3 exchange which preserve the vinyl cracks and pops. The paired voices of Khagen and Archana Mahanta, with their playful, flirtatious singing style, persist in the Assamese imagination as one of the iconic sounds of *bihu*. Charming and sweet, singing of love

and longing, their recorded voices and the memory of their performances evoke the imagery of young love. While the choral-style arrangement recorded by the Mahantas is less popular these days, their son Papon performed the song during his springtime *bihu* tour of Assam in April 2016 as a solo with his band composed of electric guitar, bass, synthesizer, drum kit, "world" percussion, as well as *ḍhul* and *tāl,* continuing the legacy of his parents in dynamic new ways.

Bihu songs with more explicit sexual content have understandably been underrepresented in the respectable domain constructed by singers like Khagen and Archana Mahanta. But explicitly sexual *bihu* songs are thriving in the contemporary recording industry, although arguably aimed at a lower-brow consumer market. These songs are frequently condemned by Assamese cultural authorities on televised debates as evidence for the decline in the integrity of *bihu* songs during recent years. They argue that many contemporary recording artists will produce sexually explicit songs to titillate lowbrow audiences in order to make profits. One such song called "*Kus Kus*" ("Gather it up") was released in 2014 as part of a *bihu* album entitled *Moromor Junāli* (Lovely Junāli) (Audio 2.3).

The song begins with the male protagonist gazing from a distance at a young woman who is using a *jākoi* basket to catch fish in shallow water in a rice field (see Figure 2.3 for an example of *jākoi* fishing). This means she is barefoot and calf-deep in muddy water. It starts to rain and her *sādor*, the cloth wrapped around her torso and left shoulder, begins to cling to her body. The young man narrates the scene, beginning with a *bihu zuzonā.* Beginning in mid-range on the tonic pitch, the male voice sings longingly articulating a minor third. With each phrase's pentatonic melody climbing higher, his voice reaches a climactic height as he describes the woman's wet, rain-soaked body, and slowly recedes in pitch back to the tonic by the end of the last phrase:

Oi jākoi bai thākute	As she was catching fish with the *jākoi* basket
Oi boroxun āhile oi	It began to rain
Oi titile gāre sādor	The *sādor* shawl wrapped around her body got wet
Oi titā kāpur kāniye rupot rohon sorāise	The wet cloth enhances her beauty
Oi sāi nu sāi nelāge bhāgor	I never tire of gazing at her

Figure 2.3 – Menaka Basumatary catches fish with the *jākoi* basket. Near Simen Sapori, Dhemaji, Assam. March 6, 2014. Photo by the author.

The *ḍhul* plays the iconic 3-beat *bihu* rhythm, signaling the beginning of the metered song, and the young man addresses the young woman directly with a percussive, bouncy vocal style which evokes the movement of his dancing body as he approaches her:

Kus, kus, kus, kus, kusāi de, kusāi de	Fold fold, gather, gather, gather it up
Kusāi de tur mekhelā	Gather up your *mekhelā* (skirt)
Dāng dāng, dāng dāng, dāngi de bhori	Lift lift, lift lift, lift up your leg
Tuk juke khāle hobolā	Maybe a leech has bitten you
Toloni pothārot jākoi bāi thākute	In the muddy field, fishing with *jākoi* basket
Moh juke dhorile	A big leech has bitten you
Bhorir kolāphulot	On the calf of your leg
E he senimāi oi boi gol tejore	Oh sweet dear, blood has begun to flow
Xuti senimāi oi	Oh sweet dear
Ture kumoliyā, ture nu kumoliyā bhori	Down your soft, young leg

At this point, the young woman responds to the young man's advances:

Jā, jā, jā, jā, nāhibi nāhibi	Go go, go go, don't come, don't come near
Lāje nu nāikiyā?	Have you no shame?
Nā, nā, nā, nā, nāsābi mur phāle	No no, don't don't, don't look at me
Nu kusāu moi mekhelā	I won't lift up my *mekhelā* (skirt)
Juke khāleu khāok, dāhe khāleu khāok Mure kolāphulot	Let the leech feast on my calf if it must
Kāx sāpi nāhibi toiye	Don't come close to me
Seni dhon oi nelāge eruwābo juke	Oh sweet treasure, no need to remove the leech
Seni dhon oi nelāge eruwābo juk	Oh my sweet treasure, no need to remove the leech

Although she refuses the young man's help and attention, she simultaneously encourages him by calling him "*seni dhon*" sweet (sugar) treasure – a flirtatious trope common in *bihu* songs. He leaves the issue of the leech aside and begs her to tighten her *sādor*, the cloth wrapped around her torso and left shoulder, so he can see the shape of her body:

Tān tān tānilo tānilo tānilo tur sādor khon	Pull, pull, tightly wrap your *sādor*
Jil jil jil jil jiliki uṭhise ture nu bhorā joubon	I'm mesmerized by the shape of your young body
Nesāu nesāu buli nesāiyu nuwāru	I'm trying not to see, but how can I stop myself?
Ture bhorā joubon	Your shapely, full young body
Muru je lubhiye mone senimāiye oi	My lustful mind, oh sweet dear
Kolijā kāmuri khāli senimaiye oi	You've stolen ("eaten") my heart, oh sweet dear
Muke nu oi boliyā kori	You made me crazy

She continues to refuse the young man's advances, recognizing that she is dangerously close to giving in to the passion they both feel:

Kuj, kuj, kuj, kuj usor sāpi sāpi nāhibi	Step, step, step, step, don't come near me
Mur senāi dhon	My sweet treasure
Tur, tur, tur, tur, ture māt xunile	Your, your, your, your, hearing your voice
Khopi uṭhe buku khon	My heart shivers
Kinu ulāhote usor sāpi āhi	What is this excitement that makes you want to
Gusābo khujiso mure kolāphulor juke	Come near and remove the leech from my calf?
Seni dhon oi	Oh my sweet treasure
Mure tāte ni dibi hāte seni dhon oi	Don't put your hand on my leg, my sweet treasure
Mure nu oi gābhoru dehā seni dhon oi	Don't touch my *gābhoru* body, my sweet treasure
Mure nu oi gābhoru dehā	My *gābhoru* body

This song resonates with listeners in Assam because the *jākoi*, a basket used to trap fish and other small river creatures, has become an icon of Assamese cultural heritage. Because fishing with *jākoi* requires wading into the river, leeches are a common problem, and the scene evokes a romanticized vision of village life. This scene is also referenced in an Assamese folk proverb that advises young men to search for their brides while young women are fishing (Dutta 2008). The intensely local feel and sentiment of this song, combined with the flirtatious narrative and the exciting *bihu* melody and rhythm makes it fun to listen to. Regardless of the public disapproval of cultural authorities, songs like "*Kus kus*" are popular among the general *bihu*-loving public in Assam, and even among Assamese diaspora communities, as I recognized in April 2016 when "*Kus kus*" rang out over the speakers at the annual Chicago-area *bihu* celebration in a conference room at a suburban Holiday Inn. The focus on the *gābhoru* body as an object of desire is a common theme in *bihu* songs. This focus marks the transition from childhood to adolescence as an important one.

Tuloni Biyā: Coming of Age in Rural Assam

Adolescence is experienced and defined differently across different class, caste, and cultural backgrounds, but in many contexts, the onset of menstruation plays an important role in marking this transitional life stage. In their work with adolescent women in the UK, Lovering (1995) and Coates (2013) approached menstruation through discourse analysis, interpreting how young women spoke about their everyday experiences. Lovering found negative, taboo attitudes toward menstruation paired with general ignorance, while Coates delineated three dominant discursive themes: medical, self-disclosure, and repressive discourse. In both studies, menstruation emerged in adolescent discourse as something undesirable. In contrast, Laurel Kamada's study of adolescent girls in Japan found positive values associated with the start of menstruation as a manifestation of maturity (Kamada 2010, 124). I have not attempted a similar survey of adolescent discourse in this chapter, but instead I interpret songs, ritual practices, and conversations with men and women of different ages as discursive vehicles for analyzing the creative power and associated anxieties associated with the female body, and recognize that my analysis is shaped by my own experience of being a menstruating woman in Assam.

Although it is not common in contemporary Assam, in other parts of India young women are routinely married before they begin menstruating. Kumar (2002) describes a rural Rajasthani community which conceives of adolescence in three phases: early adolescence when the young woman lives with her parents and experiences physiological changes, mid-adolescence when the young woman lives with her husband and menstruation begins, and late adolescence which encompasses pregnancy and motherhood. In her work with young women who engage primarily in unskilled labor and domestic work who live in a northwest Delhi slum, Thapan (2009) discovered that their experiences of adolescence are tied to their relationships with their

husbands, since they marry before the onset of menstruation, but experience a liminal period before they move to live with their husbands for the first time. In contrast to other communities, many Hindu communities in Assam celebrate a girl's first menstruation in the style of a wedding (*biyā*). Everyone in the girl's family and village are made aware of her transition to adolescence, which is accompanied by coming-of-age seclusion and purification rituals.

In Assamese, the ceremony commemorating a young woman's first menstruation is called *tuloni biyā* (throwing wedding[3]) or *xānti biyā* (peace wedding). As a series of coming-of-age rituals, this ceremony announces the young woman's emergent fertility to the wider community. But *tuloni biyā* is also the beginning of a girl's training in isolation. In most traditions, she is confined to a dark room for around seven days where she sleeps on a bed of hay on the floor and keeps a fast. The period of confinement, consonant with Victor Turner's preliminal separation phase (1977 [1969]), is a foreshadowing of the years to come, where she must remove herself from contact with other members of the family, even her children, during the time that she is *suwā*, or impure, while she is menstruating (Das 2008, 31).

In March of 2014, I was invited to attend a *tuloni biyā* in Betoni Pam village, where I was working with the *bihu* troupe Kāsi Jun, described in Chapter 1. The *tuloni* bride was Priyanka Baruah, a friend of Simimoni Borgohain who performed with Kāsi Jun before her father passed away. Since I was living with Simi's family at the time, all the women of her extended family and I walked down the earthen path together to Priyanka's home. It was early evening, and we joined around 50 women of all ages sitting in circular groups on tarps spread across the newly constructed cement floor of Priyanka's small house. I sat between the area where the older women were gathered to my left and the younger women to my right, thigh pressed against thigh.

[3] Explained to me as related to the throwing of water onto the young woman during the ritual bath.

Little girls and a few little boys were sitting scattered throughout the room. I imagined how exposed and scared I might have felt as a young girl going through these rituals accompanying a physical transformation that I believed was a very private affair. I looked over at Priyanka, who was tucked away among a circle of girls who seemed to be around the same age, including Simi and her younger sister Rimi (Figure 2.4). She was smiling and laughing.

Figure 2.4 – Women gather to sing at Priyanka Baruah's *tuloni biyā* ceremony. Betoni Pam village, Assam. March 18, 2014. Photo by the author.

The women sang *biyā nām* (wedding songs) late into the night as people came to the house bringing gifts for Priyanka. Hard candy, *pān* leaves, 10 and 20 rupee notes, and packets of biscuits were each deposited into a traditional Assamese *xorāi* (brass vessel) covered with a *gāmusā* woven cloth. One of Priyanka's aunts received the gifts on her behalf, and returned the *xorāi* to each guest with a few candies, pieces of *tāmul* (betel nut) and *pān* leaves. As guests moved in and out of the house, one song would end, and another would begin. Since the younger

women and girls in the room tended not to know the song texts, they would repeat each line after the older women, stanza after stanza of the same melody. After a few hours, exhausted and feeling stifled by the stuffy air inside, I stood up to walk out to the house's veranda, accompanied by Rimi. We stood there at the threshold of the house, looking out at the men who had gathered, sitting in circles under a large temporary tent. Many were smoking, and their attention was focused on something in the center of each circle. I found out from an older woman that they were playing cards – gambling. Rimi and I squeezed back into the packed room and found a spot on the floor. Just as another *biyā nām* began to emerge from the women around us, the booming screech of the *pe̊pā* double-reed buffalo horn blasted out from a pair of speakers just outside the house, announcing the arrival of *bihu* into the late night festivities.

The next morning, I proceeded with a smaller group of women and girls to the river to collect water and back to the house where Priyanka was waiting in seclusion. Most of the rituals performed foreshadow those of the wedding the adolescent girl may celebrate with her groom one day. One of the older women who seemed to be directing the ritual activities informed me, "In order to bathe our girl, we have to cover her completely with water [from the river]. After washing, she will be given blessings." As Priyanka sat on a small wooden *pīrā* stool situated at the center of a small platform with four bamboo posts and a conical roof, one aunty directed her grandmother to "hit the soap" (i.e. wash her hair). As each part of the ceremony was performed, the appropriate song was intoned by the group of aunties standing to my left.

Since the *tuloni* bride will have most likely attended the ceremonies of her elder sisters, cousins, or friends, she will probably have some idea of what to expect. But, as I learned from observing Priyanka's *biyā*, the exact order and way to perform each ritual always seems to be debated and contested during the course of the event. As I observed the pouring of water, singing

of songs, and washing with turmeric, I was surprised to hear so many expressions of disagreement among the older women gathered around. Aunties argued over what should happen, when, and how. A particularly striking example of this happened when one auntie realized that Priyanka had just completed the entire bathing ritual without removing her undershirt ("chemise" or "ganjee") or her panties.

Making an upward flailing gesture with both hands, the auntie shouted, "She didn't take off the chemise! Take off the chemise!" Another auntie chimed in, "Haven't taken it off, what are you washing then?" And another, "She didn't take any of it off." And another, "Ooo she didn't even take the ganjee off, what body is she washing then?" Priyanka looked over at the chorus of commenters and quickly removed her panties, kicking them aside with her foot. Then she began removing the undershirt, which was plastered to her wet body underneath the long *mekhelā* (skirt) covering her from the armpits to the knees (Figure 2.5). She removed the thin straps from her shoulders, scrunched them down inside the *mekhelā*, and then began tugging on the undershirt, trying to slide it down her body without exposing her chest.

Realizing her strategy, the first aunty cried out, "She's pushing it down… Should've taken it off from up…" As the undershirt stuck stubbornly to her torso, Priyanka kept tugging, trying to loosen the suction inside the *mekhelā* in order to slide the undershirt down around her buttocks. Another aunty shouted, "Oh why didn't you take it off from above?! You're taking it off from down now?" Another aunty agreed, "She should have taken it off from above." Finally, Priyanka managed to slide the undershirt down around her ankles and kick it off to the side. In her liminal state, Priyanka was the object of everyone's attention and critique. Then, over the next hour, a young woman dressed Priyanka in new clothes and jewelry, and styled her hair and

makeup, moving her into the postliminal phase of incorporation into the community (Turner 1977 [1969]).

Figure 2.5 – Bathing rituals performed during Priyanka Baruah's *tuloni biyā* ceremony. Betoni Pam village, Assam. March 19, 2014. Photo by the author.

The young Assamese woman, having begun menstruation, joins her female peers and elders in sharing both the joy and shame of having transitioned into womanhood (Sharma 2009). As part of the *tuloni biyā*, other teenage girls who already completed their own menstruation ceremonies gathered around Priyanka to sing "*Āgot diyā pāsot diyā*," one of the most well-known wedding songs in Assam. While they sang, they each held a fistful of uncooked rice in their right hand and then dropped the grains into Priyanka's *sādor* cloth that was draped over her head and extended out before them (Figure 2.6). At the end of the ceremony, as Priyanka sat in front of the elder women of the village, gifts were presented to her by different women. If Priyanka experienced feelings of humiliation, these may have been mitigated slightly when her

grandmother was compelled to wear a garland of trash including discarded matchboxes and plastic cups while dancing *bihu* in front of Priyanka at the end of the ceremony.

Figure 2.6 – Young women throw rice at Priyanka Baruah's *tuloni biyā* ceremony. Betoni Pam village, Assam. March 19, 2014. Photo by the author.

While the rituals performed during *tuloni biyā* are focused on the young "bride," the event involves the whole community. Even though men are not permitted to be present during certain parts of the ceremony, they have a role to play, and discourse surrounding the *tuloni biyā* includes commentary on masculinity. Young boys are often present during *tuloni biyā*, but it is considered inappropriate for boys above a certain age to participate. Even during the feast following the ceremony, teenage boys often fight the urge to attend to enjoy the specially

prepared free food.[4] There is a widely shared belief that a boy who eats at a *tuloni biyā* feast will not be able to grow a beard. This is no small threat, since Assamese men are known for having very sparse body hair. The *tuloni biyā,* therefore, functions to educate young people about physical transformations of their bodies as well as the accompanying social expectations regarding how to manage these changes.

Ritual Purity and Personal Hygiene

The *tuloni biyā* marks the beginning of a young woman's journey as a *gābhoru*. For Hindu women in the rural areas of Assam where I work, managing the impurity associated with menstrual bleeding is a critical life skill. While visiting a friend in a small town in Upper Assam, I learned about some of the techniques women use to manage these impurities. I woke up one morning in January 2014 to find my friend Mamoni's flatmate Dristi hanging her bedsheets on the clothesline and draping the cloth mattress outside across a few plastic chairs.[5] I watched through the open door as she splashed water on them with her right hand from a plastic bucket. Mamoni explained to me that it was the third day of Dristi's menstrual cycle, so she had abstained from cooking or cleaning. On the third day she could touch the bed without being *suwā* (impure), so she was performing the ritual washing of the bedding. During Dristi's *suwā* days, Mamoni cooks for Dristi, who returns the favor during the beginning of Mamoni's cycle. I learned that since they cannot afford to buy a refrigerator, Mamoni must return early from work during the first few days of Dristi's cycle to cook for her, otherwise Dristi would not eat. This was striking to me, because I had previously assumed it was the vigilance enforced in the joint family living situation that compelled women to follow these purity rituals. But in this case, two

[4] The feast is one of the hallmarks of *tuloni biyā*, as is the feast offered to guests during a wedding between a man and woman. In fact, the feast is such a significant part of the event that in Assamese, when people say they are going to attend a wedding, they actually say "*biyā khāboloi jām"* ("I'm going to eat a wedding").

[5] Names are changed in order to protect identities.

young women were living together in an apartment with no one around to observe their daily activities. But still, removed from the joint family living arrangement, they strictly followed these purity regulations.

Sociologist Jyoti Puri writes about how urban middle-class women in New Delhi talk about menstruation and managing the flow of their menstrual blood. She emphasizes discourses of cleanliness and seeks to show that, counter to most scholarship on menstruation taboos (Douglas 2005 [1966]; Dube 1988) these women are not fundamentally concerned about "ritual forms of purity and pollution" (Puri 1999, 60). She writes, "Menstruation's concomitant sequelae – discomfort, perceptions of dirtiness, messiness – are not residuals of ritual pollution or overt indexes of female inferiority and potential threat. Rather, they are aspects of a fundamentally different, transnational discourse" (Puri 1999, 60). One of the Delhi women Puri interviewed told her, "When I get my period now nobody in the house comes to know also." Puri writes about how advertising media campaigns use discourses of hygiene to market products like sanitary pads to women who may not have been taught how to use these products by their mothers. According to Puri, purchasing products related to menstruation is the mark of the modern woman.

While Puri writes that for her Delhi interviewees, the "concept of personal hygiene displaces ritual impurity" (1999, 63), the women I work with are genuinely invested in managing their ritual impurities and caring for each other in this endeavor. Puri describes a sense of anxiety surrounding "self management" that her informants share, and I believe the women I work with also share this concern. But the manner in which women like Mamoni and Dristi "manage" themselves is different. For women who believe that their impurity will harm the people they love, concealing their impurity could lead to accidental contamination, and therefore making

impurity known becomes a labor of love. Because Mamoni earns a modest income working in town, she is able to buy products like sanitary pads that make menstruation more "manageable," because she can avoid constantly having to wash soiled cloth rags or worry about leakage. But when she returns to her village on the weekends where the system of waste disposal leaves no appropriate place for her to deposit soiled pads, she must rip each one apart by hand and wash the shreds down the latrine with a bucket of water. In this sense, Mamoni is caught in between an urban consumer-oriented lifestyle and a ritual-bound self-sustaining rural lifestyle.

Studies like Puri's make important arguments about the diversity of experiences in women's lives. Puri demonstrates that although there may seem to be continuity in practices in intimate spheres of women's lives over time, tradition and ritual don't necessarily govern young women's lives in contemporary urban middle-class India. Based on responses from her interviewees, Puri argues that rituals governing purity and defilement are translated through the lens of consumerism into practices of personal hygiene. While this may be true for urban cosmopolitan women, I argue that the focus on analyzing and interpreting the rapid change this generation of young people are experiencing and responding to should not bypass the experiences of those for whom this transition is partial. Many of the women I work with receive the message about consumerist modes of performing gender and sexuality, especially through robust television advertising campaigns, but the message does not find a straightforward path to manifest in their daily lives, evoking a sense of "betweeness" (Leyshon 2008).

The *Buwārī*: Marriage and Mobility

In Assam, as in many parts of India, it is common for a young woman to leave the home of her parents upon marriage and move to the home of her husband. In my work with *bihu* performers, I have found that one of the major obstacles *bihu* troupes face from year to year is

retaining female performers. In Chapter 1, I gave specific examples of *nāsoni*-s in Kāsi Jun *bihu* troupe who left performing for various reasons. In general, marriage seems to be one of the primary events that change circumstances for the *nāsoni*. Many times, the husband's home is far away, and regardless of proximity, married women rarely perform with mixed-gender troupes. As the following *bihu* song describes, a *nāsoni* from the *bihu* troupe got "lost" – cut and carried off like a stalk of bamboo and married into a home far away (Audio 2.4):

Edāli bholukā o logori kune kāṭi nile	Who cut and took away one bamboo stalk?
O logori kune kāṭi nile	O friend, who cut and took it away?
O logori heidāli oi mukoli hol	O friend, that branch is gone!
Āmāre nāsoni o logori keneke herāle	How did our dancer get lost, o friend?
O logori keneke herāle	O friend, how did she get lost?
O logori bihutolī mukoli hol	O friend, the *bihutolī* is empty.

Feminist scholar Leela Dube writes that in many parts of India, girls learn from an early age that they are only temporary members in their parents' home. According to Dube, rituals like *tuloni biyā,* which in Assam often includes marrying the *tuloni* bride to a banana tree, "provide one of the important means through which girls come to realise the inevitability of their transfer from the natal home to that of the husband" (Dube 1988, WS-12). Some scholars argue that the joint family arrangement functions to contain female sexuality and restrict female mobility. Others highlight the importance of the joint family structure to maintaining generational bonds and providing support networks for the elderly and the very young. One of the relationships in this extended family living arrangement that is often dramatized as antagonistic in popular culture and oral narrative is that of the mother-in-law (*xāhumā*) and daughter-in-law (*buwārī*).

Figure 2.7 – *Buwārī* sits on the ground in the presence of men at the home of the Boruah family. Betoni Pam village, Assam. April 14, 2014. Photo by the author.

The life of the *buwārī* is characterized as very difficult, full of physically demanding domestic work that consumes her entire day, and marked by emotional distress inflicted by an overbearing mother-in-law. In villages like Betoni Pam, where I spent time living in different homes, it is not common for families to hire domestic workers to help with household labor, regardless of the family's economic status. For this reason, the domestic labor provided by women who have married into the household is essential to everyday life, and a *buwārī*-s who marries into a family far from the place she was born normally finds limited opportunities to visit her parents and extended family (Figure 2.7).

Societal resistance against allowing a married woman to visit her natal home is expressed in the following Assamese saying: "Bring a girl from far away (at least one day's journey from

her mother's home), but bring a cow from nearby." The underlying meaning suggests that if a man's cow wanders back to its original owner's home nearby, the inconvenience would not be so great, since cows normally spend the day out grazing. But if his wife's original home is nearby, she might frequently leave her domestic duties in order to visit her parents. A similar message emerges in a well-known *bihu* song, which advises an elder brother not to "bring" (i.e. marry) a woman who lives nearby:

Mohor xingor pe̊pāti nobojābi kokāiti	Don't play the *pe̊pā* buffalo horn, elder brother
Tihi-tileu tihi-tileu kore	It makes a loud *tihi-tileu* sound
Usoror suwālī nānibi oi kokāiti	Don't bring a girl from around here, elder brother
Ghoroloi jāu ghoroloi jāu kore	She will keep wanting to return to her home

Beyond implying restrictions on the mobility of the *buwārī*, this song compares the woman's voice to the *tihi-tileu* sound of the double-reed *pe̊pā* buffalo horn, which is commonly played by men during *bihu*. The song suggests that the high-pitched, persistent, nasal sound of the *pe̊pā* would resemble the *buwārī*'s voicing of her desire to visit her natal home, should that home be in close proximity. The reference to the *pe̊pā* may be even more evocative in this metaphorical usage, considering the circular breathing technique used to play it, which creates a stream of sound that could continue indefinitely. At the same time, the fact that the song brings up the need for restricting the mobility of the *buwārī* signals the presence of that strong desire to go back home after marriage.

One occasion when the *buwārī* is allowed a certain amount of freedom is during the *bihu* festival period, which stretches from mid-April to mid-May every year. During this time, *buwārī*-s celebrate the New Year by dancing and singing together, traditionally segregated from men. During *bihu,* the *buwārī* is also allowed a ritual visit to her natal home. Her impatience to

get there and her anger at having to return to the home of her husband afterward is expressed in stories and songs about *Bordoisilā*, the personification of the angry *buwārī* as a monsoon storm. Furious at having been trapped under the roof of her *xāhumā* (mother-in-law), *Bordoisilā* travels to her own mother's home, her natal village, leaving a trail of destruction in her wake. Trees uprooted, homes destroyed by the violent winds and rains, *Bordoisilā* returns at the end of *bihu* to her husband's home. This story expresses a woman's frustration at being contained within the structures and expectations of traditional society, but it also highlights an underlying anxiety about the loss of patriarchal control associated with her mobility. Considering the circumstances associated with the social role of the *buwārī,* the relative freedom of the *gābhoru* woman is significant. This freedom is recognized and celebrated during *bihu,* commemorated in *bihu* song narratives and performed through provocative dance movements. But this freedom and the creative potential of the *gābhoru* body is also accompanied by risks.

Kidnapped Brides and Eloping Couples

In the context of South Asia, which is known for the prevalence of arranged marriages, Assam is unique in its long history of eloping couples. *Bihu* song narratives also sustain this link, as distinctions between intent and consent are blurred by the intoxication of love. One *bihu* song, famously collected from a village near Sibsagar in northern Assam and recorded in 1969 by Khagen and Archana Mahanta for the Gramophone Company, depicts a young woman pounding the *ḍhe̍kī*, a long wooden lever used to grind rice into flour by pumping with the foot.[6] She sings to her male suitor, "Don't take me away while I'm pounding the *ḍhe̍kī,*" suggesting that if he were to kidnap her (i.e. elope), he would have to compensate her family with money. The young

[6] I have transcribed these lyrics from a version of the song recorded by Dasarath Das for Gramophone Company in 1974. I discuss the Mahantas' version in Chapter 3.

man assures her that he is saving up money for this purpose, but then teases her by declaring he has not yet saved enough to purchase her hand (Audio 2.5).

Female:

De ḍhe̍kī de ḍhe̍kī de	Pound the *ḍhe̍kī*, pound the *ḍhe̍kī*
Hātot kulā sāloni loi	Taking the *sāloni* (sieve) in my hand
De ḍhe̍kī di thākibo mon	I feel like continuing, pounding the *ḍhe̍kī*
De ḍhe̍kī di thākute	When I'm pounding the *ḍhe̍kī*
Poluwāi oi ninibā senāiti	Don't kidnap me, my beloved
Bho bhoribo lāgibo dhon	You will have to pay (fill up) money

Male:

Bho bhorile bhori jāu	I will pay (fill up)
Tumāk biyā korāi jāu	I will marry you
Ke keloi nu ghotisu dhon	Why else am I saving money?
So sokuri soṭokā āse āikon Bimolā	But I only have 126 rupees, my sweet Bimola
Ka kenekoi korāi jām biyā	How can I marry you?

When the theme of elopement appears in *bihu* song narratives, it is often when the woman is working that the man sees her as he's passing by and feels compelled to kidnap or run away with her, since the *ḍhe̍kī*, the loom, and the kitchen are all located outside of the village home.

Another song that features elopement was collected by folklorist Prafulladatta Goswami and published in his *bihu* song anthology. This song suggests that the young man might be tempted to carry the young woman off while she is dancing *bihu*:

Bihu māri[7] *thākibor mone oi lohori*	I want to keep dancing and singing *bihu,* oh friend
Bihu māri thākibor mon	I want to keep dancing and singing *bihu*
Bihu māri thākute poluwāi ninibā	Don't carry me off while I dance and sing
Bhoribo lāgibo dhon	You will have to pay (fill up) money

[7] The verb "*māriboloi*" actually means "to strike," but refers to the combined activities of dancing, singing, and generally enjoying the celebration of *bihu* with others.

In January 2015, over glasses of home-brewed rice liquor, Mintu and Dipali Gogoi shared with me their concerns regarding their daughter Sima's future. A member of Kāsi Jun, the *bihu* troupe with which I had been performing and conducting ethnographic research, Sima had recently turned 16 and was ranked as one of the best performers in her village. Her parents told me that more than a few of Sima's friends eloped with their boyfriends, but soon found out that their new husbands were alcoholics and physically abusive. According to Mintu and Dipali, after getting divorced, these young women returned home so their parents could find more suitable husbands. These cautionary tales position parents as providing a critical layer of protection around vulnerable daughters who cannot be trusted to choose suitable partners. A contrasting narrative circulates in *bihu* songs, which tend to celebrate the relative freedom of the springtime *bihu* season and the budding passion concealed just behind a flirtatious exchange. Considering the association of the springtime *bihu* with eloping couples, Mintu's extra concern for Sima during this season might be warranted.

The next morning when I joined Dipali on the front veranda to help her peel onions, she revealed to me that she had eloped with Mintu when she was 14, two years younger than Sima. Since Mintu was 23 at the time, he was jailed for kidnapping a minor. She explained to me that couples usually elope because their parents don't agree with their intent to marry. Sometimes the girl's parents call the police, accusing the young groom of kidnapping their daughter. When I inquired with the Superintendent of Police responsible for the area, he confirmed that he makes frequent trips to other districts to retrieve young girls who have been reported as kidnapped by their parents, only to find out that they have run off with their sweethearts.

Figure 2.8 – Manisha Borah and Montu Gogoi playing the roles of Komola and Moniram in a performance of *Menaka* at Nalbari Theatre Fest, Nalbari, Assam. April 28, 2014. Photo by the author.

Rumors about young lovers having sex in the forest and eloping against their parents' wishes are popular and common, but nonetheless scandalous. Celebrated Assamese writer Homen Borgohain took up this theme in his 1987 novel *Matsyagandha.* In the novel, a young woman named Komola falls in love with Moniram, a young man who is already betrothed to someone else. Their mutual attraction blossoms during *bihu*, and their first physically intimate moment occurs in Moniram's boat as he ferries Komola across the river from her family's rice field back to her home. The popular novel was transformed into a play by Anup Hazarika and Pakija Begum under the title *Menaka* and staged by their "BA" theatre troupe at an Assam state drama festival in February 2015. In the scene that portrays this intimate encounter, Komola and Moniram sing alternating *bihu* song stanzas to each other with full-throated passion. As they

embrace, Komola's hair tumbles down her back and the lights turn blood red (Figure 2.8). The subsequent news of her pregnancy is a twist in the plot, which sends the characters into turmoil.

The reality of teen pregnancy and other risks associated with the loosening of social norms during festival season motivate me to take the experiences of young performers seriously when considering the narratives expressed in *bihu* songs about young love, elopement, and other themes associated with the *gābhoru* body. Agricultural and human fertility celebrated during *bihu* is more than just a myth for many young Hindu women I worked with in Assam. Many of their families' livelihoods depend on agricultural cultivation, and their own education related to fertility and coming-of-age have been experienced in part during the *tuloni biyā* ceremony. For these women, becoming *gābhoru* is more than just a metaphor often romanticized in *bihu* song narratives. It is a gendered role with social responsibilities and risks that young women learn to inhabit. In this context, the *gābhoru* body is a site on which debates about gender and sexuality are played out in everyday life.

The legacy of stories that circulated during the colonial period portraying Assamese women as sexually insatiable conjurers have not disappeared, but have become incorporated into the way women from the northeast are perceived by people from other parts of India. As *bihu* has been developed into a state-wide celebration of Assamese cultural heritage and young people pursue opportunities to perform *bihu* outside Assam, the prejudice and threats of violence that are increasingly being reported in national news media are of concern. In Chapter 3, I shift my focus to the urban folk performance scene to investigate how elements of everyday rural life have become incorporated into a folk sensibility that mediates the performance of Assamese identity on the world stage.

Chapter Three – It Entered My Body: Articulating a Folk Sensibility in Assam

> It is said, "Time is precious. Time is also very cruel. Time and tide wait for none." I think it is high time, if we do not take care and caution, in time, our rich cultural heritage are likely to be jeopardized, which will entail loss of our identity.
>
> --- Sankar Prasad Kakoti Bora, Regional Director, ICCR[1]

These words, spoken at a 2008 "Seminar on Folk Music" in Assam's metropolitan center, Guwahati, represent a widely shared anxiety surrounding cultural loss and identity in contemporary India. State-sponsored arts institutions such as the Kalakshetra, and the combined "Artisans Village" and performance venue Shilpagram in Guwahati have served as arenas for debating issues surrounding the preservation and promotion of what are collectively known as the folk arts, encompassing music, dance, drama, storytelling, musical instruments, and visual arts including textiles. When ICCR Regional Director Bora claimed during the seminar that "Folk music forms an integral part of the Indian culture, which is presently being threatened by film music or pop music," he was not only declaring a call to action, but also enacting "gender- and caste-inflected sociomoral discourses encoded in the performances of the present" (Soneji 2012, 225). From this top-down perspective, preserving folk music is a critical intervention involving codification of formal elements including tune types, rhythmic patterns and compiling anthologies of song lyrics. Central to this philosophy is the essential outward looking focus, where the ultimate goal of preservation is to create a standardized, teachable repertoire that can be disseminated through various channels as a representative sample of a community's cultural essence to the outside world.

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[1] Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Gov't of India.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the elements that locate *bihu* in the realm of "folk," and how these intersect with local discourses of the body. Beyond the physical training performers undertake in order to prepare their bodies for singing, drumming and dancing, the performing body takes on symbolic significance as part of an embodied politics of representation. I argue that gender and caste, which are critical identifiers of personhood in contemporary India, are not self-evident qualities of a performer's body. Instead, these emerge through the act of performance – be it on stage, in rehearsal, or as part of everyday life. The everyday activities associated with rural life that are encoded in *bihu* song texts, melodies, rhythms and movements provide clues about the potential of the rural to represent values associated with a particular vision for Assamese modernity.

For performers who live in rural areas, many of the iconic aspects of *bihu* are familiar, but for many who live in Guwahati, institutionalized training is one of the main venues for learning *bihu* performance techniques and associated meanings. As scholars who analyze body-disciplining techniques related to training for war and nationalistic competitive sports have shown, training the physical body has a powerful ideological component (MacAloon 1984; Alter 1992, 1994, 2000; Appadurai 1996; Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011). Following Joseph Alter's (1994) conceptualization of "somatic nationalism," which approaches Indian wrestling as a way of life tied to discourses of the state, I argue that learning to perform *bihu* can be understood as training in citizenship. Through *bihu,* students learn how to embody a folk aesthetic, which is critical for the representation of Assam on the world stage. But *bihu* is not alone in this regard. Once confined to the spring festival season, *bihu* has become ubiquitous, performed at any time of the year alongside many other folk performance traditions of Assam, each associated with a specific tribe or caste group.

Politics of Genre and Style

Although early music scholars working in South Asia tended to study either one of the "classical" styles of Indian music and dance performance or one of the many regional folk or devotional performance traditions, over the past decades, scholars have increasingly recognized that the boundaries between tribal, folk, classical, and devotional categories have never been as distinct in practice as earlier analyses suggested (Babiracki 1991; Groesbeck 1999). I have observed this phenomenon in my research, especially with regard to the prevalence of practitioners participating in performances of multiple genres and styles. Very few musicians and dancers can survive solely on the profits gained through *bihu* performance, and according to my preliminary research, this does not seem to be a desirable goal.

Versatility with respect to performance genres, styles, and contexts is usually an asset for performers in Assam, especially since the most lucrative *bihu* performance opportunities are clustered around the spring season. Some of the most famous *bihu* singers in Assam have trained in Hindustani vocal music, which many musicians consider the most important foundation of a good singing voice. Additionally, some of the most famous *bihu* dancers, many of whom are also actresses in Assamese films, have training in *Xotrīyā* dance — Assam's "classical" dance tradition. It could be argued that a singing voice trained in Hindustani vocal music, and a body trained in Assam's *Xotrīyā* dance tradition produces a particular kind of disciplined sound and movement distinguished from the free, exuberant, undisciplined nature of *bihu* song and dance. In the popular media and on the cinema screen, *bihu* is sung and danced by different women, in the "playback" arrangement common in cinema across the Subcontinent: *bihu* singers are heard and *bihu* dancers are seen. A "classicized" aesthetic protects women performers from the kind of criticism that would attack their character as improper.

Scholars in ethnomusicology, anthropology and history have analyzed the processes by which diverse music and dance sources were consolidated into "classical" traditions in the twentieth century (Neuman [1980] 1990; Allen 1997; Bakhle 2005; Weidman 2006; Subramanian 2008). Many scholars have emphasized that the processes involved in classicization have negatively affected hereditary female performers, undermining their authority, dismantling their patronage structures, condemning them to prostitution, and ultimately erasing them from history (Qureshi 2006; Maciszewski 2006, 2007; Putcha 2011; Schofield 2012; Soneji 2012; Morcom 2013; Walker 2014). These processes of classicization have unfolded differently in Assam, where the local classical dance form, *Xotrīyā*, was for centuries practiced by celibate men (*bhokot*-s) living in monasteries (*xotro*-s) on the river island Majuli, devoted to following the teachings of the 16th century *bhokti* reformer Xrīmonto Xongkordew.

Although *bhokot*-s continue to practice *Xotrīyā* in the *xotro*-s still operating on Majuli island, in the middle of the 20th century, some *bhokot*-s began to leave the *xotro*-s to settle in nearby towns, to marry, and to teach women this performance tradition that encompasses music, dance and drama. It was not until the year 2000 that *Xotrīyā* dance, championed by Indira P. P. Bora — one of the first professional female *Xotrīyā* dancers in Assam — was officially recognized by Sangeet Natak Akademi as one of India's national classical dance forms (Viswanathan and Janaki 1999; Thakur 2005). In this sense, Assam's representative classical dance does not share the rich cultural legacy of hereditary female court or temple performers with other parts of the Subcontinent.

Folk songs have a relatively long history as the objects of anthropological and ethnomusicological study. In *The Music of the Bauls of Bengal* (1986), ethnomusicologist

Charles Capwell interrogated the "hypothetical realm of folk," describing Baul musicians' experiences with international travel, producing commercial recordings for film, radio and television, and performing at urban music festivals, which many feared would "undermine the validity of a folk tradition" (1986, 59). Baul songs had already enjoyed international commercial attention, but Capwell brought an analytical lens to the tradition, shedding light on the decisions individual performers made that affected their performance careers. Most other folk song repertories in South Asia studied by ethnomusicologists at the time were not accessible to an international audience. Edward O. Henry's study of Bhojpuri songs (1988) was one of the first to present a nuanced analysis of village social dynamics based on an extended fieldwork period that focused largely on women's songs and incorporated musical transcriptions. One critique of the book is its near omission of the music and perspectives of low-caste village residents. Responding to his critics, Henry analyzed Maithil women's songs and includes a final section about how the increasing popularity of brass band film music was beginning to drown out traditional wedding songs, echoing scholars concerned about disappearing performance traditions (1998).

The work of feminist anthropologists such as Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja in rural Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan countered colonial constructions of South Asian women as submissive carriers of tradition through analysis of folk song texts (1994; 1997). Kirin Narayan boldly challenged researchers to critically consider the interpretations of the singers themselves when trying to make sense of the meaning embedded in folk song texts (1995). These pioneers demonstrated the subversive potential of folksong performance, examining how songs become vehicles for the construction and reproduction of gender identity, how songs broaden our understanding of women's agency, and what role songs play in the maintenance and

internalization of inequality in women's lives. I take from these studies the importance of interrogating caste politics and kinship relations, the possibility of claiming agency for rural, disadvantaged women, and the utility of closely reading orally transmitted song texts.

Tarini Bedi's (2012) exploration of the way working-class mothers active in the male-dominated, militant Shiv Sena political party publicly perform their political agency, and her consideration of intimate emotions, such as grief after having lost a child, inspires my own questions about the opportunities marginalized female performers are able to access in the public sphere in Assam and beyond, and the risks that accompany the visibility gained through public performance. My analysis of gender also draws on the work of ethnomusicologists beyond the context of South Asia who pioneered the study of the relationship between music and gender. They brought the value of cross-cultural study of women's song repertories to scholarly attention (Koskoff 1987), and explored the implications of gender ideologies on musical practices (Diamond and Moisala 2000; Magrini 2003).

From a single unaccompanied voice, to fully orchestrated synthesized recordings, to techno dance music and rock, *bihu* has traveled, circulating through various media, but is nevertheless clearly recognizable as *bihu.* For Paul Greene, "The 'folk' is a variable and multifaceted cultural construction that engages both the past and the future and that often serves shifting political and nationalistic ends" (2002, 43). In a similar role as *bihu*, Greene argues that Nepali Lok Pop, performed by young urban Nepalis, "serves the state's agendas of modernity" which are "internalized by many Nepalis and rooted in competing and sometimes contradictory ideologies" (2002, 44). Like *bihu*, Nepali Lok Pop is "caught up in a mutually-constituting tension between desires for something authentic and traditional on the one hand; and drives toward a new, cosmopolitan, commercially-empowered society on the other" (2002, 44).

Through song texts, melodic and rhythmic conventions, and studio effects, both *bihu* and Nepali Lok Pop index rural life and nostalgia for an imagined rural past.

As I demonstrate this chapter, the recording studio is a critical place for the production of *bihu.* Stefan Fiol explores the complexities of the relationship between rural festival traditions and music industries in South Asia by studying how musicians move between villages and production studios (2011). Working with musicians from Uttarakhand who travel to studios in New Delhi to record songs associated with festival dances, Fiol writes that many Uttarakhandis believe the urban recording studio to be a space of modern musical production distinguished from the traditional, rural festival space. Fiol acknowledges the operation of a widely shared modernist discourse that relies on dichotomies such as global/local and popular/folk (2011, 25). Although I draw on Fiol's findings for conceptual and ethnographic inspiration, I depart from his methods, which focus mainly on the experiences of men who tend to dominate public arenas. I adopt a critical approach to considering the role of gender in the production of expressive culture, analyzing how access to mobility is gendered and how young women navigate personal risks that are often articulated as traditional values rather than structural effects of patriarchy and capitalism.

Creating a Folk Sensibility: Marking Assamese Modernity

Recognizing that many of Assam's various communities, often distinguished by tribe, caste, or religion, have each claimed their own unique style of folk music and dance, it is clear that folk performance is a marker of becoming modern in contemporary Assam. Drawing on Lila Abu-Lughod's formulation of Egyptian modernity as marked by "modern sensibilities" through melodramatic television serials, I argue that in Assam, a folk sensibility, rooted in romanticized rural life, is a key marker of Assamese modernity (Abu-Lughod 2005). Similar to Abu-Lughod's

Egyptian serials, folk performance in Assam is characterized by an "unapologetic moralism" as well as the "quality of emotionality, with affect located in ordinary life" (2005, 113).

This folk sensibility drives the creation of a folk canon, which is a dynamic process and a critical part of the project of modernity in post-Independence India. The "dialectical bridging of text and context" involved in the ongoing process of canonization encodes shared values narrativized in song texts and embodied through performance (Bohlman 1988, xviii). For example, the contemporary practice of *bihu* performance, having developed alongside Assamese nationalism, has become an integral part of defining a vision for social life in Assam, and debates surrounding *bihu* align with debates about Assamese social values. Due to this close relationship, the stakes of performing *bihu* converge in social, political, and economic domains, as I demonstrate in this dissertation. The fact that Assam is underrepresented in the Indian national media makes the stakes higher for every performance broadcast outside of Assam, and every touring performance troupe, especially considering the historical legacy that perpetuated marginalization of the northeast region in the Indian imagination, as discussed in Chapter 2. Therefore, for cultural elites including members of corporate-sponsored *xobhā*-s and state-sponsored cultural institutions, it is important that a particular version of *bihu* is projected.

The concerns voiced by Bora and other cultural authorities in Assam with guarding the "true" folk music from the "inflections of other genres or the mass media" have characterized folk music scholarship worldwide (Bohlman 1988, xiv). Debates among members of corporate-sponsored cultural organizations (*xobhā-s*) about performance practices and recording techniques find wide circulation via forums on Assamese news channels. The eclectic mix of voices range from professional drummers, dancer-actresses, and university trained folklorists to respected members of the Assamese elite whose opinions on cultural issues are given airtime. Heated

arguments often ensue when television channels call *xobhā* members to debate on talk show panels alongside singers who record and perform "modern" (*ādhunik*) *bihu* songs which are popular with the masses but frowned upon by the cultural elite. Although *bihu* songs have been recorded in studios and circulated since as early as the 1960s via vinyl albums, cassettes, CDs, and most recently mp3s, aesthetic decisions made in the studio continue to be debated in these forums. Artists who record and perform "*bihu* modern songs" incorporate synthesized chords as background harmonic fillers and "bridge" sections that move beyond the traditional pentatonic melodic framework, marking what is considered a to be a "modern" aesthetic. But artists have also used studio techniques to create a "rustic" feel that they argue captures the true "feeling" of *bihu* ("*bihu lāgise*").

Similar debates regarding *bihu* dance focus on the movements of the *nāsoni*, the female *bihu* dancer. While male *bihu* performers also dance, their movements have not come under scrutiny, which is understandable considering the association of the performing female body with upholding norms of respectability. *Bihu* dance has been performed on public stages since at least the 1950s, but the more recent media explosion that launched Assam's news channels into the 24-hour cycle has been accompanied by live and repeat broadcasts of stage performances and competitions, as well as a proliferation of serial dramas and more recently reality television style song and dance competitions featuring *bihu.* Feature-length *bihu*-themed VCD films portray stories of romance and betrayal set during the *bihu* festival season and incorporate song and dance sequences similar in function to the famous Bollywood film song, where the protagonist plays out hidden desires, advancing the film's plot through *bihu* song and dance. Increasingly, *bihu* music albums are accompanied by music videos circulated on YouTube. The dance choreographies performed in these film sequences and music videos differ from those performed

in competitions, where movements are strictly observed by judges, most of whom belong to corporate-sponsored *xobhā*-s and participate in judging summits to standardize *bihu* song and dance.

Debates about authenticity often focus on how "old" (*puronā*) a *bihu* song is, and whether the lyrical themes capture the "feeling" of *bihu*. Debates about a performer's ability to correctly render a *bihu* song often focus on the tunefulness of the singer's voice (*ḍhek*), the extent to which the singer has mastered the correct application of breath pressure (*heṁsā*), and more recently how "raw" the sound is. And debates regarding *bihu* dance performance by women often focuses on the "breaking" of the waist (*koṁkāl bhāngi*), the position of the arms, the bending of the torso (*hāuli*), and the proper execution of the various spins (*pāk*), as well as how well the *nāsoni* can mask the effort she expends while dancing by maintaining a smile throughout her performance and staying in tune while singing after having danced.

Because the category of folk is associated with the embodied knowledge of the "common people" and therefore is understood to be shared cultural knowledge, sometimes Assamese people are called upon to perform this knowledge to demonstrate their connection to their identity. I can recall many occasions when *bihu* music was being played, either live or recorded, and people who were originally reluctant to dance eventually joined after some prodding. Many times these people could do no more than flap their arms in the air and bounce to the beat, but the fact of participating in *bihu* performance was a statement of Assamese solidarity. In contrast to contexts like the village Betoni Pam featured in Chapter 1, where all children in the village learn to perform from a young age as part of rituals associated with agricultural prosperity and the New Year, many young people growing up in Guwahati do not have access to these pedagogical opportunities. Instead, as is the case with institutionalized music and dance training

across India, students in Guwahati can learn to perform a variety of traditions under one roof, including so-called classical, devotional, and folk genres.

Panchasur: Folk Music and Dance Training in Guwahati

My dissertation project is one effort to show some of the variety in performance practice by drawing links between *bihu* performance and the wider context of performers lives by focusing on one troupe as they move between ritual contexts and the proscenium stage (Chapter 1) and by examining the connections between *bihu*'s celebration of fertility, local histories and colonial stereotypes of feminine power, and the creative potential of young women as they come of age in Assam (Chapter 2). But here, I turn to a folk music and dance school in Guwahati, called *Panchasur* ("five notes" or "Pentatonic") where I have spent time learning alongside other students and interacting with the school's directors, Probin and Roshmi Saikia (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 – Probin and Roshmi Saikia teach at home. Guwahati, Assam. March 28, 2015. Photo by the author.

The Saikias are folklore researcher-performers often called upon by Mr. Kakoti Bora from the ICCR to serve as "resource persons." Their experience travelling to different parts of Assam in order to learn folk songs from a variety of Assamese communities and teach them to urban students makes them ideal interlocutors for the government to draw on as representatives of Assamese folk culture. In turn, the Saikias have been awarded ICCR funding for dance-drama projects they have created and directed, which incorporate Assamese folk songs into dramatic narratives and provide opportunities for the students of their school to perform. As folk researchers and performers who are active in the local music recording industry, the Saikias use their school not only to educate students about what folk means, but also to provide opportunities for their students to perform in government-sponsored events and prepare them to pursue careers as independent performing artists. As teaching and learning have become increasingly institutionalized, the Saikias and other educator-performers play an important role in bridging the experiential gap between the material students are learning, and their everyday lives in Guwahati. Education and practical training in performance are meant to narrow this gap by bringing students closer to the lived experiences from which folk songs, folk dances, folk tales and folk dramas are believed to emerge.

Roshmi gave me an example of some of the struggles she and her husband Probin face when educating young people in today's media-saturated world by drawing my attention to a well known *bihu* song, and asking me to recite its lyrics. I began, "*Pīriti, pīriti, pīriti, pīriti mīṭhā sirā doi*." (Love, love, love, love is sweet like *sirā doi*). Roshmi stopped me after the first line, asking me why *sirā doi* would be given as an example of something sweet. *Sirā* is a type of flat rice which needs only to be soaked in water in order to eat, and *doi* is yogurt. The two combined form a typical breakfast food eaten in Upper Assam, which is traditionally served on the first

morning of *bihu*, and at other ceremonial times of the year. Since the rice and yoghurt are not sweet, they are combined with *gur,* or cane sugar sometimes translated in English as "jaggery." I told Roshmi that I had assumed the song compared the sweetness of love to the sweetness of *sirā doi*, with its sweet *gur* included. "That's what most people think," Roshmi responded.

The story Roshmi subsequently told me about the original lyrics of the song highlights not only the disconnect between traditional lifeways and urban cosmopolitan experience, but also the continued ignorance of and disregard for traditional knowledge and the role of the media in perpetuating this disconnect. Roshmi told me that the original lyrics of the song were "*surā doi,*" not "*sirā doi*." When a famous artist recorded the song and made it into a popular hit, he thought the lyrics, having been sung by illiterate farmers, were either incorrect, or the pronunciation of the word "*sirā*" had become tarnished by an improper Assamese dialect. In fact, Roshmi explained, *surā doi* refers to the top layer of froth that bubbles up when cooking sugar cane in order to make *gur.* The person who first sang this song knew about the process of making *gur* and knew that the top layer is the sweetest part, which is removed and kept separately.

***Gāt Xumāle*: *Bihu* Entering the Body**

One evocative phrase Roshmi and others used to describe the point at which a student has achieved an important step towards learning *bihu*, is that *bihu* has "entered the body" (*gāt xumāle*). Since folk songs and dances are conceptualized as deeply rooted in the identity of a community and tied to their physical reality, the process of "entering the body" is one that happens during the course of everyday life. But for people interested in learning to perform a tradition outside their everyday experiences, this process is distinct. Roshmi explained to me that there are some things that cannot be taught, but must be learned from life experience. As an example, Roshmi described a workshop she organized on Deurī *bihu* dance (called "*bisu"* in the

Deurī language). *Bisu* music and dance are associated with the Deurī tribe's New Year's rituals, which happen a few days after the *bihu* rituals of the mainstream *Oxomīyā* community.

Having grown up as part of the dominant *Oxomīyā* community known for the style of *bihu* that is most widespread and well-known within and outside of Assam, Roshmi is often called upon to teach *Oxomīyā bihu* songs at ICCR workshops sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, and she teaches these songs to her students as well. But when it comes to the *bihu* traditions associated with other communities, for example those recognized by the Indian government as Scheduled Tribes (i.e. Deurī *bisu*, Sunuwāl Kāchāri *bihu*, Bodo *bwisāgu,* and Mising *oi-ni:tom* songs and *gomrag* dance), Roshmi calls on her colleagues, educator-performers who belong to these communities. She studies with them in order to prepare for her own performances of Deurī, Sunuwāl Kāchāri, Bodo and Mising songs, and she invites them to teach her students directly by organizing workshops that are open to the wider public.

Roshmi described the experience of awe she felt during the Deurī *bihu* workshop. The main instructor, one of her Deurī colleagues, focused on teaching dance, and he had brought along a group of musicians to perform during the workshop as well (Figure 3.2). As Roshmi described the beauty of the dances and songs, she also drew my attention to the way the main singer created the illusion of distance with his singing technique. Roshmi explained, "He was singing near to me, but it seemed like the voice was coming from *very* far away." As I learned from our conversation, creating the impression of distance with the voice is an iconic property of Deurī singing style. Roshmi told me, "I mean, you can't copy that, you can't learn that. If *we* would learn to sing it, that impression would never come. I mean, it *exists* from deep inside him."

Figure 3.2 – Women performing Deurī *bihu*. Bormoriya Deurī Village, Assam. April 17, 2011. Photo by the author.

What is so elusive about this singing technique that even Roshmi, accomplished in many styles of folksong, admits she can't learn and can't teach? This example strikes me as particularly interesting, because the commonly spoken form of the Deurī language has become almost indistinguishable from Assamese, but many Deurī words have been preserved in Deurī *bisu* songs. While the rhythm of Deurī *bisu* is almost indistinguishable from the mainstream *Oxomīyā bihu*, the dance style and dress are very distinct (Figure 3.3). Roshmi's suggestion that a Deurī *bisu* song can enter some bodies but not others is perplexing, because it goes beyond arguments about talent and learning potential having to do with mental capacity, aural skills, and vocal production typically invoked in discussions of music transmission.

In their work on the idea of tribe in India over the past two decades, Babiracki (1991) and Wolf (2000) have not only highlighted the importance of the category to generations of music researchers working in India, but also the ways in which "tribe" persists in India while the rest of the world seems to have left this term behind. They have raised important questions about whether musical characteristics can plausibly be called "tribal," or if the category applies only to people. And they have grappled with the idea of local categories: what is the musical, social, and political significance of the term "tribal" and its translations in local languages to performers? By claiming that a Deurī way of singing "exists" from deep inside the performer, Roshmi is perhaps referencing the problematic assumption that tribal culture resides naturally in tribal bodies. This ideological orientation towards "tribal culture" informs the basic underlying logic that drives the folk performance industry in which Roshmi and Probin have built their careers.

Figure 3.3 – Women performing *Oxomīyā bihu*. Borpothar Village, Assam. April 22, 2014. Photo by the author.

Preservation Through Performance: Creating Boundaries Around the Folk

Although she performs songs associated with different tribal communities, Roshmi's expertise is in folk songs associated with *Oxomīyā* culture, including devotional *nām-kīrton* of Xongkoriya Vaishnavism, lullabies (*dhāi nām or nisukoni gīt*), children's game songs, and *Oxomīyā bihu* songs. Part of the mission of *Panchasur* is to preserve the purity of folk music in the face of modernization and digital innovations in the interconnected industries of music, dance, film and theatre. Roshmi explained to me that creating boundaries around the folk genre is important for maintaining its distinction from other genres. She sees her role as both helping to formalize these boundaries through ongoing debates with colleagues in the performing arts, while also teaching young aspiring performers to understand what these shifting boundaries are and why they are important. As we sat in her drawing room a few months ago, sipping black tea, she explained:

> The boys and girls that are coming out as singers and dancers today, no one them information about these things. No one explained to them that if certain elements are present, it's folk, and if those elements are not present, it's not folk. Get it?

After spending months learning to perform alongside Roshmi's students, and traveling to villages and small towns in different parts of Assam, I'm starting to "get it." In the context of expressive cultural performance in Assam, ideas about the essential nature of folk are entangled with discourses of shared history, belonging, and ownership of embodied cultural practices. The folk genre brings together a diverse set of performance traditions under one banner, including popular and devotional repertories associated with different communities. In this context, the folk plays an important role, because of its association with the vernacular and with embodied practice, and its potential for creating comparative relationships between otherwise distinct

communities. Folktales, folk songs and folk dances live in the telling, singing, moving body of the people.

Although the "folk" category has been contested among scholars, it still holds a prominent place in the Indian academy and Indian cultural arts institutions such as the ICCR. As part of a wider field of folk arts, folk music has traditionally been interpreted as text in the form of song lyrics. In Assam, songs are "collected" from rural areas where everyday people are presumed to harbor cultural gems that need to be preserved. The creative process of canonization, which is related to Hobsbawm's notion of the "invention of tradition," (1983) is obscured by the discourse of discovery. Rustom Bharucha makes a compelling case in an essay arguing that "folk theatre" is an invention of the urban intelligentsia, created from elements of tribal and rural performance practices (Bharucha 1990). Folk forms are by definition found forms, and the codification of these forms is routinely interpreted not as an act of creation but an act of discovery and exposure.

The Assamese Language Movement and the History of the Folk Arts in Assam

Many popular contemporary ideas about the nature of "folk" in Assam have roots in the early twentieth century Assamese literary movement spearheaded by writers like Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938). Bezbaroa used narrative tropes associated with romanticism to create a sense of unity among Assamese-speaking people. This literary movement emerged in response to the period when the Assamese language was overshadowed by Bengali, which the British administration established as the official language of greater Assam from 1837 until 1873. Besides his numerous short stories and popular magazine articles, one of Bezbaroa's most influential contributions has been a collection of folktales called *Buṛhi Āir Xādhu* (*Grandmother's Folktales*) first published in 1910 (Figure 3.4). Through its unity of narrative

themes and characters featured in folktales collected from diverse communities in Assam, this work served as fodder for bringing into being an Assamese folk sensibility. This folk sensibility was mobilized by young Kolkata-trained, Assamese-speaking intellectuals such as Bezbaroa and his contemporaries, who were discouraged by exclusion from government jobs reserved for Bengali speakers, to mount a campaign to gain recognition for the value of the Assamese language.

Figure 3.4 – Sculpture of *Buṛhi Āir Xādhu* dramatization featuring a grandmother telling folktales to young children, Dibrugarh University Park, Dibrugarh, Assam. February 26, 2014. Photo by the author.

The folk genre serves as a powerful form of evidence for shared history and cultural unity because of the way it is imbued with a certain timelessness that comes from the romanticist paradigm which Bezbaroa understood so well. In the opening of Nandana Dutta's 2012 volume of English translations of folktales from different communities in Assam, she translates

Bezbaroa's "confession" about the extent to which he took creative license in rewriting the folktales published in *Buṛhi Āir Xādhu*. Bezbaroa states:

> I collected stories written in many ways, from a number of people, and I read, combined and selected, excluded and included and then wrote them anew. Actually the language, in which these tales were written and sent to me, has been almost completely changed.

Dutta draws attention to the ways in which the collection of cultural materials is always already involved in the politics of representation, and complicated even further by the issue of translation. Bezbaroa recreated the tales he collected[2] in order to create a body of evidence for a shared Assamese culture as a kind of social fact, not bound by distinctions of caste and tribe. The influence of his collection over the general public to this day is quite impressive, as his tales have made their way into elementary school curricula and oral tradition. I experienced this firsthand at a Grassroots Comics workshop held at the NGO Rural Volunteer Center (RVC) in Dhemaji District, where I lived for a few months in 2011. Around twenty children had come from surrounding villages to participate in this workshop, which was intended to teach participants how to create comic strips depicting significant events in their lives tied to social issues. The workshop director who had come from New Delhi was baffled when, upon asking the children to write down a story of some event that happened in their lives, three different children independently wrote down the same story: a tale from Bezbaroa's collection.

As Dutta and her team of collectors traveled to villages in search of "undiscovered" tales, they found that Bezbaroa's collection had "slipped into circulation and into the psyche of the people so comprehensively" that it was difficult to determine to what extent the tales they

[2] The nature of this collecting and recreating project is known in some circles, but it doesn't seem to be common knowledge among the general public, instead it seems to be taken for granted that these tales have been passed down orally and captured in print in a more or less straightforward, unmanipulated fashion. Those aware of Bezbaroa's project methodology, for example, English scholars in Assam, compare his project to that of the Brothers Grimm, who sought to unite the German mind, emotion, and imagination despite regional differences through collecting and publishing folk tales.

encountered had been influenced by this canon. Dutta believes folk tale collections published by literary associations (*Xāhityo Xobhā*) of different linguistic communities in Assam used Bezbaroa as a model, complicating romanticist assumptions that folk genres exist in "pure" states and can be discovered in rural areas. This paradigm however is still very powerful in Assam, where economic and infrastructural development have proceeded haphazardly and unevenly across the state, and urban researchers continue to search for an elusive overarching Assamese identity through discovering embodied knowledge in the form of folk tales, songs and dances in so-called "remote" villages.

Transmission of Traditional Knowledge

Not so long ago, it was more common for people to spend time in contexts where folk performance was shared, learned, and critiqued as a part of daily and seasonal activities, for example during food preparation at home, or working together during crop cultivation. Roshmi and Probin Saikia's students live in Assam's capital Guwahati, where urban cosmopolitan ways of life include a busy daily schedule with organized after-school activities for children, and households where both parents work outside of the home. Many families live in apartments without space for traditional Assamese cooking equipment such as the outdoor wood or bamboo-burning stove and the leg-powered *ḍhe̊kī* used to pound rice into flour. The combination of a faster-paced life, the shift from wood and bamboo-fueled cooking to gas, and the mechanization of rice grinding, are some of the factors that have diminished the time people spend together to share embodied cultural knowledge.

One important context for the transmission of *bihu* songs, especially among women and children, is during food preparation. In traditional joint family living situations, much of the domestic labor falls to the daughters-in-law (*buwārī*) who leave their natal homes to marry into

their husbands' families. In 2011, I visited Santipur village in Dhemaji District, around 450 kilometers from Guwahati, and I spent some time at the home of Laboinya Das, who had married into the Das family from a village around an hour drive from Santipur (Figure 3.5). On April 13, the day before the *bihu* festival was to begin, Laboinya, her co-*buwārī*-s, and a few children of the household were engaged in the long and taxing process of making *piṭhā*, local sweets made from home-ground rice flour.

Figure 3.5 – Laboinya Das sings *bihu* songs while sifting rice flour ground by the *ḍhekī.* Santipur village, near Silapathar, Assam. April 13, 2011. Photo by the author.

As I spoke with Laboinya, asking about her knowledge of *bihu* songs and rituals associated with the festival, she maintained a squatting position low to the ground where she could reach the earthen hole at the end of the household's *ḍhekī*. Standing at the rear end of the *ḍhekī* and steadying herself by holding a rope tied to the thatched roof covering the area, a younger woman took cues from Laboinya regarding when to pump the long wooden lever with her foot, and when to stop. As Laboinya added rice to the hole and removed the fine powder, scooping handfuls into a sieve and sifting the flour into a large metal bowl, she sang *bihu* songs that came to mind. Tossing the flour leftover in the sieve back into the *ḍhekī* hole to refine once more, she left the sieve aside and continued singing. Perhaps moved by the pleasure of singing and the presence of an audience, she started clapping the *bihu* rhythm with both hands on the sides of the metal bowl.

After she finished singing around five stanzas to the same tune, Laboinya looked straight at me and asked, "What do you say? How was it?" I replied emphatically, "Great! Great! It was very good!" Satisfied with my response, she continued with a big smile, "Singing *bihu* songs like this, and making *piṭhā* like this, now that I'm a *buwārī*... I mean, I can't even think... I keep remembering PAST days..." When she said *AGOR,* the Assamese word that refers to the past, she drew out the word with a long, high-pitched "O," throwing her hands up in the air and behind her head. Imagining that Laboinya was referring to a feeling of being transported back to pre-marriage days when she lived a more carefree life in her parents' home, I responded emphatically, "Oh yes, very good!" Smoothing out the flour in the metal bowl, and packing it down hard with her right hand as she rotated the bowl with her left hand, she sang again:

O hāi hāi, hāi mur nijorā	O hai hai... Hai my beloved…
Kāṭibo moi nājānu, kāṭibo moi nājānu	I don't know how to cut,
Māribo oi nājānu piṭhā	I don't know how to make *piṭhā*...
Morom logā koi, hāi hāi, hāi mur nijorā	Sweetly, hai hai... Hai my beloved...
Gaboloi moi nājānu	I don't know how to sing...
Gabo---	I don't kno---

In mid-phrase, Laboinya turned her head towards the younger woman now standing idly next to the *ḍheḵī,* shouted "*Ḍheḵī di thākā!*" "Keep doing the *ḍheḵī*!" and continued singing, almost without missing a beat. "*Gaboloi moi nājānu... Gaboloi moi nājānu....*" But everyone within earshot burst out laughing and she, also laughing and unable to continue singing, explained the reason for her interjection, "Well, I'm a little busy..." The abrupt shift in timbre from singing to shouting, and her attempt to quickly slip back into song was too hilarious to go by unnoticed. Our laughter traveled quite a distance and attracted even more people, who joined in with *bihu* songs and dancing as well.

This experience was unique for me, in that Laboinya continued working while singing. In other contexts, when I interacted with people and asked to record them singing, it was often while seated inside their home, or on the veranda. Since it was *bihu urukā*, the day before *bihu* was to begin, perhaps Laboinya was under pressure to complete the grinding of the rice in a timely fashion and could not spare the time to stop working. Or maybe she considered the singing of *bihu* songs as an ordinary activity, not deserving of a space and time set apart from daily life. As I learned from our interaction, maintaining a steady rhythm of foot pumping and hand scooping is imperative to avoiding smashed fingers when operating the *ḍheḵī*, and songs often provide convenient phrasing to accompany such work. But increasingly, *piṭhā* sweets are being mass-produced and sold in markets, and *buwārī*-s are choosing to work and live outside

the homes of their parents-in-law. This shift away from joint-family living arrangements in many urbanizing areas of Assam, combined with the mass production of consumer goods, has slowly decreased the frequency of opportunities for traditional intergenerational and community knowledge sharing.

Faced with such shifts, people involved in cultural fields like Roshmi and her predecessors realized that in order to preserve the traditions they love and value, they would have to figure out ways to transmit the essential elements of those traditions to the next generation of performers and simultaneously create a knowledgeable general listening public who would be able to recognize these elements as traditional. So they began to distill disparate traditions and performance practices into essential elements and use these to create stock performance pieces. In Assamese, this process is referred to as *sristi* (creation). *Sristi* also stands in for composition or "writing" (in terms of music/drama/folktales) as well as choreography (in terms of dance).

Traditionally, performers have spontaneously created *bihu* performances by combining melodies, percussion sequences, dance movements, and lyrical narratives – arranging these elements in specific ways in order to create performances recognizable as *bihu.* For example, the day before I met Laboinya, I took a day trip with Tapan Dutta to Mālini Melā, a festival at a Durga temple called Mālini Thān at the border of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh where the Siang hills meet the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. After we returned to RVC, the NGO where Tapan worked with Laboinya's brother-in-law, Moina Das, I asked some of the staff members if they knew any *bihu* songs, and Tapan sang:

Rail *jāe Junāi loi,* bus *jāe ghātoloi*	The train goes to Junāi, the bus goes to the *ghāt*
Jābā neki Rehanna *Mālini Thān sāboloi?*	Rehanna, will you go to see Mālini Thān?
Likābāli sohorot, Mālini Thān uporot	In the town of Likābāli, up on the Mālini Thān hill
Tumie moie āpong khām	You and I will drink *āpong* (Mising rice liquor)
Mālini Melār bhitorot	In the Mālini Melā

At the time, I was amused at being serenaded and found Tapan's performance endearing, as did the other RVC staff members. But upon further reflection, I recognized that Tapan took an event that actually happened (he and I drinking rice liquor at the Mālini Melā), and turned it into a potential encounter through song by setting the new text to a common *bihu* tune. The Mālini Melā festival happens every year and is an ideal place to take a girl on a date, since there are carnival rides, cheap snacks and many people milling around.

While Tapan's intentions with me were not romantic, the *bihu* song he created could be interpreted as an invitation to romantic liaison, where any girl's name could replace mine. This is the process Roshmi described to me when explaining her understanding of how a song becomes a folk song. Tapan sings this song to me, and then Moina finds it sweet and sings the song to his girlfriend, substituting her name for mine. Later that evening, she sings it to her sister, and their exchange is overheard by a neighbor boy who picks it up and sings it to his group of friends. By this time, no one remembers that Tapan was the original creator of the lyrics, which were inspired by actual events. Mālini Melā becomes memorialized in song as a dating destination, and the song becomes part of a shared tradition with its single authorship obscured.

Sristi represents an attempt to formalize the process of composition while attempting to maintain the spontaneous essence of performance. In order for a composed piece to convey a traditional feeling or style, a variety of elements must come together in just the right way. I learned a lot about Roshmi's understanding of this balance through our interactions, and her guidance informs my discussion. But before delving into specific vocal and lyrical techniques, I turn to an example of spontaneity and the complications it introduces into the commercial recording industry.

New-Old Songs: Searching for Hidden Gems

Bihu was one of the first folk performance traditions to be intentionally standardized in Assam, claimed as it was by the dominant *Oxomīyā* community, and fueled by political goals associated with the Assam Movement in the early 1980s. Other communities followed suit, standardizing and codifying their own performance traditions in order to distinguish themselves from what some call the chauvinistic *Oxomīyā* mainstream, and filling in the gaps with newly discovered old material as needed. For *bihu* performers and folklorists engaged in *bihu* research, there is constant interest in finding as-yet-undiscovered old songs to add to the traditional repertoire. But the reality is that these new-old songs are newly composed from collected and remembered kernels. One of the first and best-known singers who actively collected and recreated *bihu* songs for the masses was Khagen Mahanta (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6 – Khagen and Archana Mahanta perform at Latasil Bihutolī, Guwahati. April 2009. Taken from video footage by the author.

Mahanta told me in an interview at his home[3] that during his childhood, *bihu* was not performed by people in middle class families like his, but was associated with lower-class people. During his travels to remote villages with his father who was a *xotro-dhikār*, the head of a Hindu Xongkoriya Vaishnava monastery (*xotro*), Mahanta heard people singing and saw them dancing *bihu*, and when his singing career took off in his early twenties, he incorporated *bihu* into his repertoire. Mahanta told me the story of his first song-collecting visit to Bokota, a village in Sibsagar District in Upper Assam. In the late evening when people gathered to perform *bihu*, they started with the line, "*De ḍhe̍kī de, ḍhe̍kī de...*" (pound the *ḍhe̍kī*, pound the *ḍhe̍kī*...). Mahanta described to me his instant joy at hearing such an exuberant song, and his growing frustration when they kept singing this one line over and over again! He requested the *gāo̍buṛha* village chief to please encourage the performers to move on to the next line, but the *gāo̍buṛha* explained, "It's just getting started, the atmosphere has come now after one hour, then we will go to the next line, if we feel."

Originally in search of performable songs – songs that would fit the criteria for a commercial recording in terms of length and structural variety – Mahanta was surprised and inspired by this *bihu* atmosphere where a single line could be enjoyed for the whole night. In 1962 at Judges Field in Guwahati, Mahanta sang this one line for 20 minutes, to recreate the atmosphere he experienced in Bokota, bringing the village experience to the urban stage. He told me, as I'm sure he told the audience that day, "Thing is...first half of the first stanza is the line where they spend the whole night." Conveying this newfound sense of the *bihu* atmosphere was very important to Mahanta, but he had to work within the constraints of the recording industry. He waited one year until he could collect the second line of the song, and then he was finally

[3] Khagen Mahanta, in discussion with the author, Mahanta's home, Guwahati, April 2009.

able to record the song for the Gramophone Company. Mahanta's *bihu* albums, most often recorded as duets with his wife Archana Mahanta, gained wide appeal across Assam and contributed to the spread of *bihu* from Upper Assam to Lower Assam where the festival and associated performance traditions had not previously been widespread.

When he was young, Probin Saikia, Roshmi's husband, studied with Khagen Mahanta, taking on a kind of apprentice role, learning compositional techniques and carrying on the tradition of collecting and producing folk music for mass consumption while taking care to retain the essential bits that locate songs in the folk genre. Probin and Roshmi are not shy about disclosing their compositional techniques to their students. On more than one occasion during class sessions, in the middle of teaching a *bihu* song from one of the couple's recent collaborative *bihu* albums produced with Khagen Mahanta's son Papon, Roshmi would stop and explain that while *bihu* songs are normally three or four lines long, she and Probin had composed the subsequent verses to match the first verse in melody, rhythm, narrative and style. She would explain, "In order to keep people's interest when we sing these songs on stage or on the radio, we have to extend the story from just one verse to an entire narrative that conveys the feeling of *bihu*." In this context, *sristi* involves a reworking or reframing of tradition.

Entertainment and politics come together in *bihu* through compositional techniques that draw on patriotic themes linked to cultural nationalism. Bipin Chawdang, a singer and songwriter from Moran town in northeastern Assam, composed a *bihu* song that memorialized a tragic event that occurred in Kakopothar, the stronghold of the militant separatist group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). In 2009 as I traveled across Assam on an overnight bus ride, I was surprised to hear the song playing over the speakers late at night. It turns out that the song, called "*Tumār Bhāiti*" (your younger brother), was featured on the 2009 *Jānmoni* VCD, a

dramatic *bihu*-themed feature-length serial which is released every year just before *bihu* season since the early 2000s (Figure 3.7)

Figure 3.7 - Cover image of mp3 CD album containing songs from *Jānmoni* 2009 VCD.

"*Tumār Bhāiti*" is about an incident commonly known as the "Kakopathar massacre" which happened in February 2006 just before *bihu* season, after a young man — Ajit Mahanta, who had a wife and two small children — was arrested as a suspected ULFA militant under AFSPA, died in police custody, and around 20,000 people came out to protest. The army opened fire on them, and killed ten people. Of the many young men and women, mothers, fathers, and children at the protest, one 14-year old girl, Monica Moran, died from two bullet wounds in her spine. Kakopathar was known as an ULFA stronghold, and according to 70-year-old resident Dharmeswar Moran, quoted in the local news after the incident, "Youths and even

schoolchildren were viewed by security forces as potential Ulfa cadres. We lived with this tag for almost three decades now" (Das 2010). When, ten days after the protests, Assam's Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi arrived on the scene, he was shocked to find resistance and protests against his visit, and journalists boycotting his press conference. A young woman protester is quoted as telling him, "You are like the father of the state but you let loose your security forces to kill and injure your own sons. Worst of all, you remain a mute spectator for so long. If you had come early, this incident [the police firing] might not have taken place" ("Kakopathar" 2006). Chawdang's song is addressed to an elder brother of Ajit Mahanta. This elder brother could be interpreted as any Assamese person, taking Ajit Mahanta as the son of Assam, considering the nationalist sentiment evoked by the last line "*Joi āi Oxom*." The song says:

E tumār bhāiti nisinā muru bhāiti āsile	Like your brother, I also had one brother
Tinsukia Kakopatharot guli kori mārile	In Kakopathar, Tinsukia, they hit him with a bullet
Prothom guli lāgute	When the first bullet hit him
Mā buli oi mātile	He cried "Ma"
Dityo guli lāgute oi	When the second bullet hit him
Joi āi Oxom bulile	He shouted, "Long live Assam"

Anurag Saikia, originally from Moran but studying in a Guwahati college at the time, accompanied me to Bipin Chawdang's home in Moran and translated the song's lyrics for me in April 2009. Saikia told me, "When this song played, many people cried, because it's a common sentiment." He added, "This song is not the general *bihu*," meaning that this song's political content set it apart from the *bihu* songs with more typical themes of love and longing marketed to a general Assamese audience. Debates about how "old" new songs are become entangled with discussions of sentiments and sounds, which are mobilized affectively by composers, arrangers, and performers as they contribute to this dynamic folk canon.

Creating the *Bihu* Feel: Raw vs. *Puronā*

One recent indicator of authentic folk performance that Roshmi brought to my attention is the English word "raw." Papon, the son of Khagen Mahanta and the lead singer on the *bihu* albums produced collaboratively with Roshmi and Probin Saikia, uses the word "raw" frequently to describe *bihu.* Roshmi described to me her understanding of what "raw" might mean for *bihu* one day as we sat in her bedroom watching television:

> People say, "Oh that person sang a "raw" *bihu*." Listen now. One issue: Why do many people talk about "raw" *bihu*? The word "raw" has no meaning as such in this context. But fine. In other contexts, "raw" means "a thing as it is," meaning it hasn't been cooked. This means *bihu* – setting aside the argument about whether or not it counts as folksong, however we define folksong and all the things that may be required in that definition – it means whatever that thing is, no one has newly given shape to it or designed it. That's what I think people might mean when they say "raw".

Roshmi: *Bihu*… why is it raw? *Bihu* itself is a raw thing. If we go in this direction, everything about *bihu* is raw. For example, if someone says, "Sing a really old (*puronā*) *bihu* phrase." *Bihu* itself is old (*puronā bostu*), isn't it true? *Bihu* is not newly created. The new things are created based on *bihu*. Tell me, is it not true?

Rehanna: But that old (*puronā*) feeling that comes, how does one create that? People don't know how to do that. Well, Probin da does. People can hear it and they get that "raw" feeling.

Roshmi: This is something that comes from inside. From inside. Audience or viewers – it has to come from inside them. And in order for the atmosphere – the charming atmosphere – to come forth, both [performers and audience] must understand.

"Raw" and "*puronā*" index authenticity in a different ways. A *bihu* song that is "raw" might be newly composed in an old style, but a *puronā bihu* song must, as I understand, have lyrics known to have been passed down for at least a few generations. But in addition to this

more concrete idea of the longevity of lyrics associated with a *puronā bihu* song, Roshmi described *puronā* as a feeling, something that can be evidenced in all elements of *bihu.* Some of the technical elements that can be found in a *puronā bihu* are – the composition of the lyrics including narrative themes and a particular treatment of language known as *ḍhek*, the singing style of the performer including the timbre of the voice, the use of breath pressure called *heṁsā* to create a percussive element in the singing voice that marks the *bihu* rhythm, and the performance of *sondo,* which some translate as poetic meter. These concepts came together for me one day as I traveled with Roshmi and a group of young actors on an overnight train ride – a mobile classroom of sorts.

> From the upper berth in our train compartment heading from New Delhi back to Assam's capital Guwahati, I soak up the conversation between Roshmi and the members of BA Theatre Troupe. Roshmi is returning with the group after having performed as a vocalist along with others who provided live musical accompaniment for their Assamese drama production at a February 2015 theatre fest in New Delhi. Roshmi's status as folk researcher and singing teacher lend her authority on certain subjects which the actors and other musicians take advantage of in this contained space over the twenty-three hour journey.
>
> Some of the actors set up a game of Ludo between the lower berths and begin to play. Over the rumbling of the train crossing the tracks of Allahabad, snack vendors periodically processing through the aisle announcing their wares, and the rattling of Ludo dice, a mobile classroom has taken shape. A mock song competition has begun in our compartment where Roshmi mimics the high-Assamese style (*ukho bhāxā*) of speaking

that hosts use on televised song competitions (Figure 3.8). "Beloved viewers, our next artist is Montu Gogoi! Mr. Gogoi, we now invite you to please proceed to the stage." Montu stands up between the two train berths to take the "stage" while the rest of us wait eagerly to hear his contribution. He knows Roshmi wouldn't approve of a new, modern *bihu*-inspired song, but she would praise an old *bihu* song (*puronā*). He begins with a disclaimer, telling Roshmi that he can sing an old *bihu* song, but it's not "too many days old." She tells him, "It will be all right as long as it feels like *bihu*. Sing!"

Figure 3.8 – Roshmi selects Pallabi Bhuyan as the next contestant in a mock song competition. Delhi-Guwahati Rajdhani Train. February 6, 2015. Photo by the author.

Montu Gogoi began to sing, "Don't come out in the morning, my beloved. The wind blows at that time." Everyone immediately started clapping along and punctuating the ends of his phrases with short *kirili* tongue trills to show their appreciation. As he repeated the first line, Roshmi joined in singing, recognizing the tune but not the lyrics (Audio 3.1).

Ābelā nulābā	Don't come out in the morning,
Dehā oi, botāh bole tetiyā	My beloved, the wind blows at that time
Dupor belā nulābā	Don't come out in the afternoon, beloved
Dehā oi, gorom uṭhe tetiyā	My beloved, it gets very hot at that time
Ghāti belā ulābā	Come out in the evening,
Kāxot kolox loi lobā	And **bring the water jug on your hip**
Moi *pāni* ***bhorāi dim***	**I'll fill it** with water,
Dehā oi, tumi nu loi ānibā kāxot	My beloved, you just bring it on your hip

After he finished his verse, Roshmi exclaimed, "Wow it's very beautiful!" Montu replied, "I'll sing a *new* version, will you listen?" "Wait one minute," Roshmi retorted matter-of-factly, "No, it's not necessary. I'm telling you seriously, it's very beautiful. And the tune, honestly, we should all listen carefully because you sing so beautifully." She asked if Montu would repeat the verse so she could record the audio on her mobile phone. After shushing the actors who had begun to discuss the relative merits of the song and Montu's voice, Roshmi began recording and Montu sang again.

This time when he finished, Montu proceeded to sing the "new version," which incorporated new lyrics he and his young male friends had created. To our surprise, it was also very beautiful, and even Roshmi was impressed by the new lyrics Montu and his friends had created for the additional verse (Audio 3.2).

Ābelā nulābā	Don't come out in the morning,
Dehā oi, botāh bole tetiyā	My beloved, the wind blows at that time
Dupor belā nulābā	Don't come out in the afternoon, beloved
Dehā oi, gorom uṭhe tetiyā	My beloved, it gets very hot at that time
Ghāti belā ulābā	Come out in the evening,
Hātot **mobile** ***loi lobā***	And **bring your mobile in your hand**
Moi *poisā* ***bhorāi dim***	**I'll fill it** with money (i.e. top it up),
Dehā oi, missed call *eti māribā dei*	My beloved, just give me a missed call

Despite Montu's original disclaimer about how old the *bihu* song was, during his performance it certainly did "feel like *bihu*" as Roshmi had requested. But what exactly made it feel like *bihu*? Why was Roshmi surprised? And what were the criteria that inspired her to accept the new version even after originally discouraging the idea? Montu's performance inspired participation, and his playful singing style evoked the *bihu* atmosphere Roshmi had described to me. This is the same *bihu* atmosphere that Khagen Mahanta had become fascinated with many years ago.

Beyond the feeling Montu communicated with his singing style, the new version preserves the same melody and rhythm as the original, while presenting a parallel lyrical structure with a similar metaphor that is relevant to today's youth. Instead of asking the girl he's pursuing to bring her water jug so he can fill it with water – *kāxot kolox loi lobā, moi pāni bhorāi dim*, Montu asks her to bring her mobile phone in her hand so he can top it up with money – *hātot* mobile *loi lobā, moi poisā bhorāi dim*. In an innovative twist of phrase, Montu does not continue with the parallel lyrical structure in the last line "you just bring the water jug on your hip" by singing "you just bring the mobile in your hand" which would actually maintain the rhyme scheme as well: *tumi nu loi ānibā kāxot* would be mirrored by *tumi nu loi ānibā hātot.* He foregoes the rhyme, and instead adds a typical index of youth culture, the missed call. This preserves the overall sentiment of arranging a secret meeting in public, whether it be filling up water at the river or topping up a phone at the corner store.

The missed call has become ubiquitous across India as a popular way to avoid paying mobile phone charges, especially in rural areas like Betoni Pam. The presence of the missed call in popular culture can be seen across India. One of the more recent examples in Assam is a music album released in 2015 called "Missed Call". In rural India, most people have prepaid phone plans that don't require maintaining more than a few rupees balance to send a missed call.

So for example, I might ask a friend to send me a missed call when she reaches home so I know she's safe, and neither of us will have to pay for it. But when a missed call comes from a love interest, it is almost surely understood as an invitation.

A recent advertisement poetically captures the link between mobile technology and *bihu* (Figure 3.9). The advertisement features an image of the woven bamboo hat, *jāpi*, worn by rice farmers, which has become a ubiquitous symbol of Assamese identity, in India, and abroad.

Figure 3.9 – Samsung Smartphone Advertisement. *The Assam Tribune*. April 8, 2013.

In the advertisement, the *jāpi*, decorated with green and red cloth, is projected from a display of Samsung smartphones. The advertisement's text declares, "On the joyous occasion of Bihu, stay connected with your family and friends. Choose from a wide collection of Samsung mobiles to add on to your celebrations." The slogan "*Bihu bihu lāgise"* is one of the most common lines in *bihu* songs, and can even be added on to a stanza to extend the song a few bars. It means, "It feels like *bihu*." The *jāpi* has been incorporated into patriotic school processions, *bihu* dance choreography, and ceremonies honoring guests visiting Assam, including foreign researchers like me and visiting politicians such as the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But this mobile phone advertisement hones in on the essence of *bihu*, which is about staying connected. Connected to family and friends, connected to Assam's unique rural culture celebrated during *bihu*, and connected to that special someone. The mobile phone has become an indispensible part of romance.

The mock competition in the train car brings together some of the major themes I have discussed which are important to the concept of a folk sensibility. The young people in the train car are not professional *bihu* performers, but it is clear that "*bihu gāt xumāle*" (*bihu* has entered their bodies). The narrative themes of the song Montu chose to perform as an example of an old *bihu* song, draw together iconic activities of village life, such as collecting water from the river, with contemporary concerns, such as maintaining enough balance on the mobile phone to make a call. These are joined by the pursuit of romance, one of *bihu's* central themes. How did Montu and his friends poetically reinvent this *bihu* song? Did they learn these strategies during childhood growing up in a small town near Sibsagar? Following Roshmi's suggestion about the Deurī *bisu* singer above, is *bihu* something that exists inside Montu, because he is *Oxomīyā*?

Roshmi's claim that some things cannot be taught raises a complex issue that brings together discourses of embodied knowledge which are fundamental to the folk sensibility I discuss in this chapter. Within the four walls of *Panchasur*'s classroom, there is necessarily a limited scope for learning. But Roshmi and Probin model a pedagogical style that goes beyond this institutional framework. They teach as they live. They turn any situation, be it enjoying a meal, taking an evening walk, or riding on the train, into an opportunity for sharing embodied knowledge. To those who would argue that the lifestyle changes associated with urbanization have endangered the precious moments of everyday transmission of cultural knowledge, I would respond with examples like the ones presented in this chapter to show that many people are invested in maintaining these knowledge pathways despite changing life circumstances.

Folk performance is dynamic by definition and persists as a valued reference for a shared sense of belonging. The young people in the train car introduced above come from different places in Assam, live in Guwahati, and travel around India performing Assamese theatre for audiences that do not understand Assamese. As I walked around with them on the streets of New Delhi, the particular joy of speaking and singing in Assamese together in a foreign place was like sharing a secret. In Chapter 4, I explore recent developments in the *bihu* industry that incorporate reality television competitions in the nexus of media platforms for promoting Assamese cultural heritage, and I analyze contentious debates about fusion that emerge when *bihu* travels beyond Assam.

Chapter Four – Crowning the *Bihu* Queen: Competitive Arenas and Reality Television

"Bonti isn't just a *bihu* dancer. She weaves at the loom, grinds rice with the *ḍheǩī*, and makes *piṭhā* sweets. These skills are present in Bonti – a complete *Oxomīyā ghor-dhorā suwālī*."

This excerpt from an episode of the reality television competition series *Bihu Rānī* (*Bihu* Queen) demonstrates the particular way in which Assamese geopolitical and cultural anxieties are played out in the public sphere and how young women continue to serve as a primary site on which these debates take place. The implications of praising Bonti Hazarika, a finalist in the 2011 season of the show, for her domestic skills, points to the fact that talent in music and dance is not the only criterion for success. In contrast to other nationally broadcast reality television song and dance competition series based out of India's entertainment hub Mumbai, *Bihu Rānī* and similar *bihu*-themed competitive series produced in Assam have adapted the reality television format to serve regional interests and address local audiences. As the above example demonstrates, the loom, the *ḍheǩī*, and handmade *piṭhā* sweets cooked over a wood fire have been taken up as symbols of Assamese cultural heritage – production technologies that are rapidly disappearing from the skill sets of young women. But the voice narrating Bonti's accomplishments during this episode over video footage of her performing these tasks in a village home confirms that Bonti is a "complete *Oxomīyā ghor-dhorā suwālī*" – a girl who embodies ideal qualities (*gun*) associated with *Oxomīyā* womanhood.

Reality television song and dance competitions comprise an arena for debating the nation-state and offering critical discourse on citizenship. For example, the Eurovision Song Contest features performances by representatives from EU member nations, where cultural politics are negotiated through song (Tragaki 2013), political rivalries between Arab nations are

played out during episodes of *Superstar* and *Star Academy* (Kraidy 2010), *Super Voice Girl* sparked debates about democracy in China (Hartley 2008), and the government-endorsed *China's Got Talent* restricted voting to studio audiences, infusing ideological control into a medium created to foster the fantasy of free choice (Huang 2014). Current scholarship on reality television competitions most often investigates theoretical issues aligned with media studies and cultural studies, focusing on the affects of neoliberal economic policies on media production and consumption, the phenomenon of "ordinary people" becoming celebrities, and the resistant potential of audience participation in reality television arenas. Few scholars approach the study of reality television competitions from the perspective of performance, with the notable exception of Philip Bohlman's work on Eurovision (Bohlman 2004b, 2007) and the recent volume *Empire of Song* (Tragaki 2013). Bohlman and the other contributors to this volume argue that critically analyzing song in the Eurovision Song Contest is a crucial area that has been overlooked in scholarship on this topic. I take this challenge one step further by analyzing the performing body as a whole, incorporating music, dance and other forms of discourse that comprise the elements of performance in *Bihu Rānī*.

Leading up to the 1990s, the "ordinary person" emerged as a valuable television commodity, as soap operas and *telenovelas* depicting social "reality" became an established part of television broadcasting across the world (Couldry 2003, 102). Reality television has grown out of this history, which is based on the belief that media connect us to a shared social reality. In India, the advent of transnational satellite television in 1991 intensified already heated debates about the influence of the "West" on Indian culture. But imported television shows were not met with sustained success. After the novelty wore off, chief network executives recognized the need to "Indianize" transnational programming in order to increase and maintain viewership

(Mankekar 2004, 417). The song competition *Indian Idol* and the dance competition *Dance India Dance,* for example, follow formats inherited from their predecessors in the US and UK featuring judges who also serve as coaches for the contestants, and the music and dance styles include an eclectic mix. Indian Idol is a hybrid production based on American Idol which incorporates "Indian" themes and discourses into its narrative framework and deploys "a diverse range of representational codes and aesthetic conventions" (Mankekar 2004, 417). Similarly, *Bihu Rānī*, incorporates elements from the decades-long tradition of *bihuwotī* stage competitions in Assam, where music and dance are combined into one routine performed by a female teenage soloist accompanied live by a group of male performers. *Bihu Rānī* draws on aspects of "national" reality television song and dance competition series, but incorporates "Assamese" themes, discourses, representational codes and aesthetic conventions.

When comparing the *bihu* stage competition format with the reality television format, the distinctions that emerge provide clues about how globalization plays out in these different contexts, presenting a dynamic public arena where debates about Assamese modernity thrive. Bohlman's work on the Eurovision Song Contest is particularly relevant for my discussion of the cultural politics of competitive *bihu* arenas that span local stage contexts and reality television platforms. Bohlman demonstrates that song has the power to both create and destroy unity, indicating the potential of the song contest to expose the fragility of relations between nations as "national pride and nationalist prejudice" emerge during the voting process. Bohlman writes that song "consciously endowed with the potential to pull Europe together in unity contributes to the nationalism that endangers that unity, today no less insistently than it has during the course of modern European history" (2004a, 9). These words ring true for *bihu* song and dance, which was originally promoted to unite diverse communities settled in Assam.

Transitioning *Bihu* from Stage to Television Studio: Introducing the Host

The first officially recognized public *bihu* event was organized in 1952 by Radha Gobinda Baruah at Latasil Field in Guwahati. Baruah was a businessman who, for example, helped establish the first branch of the Imperial Bank in Assam in 1923 and founded the *Assam Tribune* in 1939. While these stage events featured organized performances of *bihu* song and dance, *bihu* competitions began much later. Madhurima Choudhury is recognized as the first winner of the first competition in 1979 at Latasil Bihutolī in Guwahati. As a famous actress known for her roles in Assam's unique Mobile Theatre tradition as well as Assamese films and television serials, Madhurima has continued teaching *bihu* at workshops and performing with a group of actresses at select venues in Assam and occasionally abroad. She also serves as a judge at large *bihutolī* competitions and on *bihu* reality television competitions. *Bihu* competitions resemble beauty pageants in that they feature multiple talents and often incorporate question-answer sessions with judging panels. Over the years, *bihutolī* competitions have become widespread across the state of Assam, and prizes have increased in value.

The expansion of the *bihutolī* competition into the reality television arena has resulted in interesting changes to the competition format. Public debates about fusion and authenticity broadcast on Assamese news talk shows highlight the growing pains the entertainment industry in Assam is facing as producers toe the line between exploring new global formats, keeping local audiences engaged, and quelling criticism from outspoken cultural purists. The widespread popularity of *bihu* makes it an ideal performance genre to feature on the platform reality television provides, but the stakes of exposing *bihu* to this new context have resulted in an interesting hybridized format that preserves elements of stage competitions while adopting some elements of the reality television format.

While most performing conventions and judging practices carry over from the stage to the screen, here I focus on three elements that distinguish the *Bihu Rānī* series from stage competitions. These elements indicate the central entertainment focus and economic motivations of the reality television platform, which is driven by TRP (Target Rating Point) ratings. *Bihu Rānī* shares these elements with reality television competitions across the world: the presence of a host or master of ceremonies who addresses the audience directly, the serialization of episodes that creates suspense from week to week, and the introduction of confessional talk formats which provide context for the competitive routines. The examples I discuss come from experiences interacting with contestants, judges, hosts, and directors of multiple seasons of *Bihu Rānī.*

Bihu Rānī began its first season in 2010 with Zublee Baruah as host. A pop icon in Assam who was introduced in the Prologue of this dissertation, Zublee is known for her singing voice and acting roles in Assamese serials and films, as well as her performances during the *bihu* season. According to her website, she holds a BA in English Literature and sang as a playback singer for the first time for the Assamese film *Ranangini* in 1992, most recently releasing a pop album *Janma* featuring her own compositions in 2008. Zublee often graces the stage with her iconic keytar during concerts in Assam, across India and in Assamese diaspora communities across the world. As host for *Bihu Rānī*, Zublee draws a large viewing audience because of her celebrity status. She facilitates transitions between scenes, apologizing to the audience for having to take a break for advertisements, and welcoming them back afterwards. She updates the audience on the status of the competition, what the stakes are, and what to expect for the duration of the current episode. "Let's see how she does!" She also speaks with contestants, asking them if they are frightened or nervous, extending the microphone to amplify their responses, and requesting the judges' verdicts after each performance.

While Zublee's activities are typical of hosts on reality television competitions, they mark a distinction from *bihu* stage competitions, where the audience is not addressed directly. Seated behind the panel of judges in the open-air *bihutolī* tent, the audience members are treated as spectators who are not directly involved with the process playing out on the stage in front of them. Normally a member of the organizing committee calls out the name of the next contestant and rings a loud buzzer at the end of the time limit for each routine, but this is purely functional and not aesthetically oriented like the host on *Bihu Rānī*. Zublee's role is to connect with the audience as they watch in their homes, and to draw them into the competition so they feel emotionally invested and willing to pay for mobile voting to support a favorite contestant.

Serialized Episodes: Creating a Dramatic Arc

Bihutolī competitions normally last from early evening until early morning, spanning around twelve hours during which contestants must wait to find out the results. Judges observe the timed routines one after another as water, tea, *tāmul* betel nuts and *pān* leaves are brought to them to eat in order to pass the time and stay awake during the long night. The spectators begin to dwindle around three o'clock in the morning, and by the end, around seven o'clock, often participants and their families make up the majority of the audience. In order to prolong the competition over one television season, the routines that would normally be performed during one long night at the *bihutolī* are split into segments and serialized for weekly broadcasts. The elements required for a twenty-minute *bihuwotī* routine at a *bihutolī* competition are spread out across multiple episodes in order to create variety from week to week. Theme music also serves to amplify the dramatic narrative, incorporating the iconic *bihu* minor third into the show's sonic branding strategy.

In April 2009, I was present for the entire duration of an all-night *bihutolī* competition in Margherita, a small town near India's border with Myanmar. Seated next to *bihu* judge Anil Saikia, who had agreed to escort me as his guest to the event, I was able to distill some of the basic performance elements required of the *bihuwotī* contestants. Each young woman performed different *bihu* songs, but the sequence of choreographed movements, song styles, and playing of particular instruments was roughly the same. As an example, I will outline the general progression of the winning routine by Bonti Hazarika, who I introduced in this dissertation's Prologue. While the elements presented in this outline form part of a single *bihuwotī* performance routine, I have divided them into discrete segments to demonstrate how they might be combined in different ways by reality television producers in order to prolong the competition over many episodes. I chose Bonti's performance as an example because her performance contains the elements of a typical *bihuwotī* routine, but also because her victory at this competition in Margherita gave her additional visibility, which helped her odds of being selected to compete in the second season of *Bihu Rānī* in 2011.

Some of the basic *bihu* dance elements that are carefully scrutinized in competitive arenas appear in the outline below. The iconic movement "*koṷkāl bhāngi*" (breaking the waist) involves three actions that align with the three beats of the basic *bihu* rhythm: contract, release, hold. The performer contracts the abdomen on beat one, tucking the pelvis under and straightening the spine so as not to let the shoulders shrug. On beat two, the performer releases the abdomen, arching the lower back (*koṷkāl*) slightly and lifting the chest and maintaining alignment so as not to push the breasts or buttocks out inappropriately. On beat three, the abdomen is held in this curved position, preparing to "break" again on beat one. The feet also follow this pattern as the performer presses one foot onto the ground on beat one, the other foot

on beat two, and pauses on beat three. The feet move in an almost shuffle-like style, hardly leaving the ground, and the knees bend only enough to accommodate the movement of the feet. One common criticism of inexperienced dancers is that they bounce up and down on beat one and two, bending the knees as they break their waists. The experienced dancer appears to be floating across the stage, as the movement of her legs and feet is concealed by the skirt-like *mekhelā* she wears, drawing attention to her upper body. In fact at the conclusion of Bonti's competitive routine, one of the judges asked her, "Why is the *nāsoni* required to dance without lifting up her feet?" Unable to produce an answer, the judge informed her, and everyone else present, that *bihu* is related to "*Oxomīyā* low culture," using the English words, and then explained that the weight of the *nāsoni*'s feet stepping on the earth makes cultivation (*hosyo)* possible, and if she lifts up her legs while dancing, that weight would not fall on the earth.

The most difficult part for beginning dancers, such as myself, is to learn to maintain a pronounced "break" with the waist even while the arms and hands are not placed in the palms-up position resting at the lower back. This position makes it easy for the performer to feel her waist as it breaks, but when the arms are extended (*meli*), the performer must break her waist while moving the arms simultaneously, which takes time to master. Mastery of this technique is one of the key distinguishing factors between performers who have pursued training in *bihu* dance and everyday people who dance as part of annual *bihu* celebrations. Bonti's mastery of *bihu* performance was evident to me as I watched her glide across the stage, pause to sing into the microphone, and continue dancing with hardly a hint of exhaustion. I present a fairly detailed journey through Bonti's routine below, because I want to point out some of the choreographic conventions that have been established over the past thirty years since *bihu* entered competitive

arenas (Table 4.1).[1] Images taken from my video footage (Video 4.1) of Bonti's performance are included below and referenced in the table's left column.

Time / Title / Image	Description
00'00" Entrance sequence	M's process onto the stage summoning B with pentatonic melody on the double-reed *pe̍pā* buffalo horn and rhythmic pattern on *ḍhul* drums and *tāl* cymbals. B spins out onto the stage and dances for the duration of the rhythmic sequence, moving across the stage and using all the space available to her, while smiling in the direction of the judges. Each movement B makes towards stage right is mirrored with a symmetrical movement towards stage right, aligned with the ebb and flow of the rhythmic pattern.
00'42" *Zuzonā* (Figure 4.1)	B makes a final spin and lands in front of the microphone in a pose with her right hand touching her *khupā* bun twisted at the nape of her neck, and her left hand palm up resting against her *ko̍kāl* (lower back). This position has become one of the iconic resting poses from which the female soloist sings *bihu zuzonā*. She sings the first stanza facing stage right, then switches the position of her arms and faces stage left for the second stanza as M's play a continuous *rogor* (drumroll) on *ḍhul* and *tāl* and punctuate with whistles, imitating the sound of the *kuli* bird that sings (*koo-woo, koo-woo*) during the *bihu* festival season.
01'34" *Zuzonā* reply	One M sings a *zuzonā* reply and B spins away from the microphone, planting her feet while swaying her upper body with arms extended and scooped hands twirling at the wrists – a dance movement typically associated with the melismatic unmetered *zuzonā.* At the end of each of his sung phrases, B spins rapidly, featuring a different arm position each time, as M's intensify their *rogor*. (These spins are called *pāk*, and each *pāk* has a different name.)
02'06" Dance sequence (Figures 4.2 and 4.3)	As one M continues singing *zuzonā*, other M's bring in the *bihu* rhythm on *ḍhul* and *tāl* (*ghen taki dighen, tak taki dighen*), and B begins another choreographed sequence, breaking her waist with hands palms-up at her *ko̍kāl* (lower back) alternating with spins during which the waist and wrists break together on beats 1 and 2. The diagrams below show the symmetry between dance movements and rhythmic patterns which form one of the hallmarks of *bihu* choreography (Diagram 4.1 and 4.2).
02'48" *Gogonā* (Figure 4.4)	M's initiate a rhythmic transition sequence and B spins towards the microphone, removing the *gogonā* (bamboo mouth harp) from its position sticking out of her *khupā* bun and bringing it to her lips. B plays the *gogonā* (*ti teu –, ti teu –, tau ti tau, ti teu –*) while M's strike sticks on the hard wooden side of the *ḍhul* drums on beat 1 and 2.
03'17" *Bihu* song (Figure 4.5)	M's initiate a rhythmic transition sequence and B spins away from the microphone, putting the *gogonā* back into her hair, and beginning a new choreographic sequence as one M sings two stanzas of a *bihu* song, declaring his love for B, ending with the line, "Let's get married during *bohāg*" (the month when *bihu* is celebrated). B dances more freely during this section, moving close to the singer and then dancing her way around the semicircle of M's, looking into their eyes as she connects with each one. She subtly takes a *ṭokā* bamboo clapper from one M and dances with it behind her back before spinning around back to the microphone to sing her reply.
04'12" *Ṭokā* (Figure 4.6)	Holding the *ṭokā* to the right side of the microphone at shoulder level with both hands, B sings and claps along on beats 1 and 2. For the second stanza she switches sides to face stage left with the *ṭokā* near hear left shoulder, and concludes by singing the line "You are the treasure of my heart."

Table 4.1 – Table outlining Bonti Hazarika's competitive performance, Margherita, April 2009.

[1] I use "B" as a shorthand for Bonti and "M" for male performers.

Table 4.1 – Table outlining Bonti Hazarika's competitive performance, Margherita, April 2009, continued.

05'02" Dance sequence	M's initiate a fast-paced rhythmic transition sequence and B spins away from the microphone, handing off the *ṭokā* to one M and launching into a furious choreographed sequence that combines spins and symmetrical movements spanning the entire area of the stage.
05'45" *Bihu* song	M's initiate a rhythmic transition sequence and one M sings two stanzas of a *bihu* song narrating unrequited love, ending with the line, "I couldn't tell you that I was searching for you." B again dances more freely, moving close to the singer and then dancing her way around the semicircle of M's, connecting with each one. She spins around back to the microphone to sing her reply.
06'25" *Bihu* song response	B sings in the same manner as she did earlier, but this time without the *ṭokā,* she marks the rhythm by breaking her wrists, flipping her hands out on beat 1, in on beat 2, and pausing on beat 3. She sings, "The stars would not shine without light from the moon; I wouldn't feel love unless it came from you."
07'00" *Zuzonā*	B sings a *zuzonā* "Who played *ḍhul*? Who played *pe̊pā*? When I hear the *ḍhul*, I can't hold myself back."
07'35" *Pe̊pā*	M's initiate a fast-paced rhythmic sequence and two M's begin playing *pe̊pā*, approaching B she dances with short symmetrical movements and kneeling on either side of her, pointing their *pe̊pā* horns toward her. She dances with specific movements associated with *pe̊pā,* including bending down low to the front and back imitating blades of rice paddy blowing in the wind, and dancing with her arms forming an arc in front of her imitating the shape of the curved horn. The pentatonic *pe̊pā* melody is continuous because of the circular breathing technique used to play it.
08'24" *Bihu* song + response	B moves towards the microphone and sings a fast *bihu* song, clapping her hands at shoulder height. After one stanza M's sing a response stanza in unison as B dances freely around the semicircle.
09'07" *Jurā-nām*	One M begins singing a *jurā-nām* teasing song *a capella* while B sways with feet planted. After his first line, all M's reply "Hoi hoi!" (Yes!) in typical affirmation of his argument and then join him on the chorus section.
09'30" *Jurā-nām* response	B approaches the microphone and sings her reply to M's *jurā-nām*, "Don't come under the peepul tree to tease me! Insults will be shouted at you!"
09'58" *Bihu* song	M's sing another fast *bihu* song and B demonstrates more symmetrical dance movements.
10'00" *Hāli-jāli*	Buzzer rings! Time is up. M's launch into another *bihu* song, this time about a butterfly, and B spreads her arms wide, breaking her hands at the wrists slightly so as to give the impression of a butterfly's wings. As M's repeat the last line three times, "Dance *hāli-jāli,* don't give us any trouble," B performs the *hāli-jāli* movement, bending over at the waist with hands patting the beat palms-down on her *ko̊kāl.* Instead of stepping lightly on the ground, both feet pound down together on beat 2 in a strikingly vigorous movement.
10'55" Closing *zuzonā* + *pe̊pā* (Figure 4.7)	B returns to the microphone one last time and sings a *zuzonā* over the speedy rhythmic pattern, indicating the end of her routine. B transitions into a final sequence of symmetrical spins as M's continue the rhythmic intensity until the routine's conclusion. Two M's play *pe̊pā* for the last few cycles and all performers end in a pose on their knees surrounding B.

Figure 4.1 – Bonti Hazarika in *zuzonā* pose.

Figure 4.2 – Bonti Hazarika performs *kokāl bhāngi* (breaking waist) with hands palms-up at her *kokāl* (lower back).

Figure 4.3 – Bonti Hazarika performs *kokāl bhāngi* (breaking waist) with open arms (*hāt meli*), breaking her wrists along with her waist on beats 1 and 2.

The following linear diagram (Diagram 4.1) shows how the *bihu* rhythmic pattern and dance movements are aligned during Bonti's performance. This example is taken from a segment that starts at 02'06", described in the above chart. In performance, the *bihu* rhythm is most often felt in a 3+3, as depicted below. The *sāpor* (rhythmic pattern) "*Ghen taki dighen, tak taki dighen*" is spread over 12 beats, but it is felt as two rhythmic phrases. The two phrases fit together almost like a call and response, since they are identical except for the first beat. In the circular diagram below (Diagram 4.2), I have depicted the same example but in circular form in order to emphasize the cyclical nature of rhythmic time in *bihu.* As depicted in the above chart, *bihu* songs, *zuzonā*-s, and dance sequences can be isolated as discrete events, but in performance, they flow together, one blending into the next, feasibly continuing on in perpetuity.

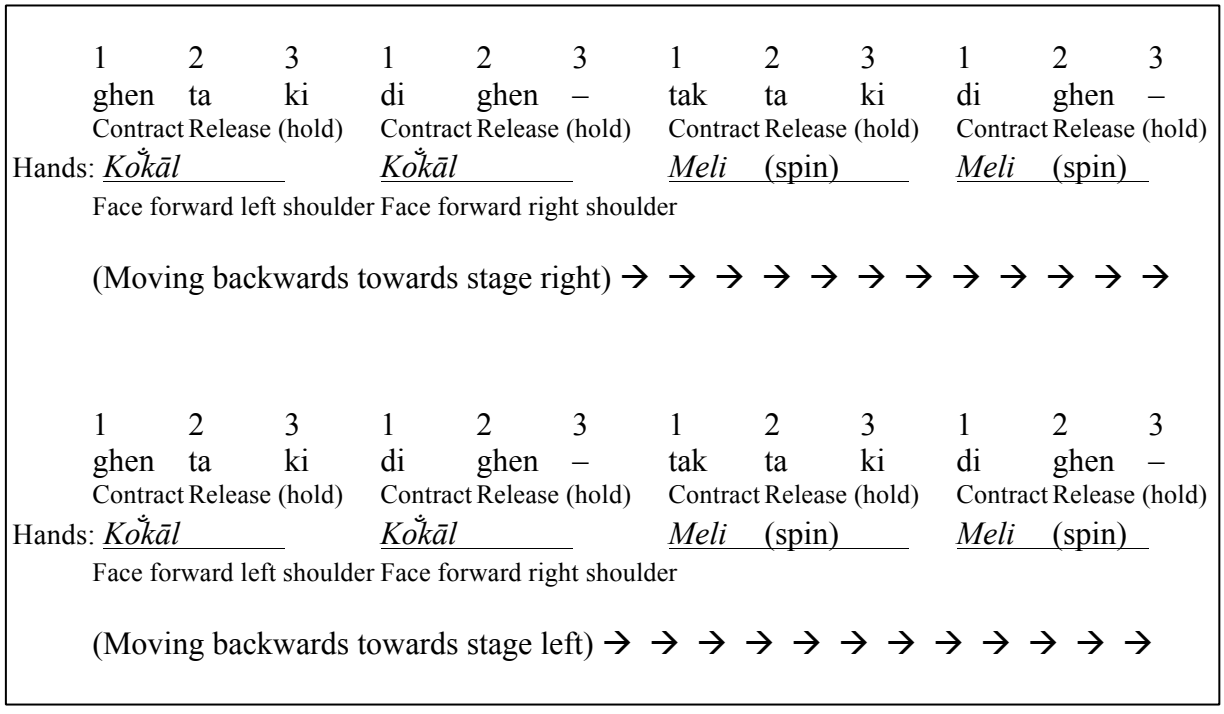

Diagram 4.1 – Linear diagram of *bihu* rhythm aligned with *bihu* dance movements.

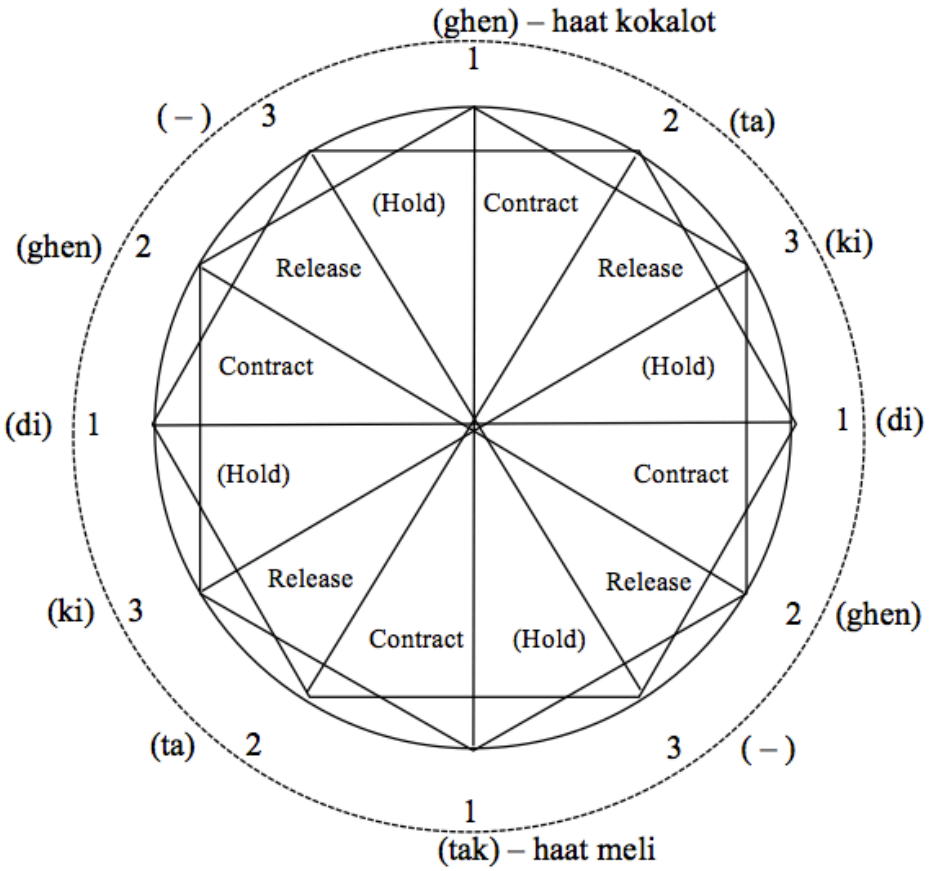

Diagram 4.2 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm aligned with *bihu* dance movements.

Playing the *gogonā* is particularly difficult, not only because the mouth has to be shaped properly in order to produce a resonant sound that can be picked up by the microphone, but also because it requires that the performer understand and be able to produce rhythm on an instrument apart from her body. I was surprised at how many performers could dance in time but could not produce a similarly regular beat on the *gogonā*.

Figure 4.4 – Bonti Hazarika plays the *gogonā*.

Figure 4.5 – Bonti Hazarika flirts with singer during *bihu* routine.

Figure 4.6 – Bonti Hazarika plays the *ṭokā.*

Figure 4.7 – Bonti Hazarika and her *bihu* troupe end in a final pose at the conclusion of her competitive routine.

In contrast to the all-night *bihutolī* competition, where each contestant must perform all the elements listed in the chart above (or a variation of these), reality television competitions like *Bihu Rānī* select a few of these elements to feature during each episode. The episodes are filmed in the DY365 studios over a period of around two weeks and broadcast twice weekly, for the duration of the television season. In order to shoot all the episodes in the shortest amount of time, two episodes are filmed each day, and judges and hosts must change clothing during the lunch break in order to give the impression that the episodes were filmed on different days. Serialization prolongs the competition over a longer period of time, but it also serves to create a dramatic arc and "elaborate appeals to series history" that keep television audiences engaged and ratings up (Jenkins 2004, 355). As the contestants are eliminated episode by episode, viewers get to know the characters as they progress through the rounds. One of the most effective ways to help audiences move from thinking of the contestants as generic types to knowing them as specific individual is through the introduction of confessional talk formats (Turner 2004).

Confessional Talk Formats: Creating Character Intimacy

While many reality television shows feature interviews with contestants and their families, I want to focus here on the way *Bihu Rānī* hones in on particular values associated with ideal Assamese womanhood by discussing a few clips that were broadcast during the second season of *Bihu Rānī* in 2011 when Bonti Hazarika was a finalist. The *Bihu Rānī* film crew visited each of the five finalists at home and incorporated candid interview excerpts with the young women about their lives and dreams. A special episode was dedicated to each finalist. Film clips of Bonti at her parents' home in Jorhat depicted her weaving at the loom, carrying a milk pail, pulling a wooden plow through a muddy field, grinding rice with the *ḍheṅkī*, and making *piṭhā* sweets over a wood fire in a village home as host Zublee narrated each scene.

The incorporation of these scenes depicting Bonti performing activities associated with domestic labor connects this reality television arena to historical debates about the role of the woman in supporting Assamese nationalism. For example, during the Indian struggle for independence, weaving one's own cloth became a nationalist practice, promoted by Mahatma Gandhi as a way women could participate in the non-cooperation movement by politicizing the domestic sphere (Srinivasan 2012, xi). Meeta Deka describes how elite Assamese women started schools for spinning yarn, and spread the notion of the loom as a symbol of nationalism which is prized to this day as evidence of Assamese womanhood (Deka 2013, 125).

Excerpts from an extended interview with Bonti discussing how she first began dancing *bihu*, challenges and successes throughout her performing career, and critical commentary on her own performance as a *Bihu Rānī* contestant are interspersed with clips of Bonti competing during previous episodes as well as excerpts from music videos and serials in which Bonti acted. The incorporation of confessional talk formats, which refers to talk shows featuring everyday people

who speak about their personal lives on broadcast television, contributes to the connection the audience feels with the contestants on reality competition shows. The element of self-promotion in these candid clips helps to transform the competitor from ordinary person into beloved celebrity during the course of the season.

As the special episode begins, Bonti introduces herself, seated on a plush sofa in the DY studio, "Greetings, I am Miss Bonti Hazarika. I have come from Jorhat. I am in DY *Bihu Rānī*'s top five.[2] Today I will share a few things with you." Bonti talks about how she began singing *bihu* at four years old, describing how she would dance *bihu* at home alone to cassette tapes and songs broadcast on the television and radio. Looking directly into the camera, Bonti speaks to the television audience with animated facial expressions as if telling a close friend secrets about her life. She describes how two of her elder "sisters" (close friends or cousins) would sing *bihu* and clap along as she danced. "Remember that old song?" she asks the audience, and begins to sing. "That song! My "sisters" sang and clapped while I danced. I remember it even today! I didn't know the proper *bhonggimā* (dance movements), but I danced and danced!" She describes how her mother watched from a distance, deciding that Bonti had the ability to dance *bihu.* The next day Bonti's mother took her to meet some people in Jorhat who were knowledgeable about *bihu*, and they told her, "Yes, she has the ability. Make her dance." She joined a performance troupe and began to refine her dance technique. Over a montage of old photographs of Bonti competing in *bihu* dance as a young girl, acting in drama productions, and standing amidst towering stacks of trophies and medals, Zublee's voice narrates Bonti's many accomplishments. A few minutes later, Bonti

[2] Words spoken in English are underlined.

speaks about some of the difficulties she faced as she progressed in the competitive *bihu* industry.

> A small story comes to mind now that I'd like to share with you. When I went to dance *bihu*, I already had the proper *bihu* dress, but one thing was missing: my *muṭhi-khāru* (bracelets). At that time, it was difficult to get them – they were very expensive. What happened was, when I went to dance in stage programs, my mother would ask the mother of another dancer to let me wear her *muṭhi-khāru* during my performance. Whenever we went to dance *bihu*, my mother always used to accompany me in a rickshaw. All the other dancers used to go in cars. So I asked my mother, "Ma, why do we always travel in rickshaw? All the other girls go so nicely in cars. Why can't we also go in a car?" Ma told me, "We are not rich people. We do with what we have. You are a good dancer." So whatever Ma told me, it entered my mind, and I still remember it today. We struggled a lot, and we have overcome many obstacles. I knew that I have to become an even better dancer to show the society that a good dancer can come from a family like ours. I have worked very hard, and here I am today. This is why I have come so far.

Near the end of the episode, Bonti explains how she became a contestant on the show:

> One day back in March, when I turned on the TV, I was watching the channel DY365, and then what happened? All of a sudden, I saw a DY *Bihu Rānī* advertisement. After that, I couldn't collect the phone number, so I waited two days until I saw the advertisement again and noted down the number. I made the phone call and found out what to do, and they took my name. Then, they called me one day for the audition, and I went all by myself. Then when I came here, at the time of the audition, I wasn't dressed up yet, and I noticed there were so many *nāsoni*-s present accompanied by their guardians. So I felt a little scared, since I had come on my own, and no guardian had come along with me. Everyone saw me and said, "Oh, this girl has come alone." They didn't recognize me. But then when I put on my dress, everyone recognized me. So then what happened? Everyone was busy with their own work. They gave me an audition slot at 4pm. So when I got dressed up and arrived for the audition, everyone recognized me. One of the judges called me by name, "Bonti, how are you?" he asked. I said, "Yes I'm fine." But before that, no one recognized me! It was really funny.

One moment during the show that Bonti refers to in her interview brings together some of the themes I discuss here in a striking way. After one of Bonti's competitive routines, instead of asking a question, Madhurima Choudhury, who was one of the judges for *Bihu Rānī* that season, asked Bonti to demonstrate her talent for acting by performing a short improvised solo skit. She outlined the scene as follows:

> Bonti, you have fallen in love with a boy from a different *jāti* (caste). He is not your *jāti*, he is *ojāti* (low-caste). Your family will never agree to this match, so you must elope. You'll run away at night, because you can't run away during the day. Right? In the middle of the night, secretly, you'll run away from your village. Now you have to show us. Go to your man, your young lover. Your parents are sleeping. Take some small snacks for your journey, and leave from your home closing the door behind you.

Bonti does a beautiful job of depicting the scene without any props, as a background track featuring crickets chirping and dogs barking augments the dramatic effect. She continues for a full two minutes, and host Zublee snores loudly into the microphone for comic effect, but Bonti remains steadfastly focused on her goal of leaving the house without waking her parents. After the conclusion of the clip, Bonti's interview continues, and she describes how anxious she was during those moments. "I could have done much better, but I was so scared during that time! What should I do? There was nothing, no dialogue! I had to create it all on my own. I tried to do whatever I could. I really enjoyed it. I just thought of my own parents, bowed to the ground doing *xewā* (asking for blessings) as I would in real life, I just thought of them."

This moment might have struck Bonti as an ironic twist, since, as she told me later during our conversations, her own love story played out in a similar way, but the lovers' roles were inverted. Bonti comes from a family classified by the Indian government as "Other Backward Class" (OBC). Her "love marriage" to her husband, whose family belongs to the higher Kalita caste, created a fair amount of controversy, and she experienced difficulties finding acceptance as a daughter-in-law in her husband's joint family. Issues related to gender, which are still central to *bihu*-related narratives and lived experiences, find expression in competitive arenas during moments like these where the eloping young woman takes center stage. Because the

contestant is being judged not only on her artistic performance, but also on her embodiment of Assamese values, the question-answer session often becomes a test of the young woman's knowledge that requires evidence from her everyday life practices.

Figure 4.8 – Smritirekha Saikia, Rehanna Kheshgi and Seema Kakoty preparing to judge an episode of *Bihu Rānī* at the DY365 studios in Guwahati.

During the 2015 season of DY *Bihu Rānī*, I was invited to participate in two episodes as a guest judge, and I had the opportunity to see what happens offstage and how the episodes are filmed. In conversation with the three other judges – Smritirekha Saikia, Nilakanta Borah, and Seema Kakoty – I learned that the questions they asked were not chosen beforehand, but were spontaneously improvised during the course of the show (Figure 4.8). These questions were not limited to knowledge about the names of specific dance movements or the meaning behind

particular *bihu* song lyrics. As is the case in stage performance question sessions, the judges on *Bihu Rānī* test the contestants on their general knowledge of historical and contemporary practices associated with *bihu* and with Assamese rural culture in general. Sometimes the answers end up sounding obscure, like the question Bonti answered about why the *nāsoni*'s feet must stay close to the ground, and sometimes they turn out to be embarrassingly obvious, like the question Nilakanta requested me to ask contestant Sumi Boruah about the *gogonā* as part of my guest judging responsibilities.

After the conclusion of Sumi's performance, she waited patiently, out of breath and panting at the microphone, until host Zublee congratulated her and turned to the four of us seated at the judging table. "Let's see what our judges have to say! Rehanna *bāideu* (elder sister), how did you like Sumi's performance?" I picked up my own wireless microphone, and feeling the camera's gaze, I said in Assamese, "Thank you Sumi, you danced beautifully. I just have one question for you. Why does the *nāsoni* wear the *gogonā* in her hair?" As if to bolster the question's authority, Nilakanta repeated my words, and then Sumi replied, "So that the *khupā* (bun) doesn't come loose." It sounded like a fine answer to me, and having no counter-answer in mind, I looked to Nilakanta for the final judgment. He spoke into his microphone, "I will say this is not the correct answer to the question. Why? If you remove the *gogonā*, does the *khupā* come loose? No, actually, there is no other place to keep the *gogonā* apart from the *khupā.* Is there? You can't go around holding the *gogonā* in your hand, can you? You must dance, isn't it true?"

Upon hearing this response, I almost laughed out loud at what appeared to me to be a random question with a silly answer. But herein lies the power of this competitive arena. The judge is always right, and the judge's knowledge is supreme. In the context of *bihu*, there is seemingly infinite scope for inventing questions and answers with no hope of assembling an

ultimate, complete body of knowledge on the subject. But this is the beauty of folk. Traditions that come from the everyday lives of "rural" people or "low" culture tend to resist standardization. Not because there is something resistant in the forms themselves, but because, at least in the case of *bihu*, many people feel a deep sense of ownership over *bihu*'s associated traditions, including songs and dances. In spite of the burgeoning consumer market for cultural commodities, which has produced an array of experts declaring truth on cultural matters, everyday people still claim truth from their own experiences and those passed down from their elders through oral narratives including stories and songs. This is why questions seem random and nonsensical. Because they can be no other way as long as people believe so strongly in their own experiences.

As Bonti told me one day in 2014 as we lounged around after a long day of dancing, "Our *bihu* actually comes from the village. In the village, the elderly people who played *ḍhul*, who have knowledge (*gyān*) about *bihu*. Those who know from experience. There aren't people like that living in towns. Take, for example, people in Guwahati. Those people learned from [knowledgeable people in villages], and after practicing, are teaching others. After going to [people in villages] and taking their suggestions, [*bihu*] has become established [in Guwahati]. People who live in villages, the only problem is that they don't have money. That's why they can't become famous. They can't appear on the television channel. They are the ones who give the best performances. They are the ones who can play the *ḍhul* well. But those wealthy people [in Guwahati] are able to build up their own names."

Because the judges who participate in *bihu* reality television competitions such as *Bihu Rānī* also judge stage competitions at *bihutolī*-s, the questions asked are similar in both venues. These questions are curious because they often probe into the lived experiences of contestants for

evidence of cultural knowledge. In this way, the "reality" that is staged during *Bihu Rānī* has a long-standing precedent which grew out of the *bihutolī*, where individual contestants prove how Assamese they are, not only through performance, but by undergoing randomly generated tests of practical knowledge associated with village life in Assam. For example, judge Smritirekha Saikia's question for contestant Yashmin Dihingia involved a lengthy prelude:

> On the first day of *bihu*, we eat 100 different types of *xāk* (green leafy vegetables), isn't it true? This is our *poromporā* (tradition). Your mother, elder sister, grandmother, if they are living, they surely have told you. In every home, 100 types of *xāk* are used, which are eaten in every home. You won't have to name all 100 varieties. Just tell us the name of ten types of *xāk.*

Yashmin, obviously flustered and confused, replied with the names of gourds (*lāu*) instead of green leafy vegetables (*xāk*), "*Kerelā lāu*, *Rongā lāu*, *Jāti lāu*…" With a smirk, Smritirekha responded, "It looks like not even one type of *xāk* was named here." The other two judges chimed in, "The things you've named do not fall into the category of *xāk*! What are these? These are *pāsoli* (non-leafy vegetables). She asked for *xāk*." Smritirekha clarified, "I am asking about *xāk*. Think about the garden behind your house and you'll remember."

Judge Nilakanta Borah, known for being antagonistic, reinforced Yashmin's mistake, saying, "Didn't you understand what she was asking? She's talking about *xāk*." Yashmin replied meekly, "Yes, I know." Nilakanta pushed further, "You didn't know earlier?" Smritirekha continued her questioning, "Do you eat *xāk* at home or not? You'll find the answer if you think of your garden at home." Yashmin again attempted to answer, listing five types of *xāk*, "*Lāi xāk, Khutorā, Jilmil, Mula, Māimuni*…" After a pause, Smritirekha intervened, "Will you remember or not?" Yashmin continued, "*Lofā, Pāleng*…" Again Smritirekha interjected, "It's coming along. Just a few more and you'll be done." Yashmin added, "*Khutorā*." Nilakanta noticed, "You

said *Khutorā* twice." Smritirekha said, "Is there no *Dhekiyā* in your garden? Just think of your garden, then you'll remember everything. Yashmin continued, "*Dhekiyā, Kosu*…" Smritirekha concluded, "Ok that was ten, wasn't it? Fine. You're beginning to remember. You should know this, don't you think so? Your own food that you eat? People are forgetting our traditional foods, isn't it true? This is why it is good to remember the names of *xāk* and *pāsoli*, you up and coming next generation. Fine, it's done. Thank you."

The simple fact of asking whether Yashmin's home has a garden – something almost impossible to find in Guwahati – indicates it as a prerequisite for cultural knowledge. That Yashmin's eating habits became part of the competition should not come as a surprise, because as I have established throughout this dissertation, the *nāsoni* is expected to be the embodiment of Assamese womanhood, from her daily comportment to her life choices. This mode of address which borders on public shaming can be found in reality television competitions across the world, Simon Cowell of *The X Factor, Britain's Got Talent,* and *American Idol*, being one of the more famous exponents. But in Assam, the roots of public hand-wringing about cultural loss run deep, fed by political movements for cultural and political autonomy during and after colonial rule.

Politics are not usually directly referenced in *bihu* competitions, but stage competitions that feature question-answer sessions tend to have more extended discussions and sometimes touch upon sensitive issues that would not be appropriate for television. For example, during the competition in Margherita where Bonti performed in 2009, judge Anil Saikia asked one of the other female solo contestants about a *bihu* song she included in her routine. It turned out the song had been sung by one of the male members of her team, and so he approached the microphone to answer the question. Anil Saikia quoted the song lyrics, asking him, "What exactly did you

sing?" The young man recited the stanza in question, "I can buy four Naga girls from the hills that are more beautiful than you." In the context of the performance, the line was meant to tease the girl of his affections, an *Oxomīyā* girl, by insulting her, which is common in *jurā-nām* style *bihu* songs. But this particular insult was based on an ethnic slur. The line not only implies that Naga girls are less beautiful than *Oxomīyā* girls, therefore making the insult's sting more potent, but it suggests that Naga girls can be purchased with money (*ṭokāt pae*). Anil Saikia repeated the phrase and said, "If we sing songs like this, will we be able to maintain friendly relations with our neighbors? Will our "country" (*dex* i.e. Assam) maintain amity? Think about it. If we sing this kind of song, will our surrounding states like it?"

That this song made it all the way to the stage suggests that various people during rehearsal did not protest its inclusion in the routine and points to lingering prejudices that remain between ethnic groups in Assam. On various other occasions I have heard derogatory references to Naga women in *bihu* songs. Under colonial rule, the many different Naga tribes were part of the wider frontier region of Assam, but fought for their own tribal state called Nagaland (est. 1963). The fact that this judge drew attention to the song and admonished the performer for singing it points to the political undercurrents in *bihu*. Singing such lyrics reflects badly on *Oxomīyā dex* – the "nation" of Assam, and the *bihu* competition becomes an arena for debating relations between states. In order to project a progressive, modern sensibility, the judge draws attention to this incident to make an example of this competition entry.

Why is it so important that young women know the names of leafy green vegetables, the names of six rivers featured in *bihu* songs, and the name of the teeth on the *kāsi* scythe used to harvest rice? This information is not taught in school and has no place in textbooks – especially not those created by the central government, where the history and culture of northeast India is

underrepresented. As young women are questioned on stage, they perform a critical role in the negotiation of local authority in a politically and culturally marginalized region. Knowledge of local culture is highly prized in this climate of fear fueled by globalization and so-called "Westernization," especially in the field of culture. The close association of respectable femininity with sacrifice, nourishment, and prosperity linked to the fertility of the earth brings into relief the metonymical force of "Mother India" in shaping the expectations for young women during these encounters (Ramaswamy 2010). Frequent televised debates and public protests related to preserving the "purity" of Assamese culture are highly gendered, and "fusion" often becomes a buzzword that sparks outrage among Assamese cultural organizations.

Bihu-Samba Fusion Controversy in Guwahati

On January 22, 2014, a fashion show called "Warps & Wefts" organized by Prem Sharma of Rudraksh Tradecom Private Limited was held at the Brahmaputra Ashok Hotel in Guwahati, featuring fashions by Mumbai designer Rohit Verma. While the stated goal of the joint venture by Sharma and Verma was to promote the culture of northeast India, a dance performance by Mumbai-based choreographer and ballroom dancer Sandip Soparrkar which took place during the fashion show sparked protests in Guwahati by various Assamese cultural organizations. At the time, I was in Jorhat, a small town around 300 kilometers from Guwahati, and I noticed the controversy being broadcast on multiple Assamese news channels on January 24.

The news footage included a few clips of the performance interspersed with commentary and interviews with protesters. The performance itself featured four female dancers dressed in leotard-type black bodysuits and wide colorful skirts who danced with Soparrkar, in black pants and a sequined shirt, to a live musical performance of a *bihu* song. Six men dressed in typical *bihu* costume (*mugā* silk shirts, white *dhuti* and woven *gāmusā* cloth tied around the head)

performed the song: one on vocals, two playing *ḍhul*, two playing *tāl* cymbals, and one playing bamboo flute, arranged on stage behind the dancers (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9 – Sandip Soparrkar and his troupe perform Samba dance to a *bihu* song with live musical accompaniment during fashion show in Guwahati. January 22, 2014. Image taken from http://www.bellevision.com.

In the footage of the Guwahati protests, women marched through the streets holding signboards written in Assamese declaring "Death to Rudraksh," "Save *bihu,*" and "*Bihu* is our national prestige (*jātīyo xonmān*)" while shouting slogans such as "Save Assamese culture (*Oxomīyā xongskriti*)" (Figure 4.10). A group of men protesting in front of a banner of the Guwahati branch of *Asomiya Yuva Mancha* (Assamese Youth Forum) burned an effigy of State Cultural Affairs Department Commissioner Swapnanil Baruah, who apparently played a part in supporting the event (Figure 4.11). Various cultural organizations released statements condemning what they called a "distorted presentation of *bihu* dance" and demanded that Baruah

resign, be dismissed, or at least publicly apologize for "hurting the sentiments of the Assamese people" ("Distorted presentation," *Sentinel Assam,* January 23, 2014). A woman protester interviewed by NewsLive for the broadcast says, "*Bihu* should be *bihu*. Whatever they are celebrating, let them celebrate, but we feel hurt that they involved *bihu*." Another woman said, "They have made a big mistake. The program they've organized, they should have reflected first on what they are doing." A third woman stated, "They should never disrespect *bihu*. If they disrespect *bihu*, they are disrespecting our *jāti* (community)."

Figure 4.10 – Still image from news footage featuring women protesting *bihu* fusion performance in Guwahati. January 24, 2014.

Figure 4.11 – Still image from news footage featuring men from *Asomiya Yuva Mancha* protesting *bihu* fusion performance in Guwahati. January 24, 2014.

Most likely due to Soparrkar's fame as a choreographer for Hindi films, the Assamese media described the performance as a "Bihu dance presented in Bollywood style" (Sentinel). Soparrkar, who was given a National Achievement Award in the field of choreography and dance in New Delhi (*Times of India*, Nov 28, 2014) has choreographed music videos, Bollywood and Hollywood films, musicals and also judged reality dance competitions such as Dance India Dance, Dancing with the Stars, and Dancing Divas. In response to the controversy, Soparrkar explained, "My dance was a blend of authentic Bihu Music and traditional Samba dance. I did not change the bihu music to fit Samba dance nor did I change Samba dance to fit into bihu music, they both were used in its pure form. They just blended in so well, it was not a Bollywood dance at all like some people are saying" (*News Karnataka*, January 24, 2014).

Soparrkar was able to blend Samba and *bihu,* because he adapted the basic Samba footwork pattern to fit the *bihu* rhythm. Since Samba music is felt and played in cut time (2/2), and Samba footwork contains three steps and a pause, Soparrkar has simply removed the pause and turned the footwork into a continuous sequence of three steps: a Samba waltz. This works for *bihu* when the pace of the footwork is slowed considerably to match the *bihu* groove (Diagram 4.3).

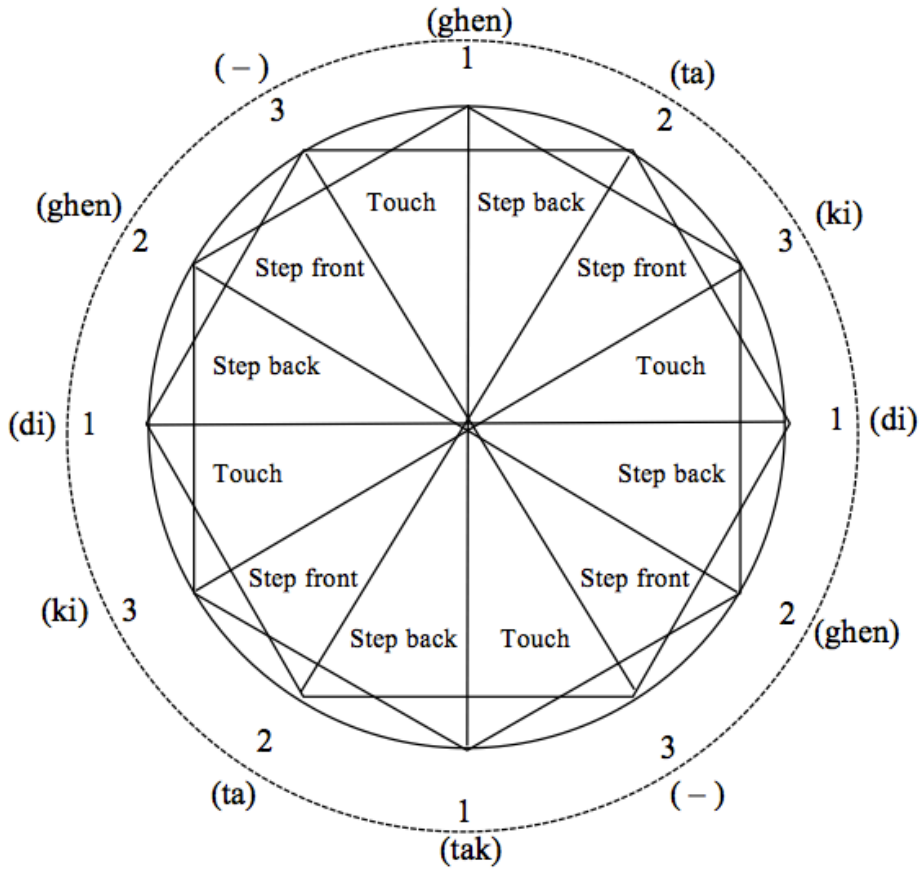

Diagram 4.3 – Circular diagram of *bihu* rhythm aligned with Samba dance steps.

Soparrkar's ambivalence to the outrage expressed by members of Assamese cultural groups is echoed in the sparse news coverage of such protests outside Assam. Within Assam and the Assamese diaspora, progressive bloggers often express dismay when debates erupt periodically about preserving Assamese culture and cracking down on fusion projects, which

they interpret as a antiquated provincial concern with cultural purity. Two of the many interrelated factors that fuel such debates, which I address here, are the expressed or apparent identities of the creators and performers of such fusion projects, and the style in which formal music and dance elements are combined.

Soparrkar and his troupe are perceived by the protesting parties as outsiders. The spectre of Bollywood is always present in the background of conversations about Indian culture, because of its power to capture the imagination and its ability to absorb such an incredible variety of styles from around the world. Every year in April as *bihu* season begins, reporters fill the cultural section of Assamese newspapers with stories about which artist has dared to include Hindi songs in his or her *bihu* concert set list. While progressive artists argue that the Assamese people should be proud of those artists who succeed in the Hindi film music industry, *bihutolī* organizers and cultural organizations have begun to intervene by interrupting performances in order to enforce Assamese-song-only policies (Das, *Times of India*, April 17, 2014; Baruah, *Times of India*. Dec 23, 2015). The history of the struggles for Assamese autonomy that came to violent struggles during the Assam Movement are still present in these debates, especially for those who lived through the turbulent 1970s and 1980s. For the fusion-protesting groups in Guwahati, Soparrkar and his troupe represent the further incursion of Bollywood into Assamese cultural matters and therefore are perceived as a threat to cultural sovereignty.

The arrangement of the performance itself intensified this perceived threat, because the *bihu* song to which the Samba dance was choreographed was performed by a live group of musicians wearing traditional *bihu* dress instead of a recorded track. Also, the song performed by the musicians has a traditional feel, as opposed to a "modern" feel which the protesting groups would have more easily written off as unworthy of serious consideration. I argue that it was

precisely because the *bihu* song was performed at a high standard in a traditional style that so much controversy was generated. That Soparrkar chose Samba as the style to blend with *bihu* adds another layer to the controversy. Although the protesting groups apparently were not aware that Soparrkar had incorporated Samba and instead read the dance as a Bollywood spin on *bihu*, the unfamiliar dance movements must have struck viewers as sexualized and foreign. Soparrkar's creation is interesting from a musicological perspective for its blending of rhythmic conventions without compromising the integrity of either tradition. Debates about tradition and change also inform performance practices and evaluation techniques in samba competitions in Brazil (Robinson and Packman 2013), which makes Soparrkar's project even more fascinating for its pairing of two music and dance forms associated with community identity (Assamese / Brazilian) and springtime festivals (Bihu / Carnaval).

The fashion show happened just a few days before India's Republic Day on January 26, a time when the pageantry of the nation is ubiquitous, and regional sentiments are tense. Having spent Republic Day in Assam for a few consecutive years, I have observed how many people are on edge during this time. In Assam, the roads are normally shut down on Republic Day, and sometimes the preceding and following day. A state-wide *bondho* (ban on travel) is often declared in order to avoid any problems. For example, a frustrated organization representing the interests of a minority ethnic group may decide to vandalize vehicles passing through the area where they live, or an anti-national activist organization may set off a bomb in a bus to draw attention to their ongoing struggle.

Political anxieties related to maintaining a sense of order in Assam where the state government has attempted for decades to bring the multitude of ethnic, tribal and caste communities under one united Assamese identity are played out in public debates surrounding

cultural events such as Soparrkar's performance. Since I was interacting with young female employees at a medical diagnostics clinic in Jorhat during the time of the fashion show controversy, I asked a few of the women what they thought of the debates. Anita Hazarika, who occasionally participates in salsa dance workshops organized at her college, told me that the program was well executed, and there is nothing inherently wrong with fusion if approached with a positive attitude. According to Anita, "If they presented a program on Assamese ground, they should have shown Assamese culture. First, actually what is *bihu*? If they would have first shown that they understand what *bihu* is, then it would have been fine. Then Assamese people would have felt proud. Then they could have added Samba later." Anita points to the perceived sanctity of Assamese soil or "ground" as she said, using the English word, where pride in Assamese traditions must be defended. Anita's claim that outsiders must first prove their knowledge of traditional forms before attempting fusion resonated in my mind later that day when a different channel broadcast a similar criticism of Soparrkar's performance, this time juxtaposing it with one of my recent impromptu *bihu* performances at a nearby elementary school which someone had apparently captured on video and sent to the news studio, suggesting that Soparrkar take cues from me on how to properly present *bihu*.

***Bihu*-Bollywood Fusion Celebrated in Dance Competition**

A very different take on *bihu* "fusion" was presented during the third season of *Dance India Dance* in 2012, which was celebrated by Assamese and regional media (Saikia, *Assam Times*, March 18, 2012; *The Telegraph Calcutta*, April 6, 2012; *Darjeeling Times*, April 23, 2012). Aired on the channel Zee TV, *Dance India Dance* is the national version of the Zee Bangla dance reality show called *Dance Bangla Dance*. The contest is run by Mithun Chakraborty, who is referred to as the Grandmaster, and three choreographer-dancers serve as

judges: Terence Lewis, Geeta Kapoor, and Remo D'Souza. Contemporary dancer Pradeep Gurung (25), who eventually won first runner-up in the show's third season, incorporated *bihu* dance into one of his successful routines. Born in Golaghat, a district in the northeastern region of Assam, Pradeep and his family identify as Nepali. News coverage narrated Pradeep's story of triumph, born into a poor family in Assam, struggling to study dance against the wishes of his widow mother, and finally encouraged and supported financially by his dance instructor to try out for the *Dance India Dance* auditions in Kolkata.

The history of the Nepali community in Assam is complex. Sometimes referred to as "Gurkhas," following the British classification used to distinguish soldiers brought from the Gurkha valley in western Nepal from Indian sepoys, the association of Gurkhas with their colonial role as load-bearing laborers called "coolies" continues to bear a stigma that some Nepalis face in India to this day. Gurkhas were offered land by the colonial administration to settle in Assam in order to cultivate jungle territories, and by 1832 many Nepalis had taken up buffalo and cattle rearing along the banks of the Brahmaputra as graziers (Sharma 2011, 94). As the population of Nepali settlers increased, the paternalistic colonial administration began blaming them for corrupting local indigenous communities by selling them opium and liquor, arguing that living in Assam had caused them to become racially degenerate (Sharma 2011, 95). While colonial records emphasize conflicts between Nepalis and local society, the British failed to recognize the extent to which Nepalis became integrated into the social fabric of the region, for example by adopting the Assamese language, intermarrying with other communities, and celebrating *bihu* (Sharma 2011, 96). Jayeeta Sharma writes, "Nepalis who settled in Assam viewed themselves as different from larger Nepali communities of the eastern Himalayas, and of Nepal. They saw themselves as distinctively Assamese, but also Nepali" (2011, 96). The

contemporary manifestations of this history are performed on the reality television stage of *Dance India Dance*, as Pradeep Gurung performs *bihu*.[3]

Contemporary dancer, choreographer and *Dance India Dance* judge Terrence Lewis, referred to on the show as "Master Terrence," coached Pradeep and his *bihu* dance partner Piyali Saha from Siliguri (a region that spans the neighboring states of Darjeeling and West Bengal) in preparation for their routine. During the broadcast episode, Lewis described his plan for Pradeep and Piyali's routine just before they began dancing. He chose an iconic 1990s Bollywood song, and gave it what he called a "folk dance twist, with the mission of mixing Bollywood and *bihu*."

> As Pradeep and Piyali enter the stage dressed in traditional *bihu* costume, the caption appears on screen in Devanagari script (Hindi): "Dance Style – Bihu and Bollywood." The pre-recorded audio track begins with a typical melismatic flute flourish indexing *bihu*, and then fades into the song "*Dekhā Hāi Pehli Bār*" ("I have seen for the first time") from the Hindi film *Sājan* (1991). During this opening sequence, the pair portrays a village scene, Piyali acting as a young wife involved in domestic work in her home, and Pradeep approaching her as if carrying a bundle of firewood on his shoulder. When he draws near to Piyali, the opening bars of "*Dekhā Hāi Pehli Bār*" establish the six-beat *khemtā tāl* as the rhythmic cycle, one that is typically associated with folk and devotional songs in Bollywood films. When Pradeep drops the imagined bundle, Piyali brings him water with her hands to wash his face, and he playfully splashes her with the imagined liquid. As she retreats, annoyed, Pradeep pursues her and she takes the opportunity to warn him with a strong finger pointed at his face before playfully flicking his nose in revenge. The choreography brilliantly weaves together many typical

[3] For another example of Gurkha nationalism rising up in support of a Nepali contestant see Punathambekar's work on season three of *Indian Idol* (2010).

Bollywood dance moves with iconic *bihu* moves. For example, in a tender moment, Pradeep gets down on one knee and when Piyali bends to sit on his knee, they both perform the iconic *bihu* "waist break" (*koṷkāl bhāngi*), embracing with their inner arms and flipping palms to the beat with their outer arms. Pradeep lays Piyali down on the stage, and as he spins around to kneel behind her, they both assume the typical *bihu* position gazing out at the audience over the right shoulder with both hands resting palm-up at the lower back (*koṷkāl*) as they break waists in sync, swaying forwards and backwards together (Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12 – Pradeep Gurung and Piyali Saha dance *bihu* to Hindi film music as contestants on *Dance India Dance*. March 11, 2012.

Master Geeta singled out this kneeling position as one of her favorite moments of the competitive routine. The first of the judges to respond to the performance, Geeta said in a mix of Hindi and English[4], "I have seen *bihu* return to this stage after many years, and it's looking very good. You know it's very difficult because in *bihu* you must concentrate mostly on the lower half [gesturing towards her lower torso] and you're always down [touching her sternum while bending forward] and it's a lot of pelvic that you move up and down." Geeta's knowledge of *bihu* dance was apparent as she discussed the challenge of the iconic *bihu* waist-break. When Master Terrence responded to the performance, he agreed with Geeta, noting his own ignorance of *bihu* dance technique prior to working with Pradeep and Piyali. He said, also in a mix of Hindi and English, "When I began choreographing to this song, I was gonna do Bollywood but they both requested that 'Sir, this beat, it's a very typical *bihu* beat, here this style will mesh very well.' And this is their hard work because I don't know how to dance *bihu*. I'm telling you it is difficult because I thought that *bihu* is this [moving his shoulders up and down] and then Pradeep and Piyali corrected me, 'No Sir, it's lower half,' just as Geeta correctly pointed out. It looks easy, but when I try to do it, I have to work extremely hard just to do that."

Although the *khemtā* rhythmic cycle featured in "*Dekhā Hāi Pehli Bār*" is not the same as the *bihu* rhythm, Pradeep and Piyali's suggestion that the song would mesh well with *bihu* dance makes sense from an analytical perspective. The individual beats (*ṭhekā*) of *khemtā* are conceptualized as six beats with two symmetrical halves (*dhin ta-dhin ta, kat ta-kat ta*). When aligned with the *bihu* rhythm, it is clear that they can be synchronized easily (Diagram 4.4 and 4.5).

[4] Words spoken in English are underlined.

Khemtā:

1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
dhin	–	ta	dhin	ta	–	kat	–	ta	kat	ta	–
Contract	Release	(hold)	Contract	Release	(hold)	Contract	Release	(hold)	Contract	Release	(hold)

Bihu:

1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
ghen	ta	ki	di	ghen	–	tak	ta	ki	di	ghen	–
Contract	Release	(hold)	Contract	Release	(hold)	Contract	Release	(hold)	Contract	Release	(hold)

Diagram 4.4 – Linear diagram of *khemtā* rhythm aligned with *bihu* rhythm and dance movements.

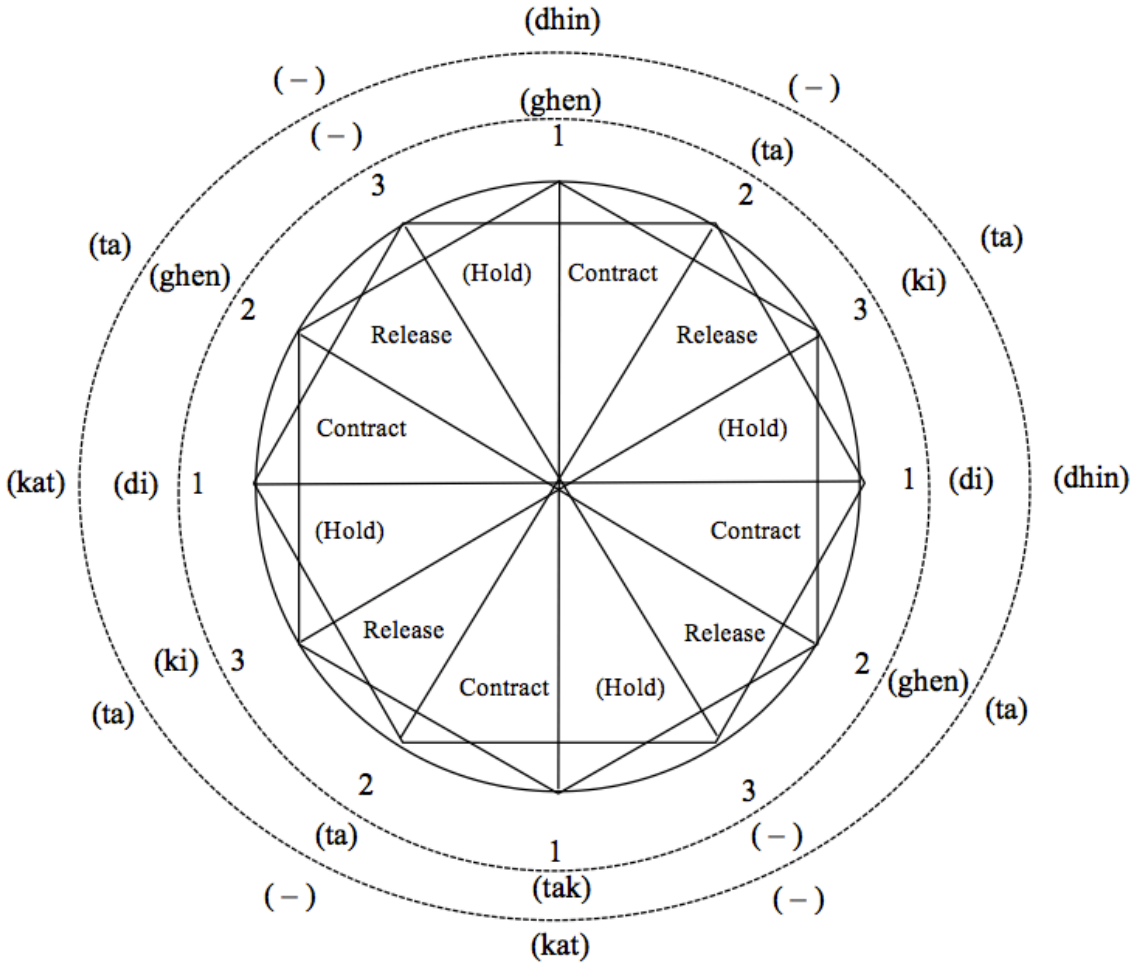

Diagram 4.5 – Circular diagram of *khemtā* rhythm aligned with *bihu* rhythm and dance movements.

Because *khemtā* is played at a much faster pace than the typical *bihu* rhythm, the effect of incorporating *bihu* dance movements normally performed in a slow groove ends up feeling quite frenetic. But the significance of aligning *bihu* and *khemtā* is that the *bihu* rhythm is rendered intelligible to a wider audience. When *bihu*, a regional genre which sounds foreign to people unaccustomed to its rhythmic patterns, is performed in *khemtā*, it suddenly becomes familiar, because *khemtā* has entered the ears of everyday Indians via film, radio, television and other channels.

During Pradeep's participation in *Dance India Dance,* there were continued calls for voting support from his constituents back in Assam. The All Assam Gurkha Students' Union (AAGSU) was particularly vocal about supporting Pradeep. According to one news story, the AAGSU publicity secretary Nanda Kirati Dewan made a public appeal to "all sections of society of the Northeast" to "register at least two missed calls for Pradeep," claiming that casting votes had recently become free of charge (*The Telegraph Calcutta*, April 6, 2012). Interestingly, an article in the *Assam Times* referred to Pradeep as an "Indian Gurkha from Northeast India permanently residing in Guwahati" and lauded his "unique fusion of Bihu dance presented in Bollywood style" which "mesmerized the judges and received high applause from them" (Saikia, *Assam Times*, March 18, 2012). Nowhere is Pradeep describe as Assamese.

At the end of the *bihu* fusion performance, Pradeep approached Grandmaster Mithun Chakraborty and special guest actor Jeetendra, and presented each with a *gāmusā* and *jāpi*, material symbols of Assamese cultural heritage. As a prelude to the presentation of these symbolic gifts, Pradeep said in Hindi, "I want to say something, if it pleases the Grandmaster. *Bihu* is our Assam's folk dance, which we dance to celebrate during happy times. On behalf of

Assam, I want to give Grandmaster and Jeetu Sir a gift, which we call our honor (*xonmān*), Assam's great honor, which is the *gāmusā* and *jāpi*." With this action, Pradeep marked this moment as an official assertion of regional pride on the national stage. Pradeep became an ambassador for Assamese culture, a representative of his state and its unique cultural traditions, even through a performance that fuses *bihu* with Bollywood. Following his success on *Dance India Dance,* Pradeep appeared at cultural events across Assam, giving motivational speeches to young dancers, hosting dance workshops, and eventually opening his own dance school in Guwahati.

Both choreographers Sandip Soparrkar and Terrence Lewis expressed an appreciation for the ways in which *bihu*'s rhythmic patterns can be mapped onto those of other music and dance genres. While the Samba fusion example incorporated *bihu* music into a performance that was criticized and the Bollywood fusion example incorporated *bihu* dance into a performance that was celebrated, both highlight important issues related to how cultural and political anxieties play out through *bihu* performance in different arenas. *Bihu* has also recently been featured in mainstream reality singing competitions.

Bihu **on** ***Indian Idol Junior*** **2015**

Although most mainstream reality singing competitions in India focus on contestants' ability and versatility in the vast field of Hindi film songs, in the case of multiple contestants from Assam, *bihu* is presented as an example of the competitor's local roots. *Indian Idol Junior* held auditions for its second season in Delhi, Kolkata, Chandigarh and Mumbai beginning in April 2015. Hiya Parasha Bhuyan from Barpeta, a town in Lower Assam, auditioned in Kolkata in June, and began her audition with a *bihu* song.

The televised audition opens with the show's hosts Hussain Kuwajerwala and Asha Negi praising in Hindi the "sound that comes from the gardens (i.e. tea plantations) of the Northeast, so fresh and fragrant, that wakes one from sleep and excites the senses." As the episode proceeds, the *pe̊pā* buffalo horn's sound plays over a montage of scenes from Assam: two men rowing a shallow boat across the Brahmaputra river, a woman carrying bamboo in a basket behind her hanging from a strap on her forehead, and finally Hiya being adorned with the traditional *bihu* ornaments – the *gām-khāru* bracelets, the bamboo *gogonā* mouth harp in her hair, the *kopouphul* flower twisted around her *khupā* bun, the large red *phut* (*bindi*) placed low on her forehead. Over a slow-motion clip of Hiya dancing *bihu* with other girls while a group of men play *pe̊pā* horn, bamboo flute and *ḍhul* drum, Hiya's voice narrates an introduction in Hindi, "Greetings. My name is Hiya Parasha Bhuyan. I am 13. I am from Barpeta District." The voiceover cuts back to the diagetic musical activity where Hiya is singing a *bihu* song in Assamese, "*Dikhou noi eribo nuwāru*…" (I can't leave the Dikhou River). Then her introduction resumes in Hindi and English[5], alternating between the footage of her seated facing the camera for the interview and footage of the scenes she narrates in Assam:

> *Bihu* is Assam's main festival. Here there is *bihu* dance and also *bihu* song. I sing *bihu* with my sister and everyone else dances. In Assam, everyone calls our Barpeta "Satranagari" (Land of *xotro*-s). It is the home of Sri Krishna's largest temple. We worship there everyday singing *kīrton* (devotional hymns). People are musically inspired from this place. My mummy also used to sing a bit, so she first taught me that I should get involved with music, and since then I have learned music. Being selected by Indian Idol Junior is important to me, because I will be able to represent Assam's culture, and Assam's people will also realize that 'Look, this girl brought focus on Assam to an international level.'

[5] Words spoken in English are underlined.

The audition begins with Hiya entering the studio and standing to face the three judges, Composer Salim Merchant, actress Sonakshi Sinha, and singer/producer Vishal Dadlani, seated behind the *Indian Idol Junior* table. Hiya introduces herself, and Vishal Dadlani asks her in Hindi, "Do you know how to sing *bihu*? Will you sing?" Hiya replies affirmatively and begins to sing a *bihu zuzonā*, "*Āgoli b̆āhore lāhori gogonā, ei bohi t̆ātor pātot ei bāu…*" Vishal interjects, "I love *bihu*!" Hiya continues singing, "*Āhe ki nāhe oi mure nu senāi oi…*" Again Vishal says, "Wow." Hiya continues, "*Ei siripāti mongolkhon sāu.*" Upon concluding the *zuzonā* Hiya begins clapping to establish the *bihu* rhythm and sings a famous *jāt-nām* which combines the repeated line "*Bihure birinā pāt*" (the *birinā* leaf of *bihu*) with the lines "*Noiyā poisā ulāi gol, hoilā ānā lukāi gol, māsei nu khutei khutei khābo*" (new money has been spent, goods have been hidden, the fish will eat). The judges clap along and shower her with compliments, and then judge Salim Merchant asks her to sing a *mukhṛā* (the first line of a song) of any song she likes. Hiya requests that he provide a tonal context for her to begin by saying, "Sir scale B," after which he plays a B Major chord on the keyboard at his side. Hiya sings the song "*Ā Zarā*" from the 2011 Hindi film *Murder 2*, and Salim begins accompanying her on the keyboard. Impressed, the judges agree that she will be selected to participate as a contestant, and she runs backstage to hug her family waiting in the green room. Salim leads the other judges back to meet Hiya and family and says in Hindi, "Hiya! Let's all sing *bihu*!" Hiya and her mother lead out with "*Dikhou noi eribo nuwāru*, *Jāji noi eribo nuwāru…*" (I can't leave the Dikhou river, I can't leave the Jāji river) and all join in clapping the *bihu* rhythm together as the scene fades to a close.

Although Hiya was one of the 120 contestants that succeeded in the auditions across the four cities, she did not succeed in the first round when 45 singers were selected to move on to the second round. Another young woman from Assam, Nahid Afrin (13), did succeed and made it through the final theatre round of 13 contestants. Of the three finalists, Nahid was the first runner up, behind the winner Ananya Sritam from Orissa and ahead of Nithyashree V. from Chennai. During a special episode of *Indian Idol Junior*, Angaraag Mahanta, known as Papon, made a guest appearance, performing the song "*Kyon*" composed by Pritam which Papon recorded for the Hindi film *Barfi* (2012) as well as "*Moh Moh ke Dhaage*" composed by Anu Malik which Papon recorded for the Hindi film *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (2015). "*Kyon*" was one of the first songs that launched Papon's career in the Hindi cinema world and put his name on the popular culture map outside of Assam. While his first and second Assamese albums *Jonaki Raati* (2005) and *Sinaki Osinaki* (2009) continue to be popular in Assam, his debut Hindi album *The Story So Far* released by Times Music in 2012 won a Global Indian Music Academy (GIMA) award in the Best Pop Album category that year. His performances on the third season of Coke Studio in September 2013 increased his mainstream following across India.

Nahid joined Papon for the duet "*Moh Moh ke Dhaage*." Following their duet, one of the hosts asked Papon how he felt performing with Nahid. He replied in Hindi, "I was under pressure. Through Facebook people were asking, "Why don't you go meet Nahid and sing with her? You are from Assam, and a girl has gone out from Assam. Two things have come from Assam, tea and the one-horned rhino, maybe we are these two." After the hosts and judges laughed at his joke, Papon continued in English, "Thank you *Indian Idol Junior* for making us meet on this beautiful platform." One of the hosts replied in Hindi, "Papon, your father was Sri Khagen Mahanta. He is known as the 'King of *Bihu*.' Since you're here and Nahid is here, can

we make some *bihu* happen?" The scene cut to Papon and the others on stage clapping to the *bihu* beat while an electric guitar marked the beat with a drone on one note to set the pitch. In his typical didactic style, Papon addressed the audience in English, "So it's two claps ok? One two. One two," and began singing "*Paak paak*," one of the *bihu* songs he made famous through his Coke Studio performance. Nahid joined in singing, and all the finalists, judges, hosts and parents joined in dancing as the episode came to a close.

The *Bihu* Queen "Goes Out" from Assam

As Papon's Facebook fans suggested, Nahid is one of the few young women who has "gone out" from Assam. The specific connotations of this "going out" have not only to do with traveling across borders or pursuing a career, which many women have done before Nahid. In this context, "going out" refers to the fact that Nahid is being recognized for her talent *despite* the fact that she is from the Northeast. She can hold her own. Nahid represents a new generation of "*bihu* queen" – one that takes home-grown talent and expands it beyond the geographical and cultural limits of Assam in order to enter the international entertainment industry, not as an Assamese woman, but as an Indian woman from Assam.

Nahid's talent in singing multiple genres led her to the final round of *Indian Idol Junior* as first runner-up, after which she was approached by Universal Music Live and signed an exclusive multi-year contract. She recorded her first playback song with Universal for the upcoming Hindi film *Akira* as the voice of the actress Sonakshi Sinha, who got to know her during the course of the season as one of the *Indian Idol Junior* judges. She also performed a solo concert tour of northeastern Assam in January 2016, and sang in the opening ceremony of the South Asian Games alongside Papon and other famous singers from the Northeast, which was held in Guwahati in February 2016. But along with these successes come restrictions. As

part of her contract, Nahid is prohibited from earning money for any performance without prior approval by Universal. Her Facebook artist page has been taken over by Universal Music branded images.

As young women pursue careers in the entertainment industry that take them far from home, they face new challenges and risks. While reality television competitive platforms give the illusion that any ordinary person with talent can succeed in winning the hearts of viewers and launching a performance career, when a young woman "goes out" from the Northeast, deep-rooted forms of prejudice follow her. News media coverage of violence against women from the Northeast in India's metropolitan centers such as New Delhi has amped up discussions about racism. These crucial issues will be addressed in the following Epilogue, where I draw together the contributions of this dissertation and look towards the future implications of this research.

Epilogue

In India's metropolitan cities, people from the northeast region are often understood as a homogeneous, foreign group by so-called "mainland" Indians who have little knowledge about the political and cultural history of the eight northeastern states. This ignorance is cultivated by a lack of education, due to scant coverage of northeastern history in national school curricula and national news media, rooted in colonial policies of isolation that translated into a widely shared belief in northeastern difference. Struggles for political autonomy by various groups in the northeast, which led to the creation of new states after Indian Independence, have had a long-lasting effect on Indian perceptions of northeasterners as anti-national. The high percentage of recognized tribal communities in the northeast distinguishes the region from other parts of India, where tribal communities are marginalized minorities with relatively little political power.

Through an investigation of *bihu* performance, this dissertation has demonstrated the complexity of ethnic relations within Assam, which is sometimes described as the gateway to northeast India because of its geographical location. Other northeastern states such as Manipur and Nagaland were created based on a shared tribal identity, and are officially recognized as tribal states. Migration and interethnic alliances throughout Assam's history have resulted in a plurality of identities (Chatterjee 2013), which is at odds with the racialized portrayal of northeastern communities that emerges from the particular legacy of colonial knowledge's "bio-cultural" notion locating ethnic traits as inherited, "fixed, solid almost biological" (Gilroy 1993, 39). Christian missionaries across India produced accounts that reported barbarism and scandal among tribal communities in order to legitimate their interventions (Dirks 2001, 173). Discourses of race inherited from colonial stigmas about tribal communities establish "categories and scales of comparison" and serve to secure "racial designations in a language of biology and fixity"

(Stoler 2006, 2). The quest for physical difference that is manifested visually is pursued in order to ground ideas about socio-cultural difference, which are not easy to see, in the body. Ann Stoler demonstrates how the concreteness of racial taxonomies depend on "a belief in the different sensibilities and sensory regimes imagined to distinguish human kinds" create the context in which "distinct affective capacities get assigned to specific populations" (Stoler 2006, 2).

Nehruvian policies designed to empower small ethnic communities of India's northeast led to the emergence of a "tribal" middle class, which became "a major buyer of consumer goods produced in the Indian market" (Misra 2014, 4). Their children, a new generation of young people from northeastern tribal communities, began to pursue educational and employment opportunities in major Indian cities. This migration has caused serious conflicts that challenge stereotypes ingrained in the collective imagination of "mainland" Indians who apparently continue to harbor the idea of tribal communities as impoverished, "backward," and marginal to civil society. Considering the sharp contrast between approaches to dealing with northeastern tribal communities and those in other parts of India, where "state programmes and corporate interests have combined to displace them from their habitats," the origins of these stereotypes are clear (Misra 2014, 4). This new generation of middle-class tribal youth is socially and politically empowered, and continues to challenge these stereotypes, unsettling some of the deeply held beliefs many Indians hold about Indian society. Recent violent attacks against northeastern youth in Delhi and Mumbai have gained media attention, and northeastern students have banded together across community lines to support the cause of greater respect and inclusion in India's metropolitan centers.

The understanding of northeastern communities as racialized subjects is compounded by media representations of tribal people in Hindi cinema ("Bollywood") as essentially Other – backward, violent, and underdeveloped. This representation has been compounded by a simultaneous association of tribal communities as "close to nature," excluded from the processes of modernity and performing local traditions marked by a "non-reflective but powerful creativity that expresses some essential, primitive, timeless humanity" (Taylor 2002, 2). Daisy Hasan cites various examples of films that depict tribal communities as "mumbo-jumbo chanting characters, wearing a parody of indigenous costumes to stand for diverse ethnicities" (Hasan 2011, 32). Northeastern politics have slowly made their way into Bollywood cinema,[1] but restricted always to terrorist-themed narratives that depict "separatist insurgencies…bomb blasts, religious riots, high level kidnappings, and hijackings" (Ganti 2004, 41). Not surprisingly, actors from the northeast are never selected to play leading roles in these films.

In a recent example, controversy ensued when famous Bollywood actor Priyanka Chopra was chosen to play the role of Mary Kom, international boxing champion from Manipur, in a 2014 biographical film of the same name. After many attempts with makeup, Chopra ended up adding prosthetic latex eyelids to her face in order to change the shape of her eyes so she would more closely resemble Mary Kom. Many critics complained that an actor from the northeast could have been chosen for this role. Racialized discrimination against northeasterners is embedded in discourses of eye shape, which is widely perceived as a marker of Indianness or foreignness. The shape of many northeasterners' eyes is interpreted as physical evidence of a homeland or ancestral roots external to the modern Indian nation, implying real and metaphorical distance and difference. Women from the northeast experience the additional burden of facing

[1] See, for example, *Dil Se* (1998) and *Tango Charlie* (2005).

stereotypes that suggest they are of questionable moral character and do not subscribe to so-called "Indian values."

The growing awareness across India that people from the northeast face discrimination because of the socio-cultural stereotypes associated with the way they look is evidenced in public service campaign-style appeals for attention to this issue. In a promotional clip for the 2014 season of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (the Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, made famous internationally by the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire*), a contestant with "chinky" eyes is asked by host Amitabh Bachchan to identify which country Kohima (the capital city of Nagaland) belongs to: China, Nepal or India. The contestant asks for an audience poll, and the result is that 100% of those polled chose the correct answer, India. This advertisement cements the problematic assumption that "you know a northeastern person when you see one" because there is a "chinky" looking person in each frame who cringes when the contestant hesitates before answering, projecting a pan-northeastern affinity. The scene suggests that if this contestant cannot provide the correct answer, she will shame the collective northeastern community. The contestant ends by suggesting, in Hindi, "Everyone knows it but how many people accept it?" Subsequently, the "chinky" person in each frame beams with pride and the "mainland" Indians look sheepish and embrace their northeastern friends.

Legislation passed in 2012 made using the word "chinky" a racial slur and a punishable offence. In my interactions with people from the northeast living in Delhi and Bombay, I have found that individuals position themselves in various ways in relation to discourses of chinkiness, some expressing outrage at discrimination and ridicule they have faced, and others expressing ambivalence due to the fact that they can "pass" for (mainland) Indians. Recent solidarity campaigns organized through social media attempt to raise awareness of

discrimination and rally allies for northeasterners across India. For example, in January 2015, the magazine *Northeast Today* launched a campaign on Facebook called "Eye am Indian" with the hashtag #eyeamindian and the slogan: "When the difference is the eye, let's celebrate the difference." One of the promotional images featured a young woman pointing to her eyes, with the text:

> Who am I? An Indian? Outsider? Who decides who looks Indian? Every racial slur, every derogatory remark leads us to question our identity. But our pain has been ignored for long. This needs to change and we need your help. Because the difference should be celebrated, not abused. Let's together say with pride #eyeamindian (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 – Promotional material from "Eye Am Indian" Facebook campaign sponsored by *Northeast Today*.

The campaign also included instructions for allies to show their support by stretching their eyelids, taking a picture, and posting it with the hashtag in solidarity in a bizarre performance that evokes troubling resonances with blackface (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 – Promotional material from "Eye Am Indian" Facebook campaign sponsored by *Northeast Today*.

Although discussions about race in India have been ongoing, manifesting in different forms since colonial classificatory regimes distinguishing "martial" from "criminal" tribes (Freitag 1991), resurging during contentious debates in the early 2000s regarding whether caste discrimination is a type of racism (Hussein 2004), and persisting in the above-mentioned cases articulated as hate crimes based on racial difference and "looking Indian," I would argue that scholars have yet to engage critically and creatively with discourses of race in South Asia. This lack of critical engagement is astounding, considering the ubiquitous popularity of skin-bleaching products for both women and men, for example, in what Radhika Parameswaran calls transnational visual economies of beauty (2011). In fact, the cosmetics company Vivel is one of the main sponsors of DY365's *Bihu Rānī* series, marketing the popular "fairness" cream under the slogan, "Be confident. Be beautiful. Reach for the stars" (from http://www.vivel.in/). It is critical that we recognize the intersecting domains of racial and caste discrimination and their

embeddedness in questions of gender and sexuality in South Asian communities (Loomba and Lukose 2012). By engaging critically with these intersecting embodied domains which are highly gendered in contexts of migration, we might begin to complicate the prevailing "mono-cultural discourse" of Indian civil society as well as the "enduring persistence of racial difference in the apparently 'global cosmopolitanism' of Indian cities" (Misra 2014, 5).

In this dissertation I have offered a cultural history of *bihu* in Assam that situates the creation of a folk performance tradition in the complex dynamics of colonial encounter and the formation of the modern nation-state. The folk sensibilities I trace in the dissertation mobilize the rural as a trope, which shifts throughout different periods in Assam's history and demonstrate its incorporation into various approaches to embodying cultural modernity and articulating the affordances of expressive performance. My investigation of the diverse sounded practices of *bihu* has shown how the subjectivities that emerge through these complex processes continue to shape understandings and experiences of Assamese modernity. Further research into music and dance performance as sounded practice across different ethnographic contexts may expand our understanding of embodiment as experienced through the performative domains of everyday life.

As this dissertation draws to a close, I recognize several areas in which further research is urgently needed. While I attend to the spaces of homosocial bonding created during the intense *bihu* performance season, and I discuss imagined, narrativized and consummated sexual relationships between women and men, further research might explore how *bihu* provides space for homosexual intimacies to thrive. Scholarly attention to the growing visibility of LGBT communities in South Asia and the relationships between activists and transgender communities has yet to incorporate critical ethnographic engagement with the role of the performing arts in variously facilitating and suppressing sexualities, with a few notable exceptions (Morcom 2013;

Roy 2015). While I have discussed the historical emergence of folk music and dance in Assam, its continued power and relevance in the 21st century, and the media entanglements that shape this dynamic field of experience, future research must take into account northeast India's cultural links with Southeast Asia. While these relationships have been explored extensively by linguists, an investigation into the performative resonances and exchanges between northeast India and Southeast Asia will provide fertile ground for analyzing transnational connections through music, dance, and popular culture. For example, scholars have only recently begun to examine the preference for K-Pop over Bollywood among young people in the northeastern state of Manipur (Reimeingam 2014), indicating that the "Korean Wave" resonates in complex ways with "northeastern" subjectivities.

By offering a critical approach to embodiment through the concept of sounded practice, which emerged through my experiences as an ethnographer, student, performer and interlocutor in Assam, this dissertation expands the fields of ethnomusicology, folklore studies, dance studies and South Asian Studies. The "sounding body" provides a way to analyze the simultaneity of music and dance as they emerge together in the body through performance, rejecting theorizations that treat these embodied domains as "parallel" or simplistically mimetic. Understanding the body and voice as joined in sounded movement, I have articulated a sounded practice that extends into the discursive and embodied experiences of everyday life.

Appendix A: Pronunciation Guide

I follow the Library of Congress (LOC) standards for Assamese transliteration, departing in a few important ways from the established template in order to keep my transliterations closer to everyday speech and intelligible for an English-reading audience. For example, while LOC distinguishes between guttural, palatal, cerebral and dental consonants, in some cases these consonants are indistinguishable in colloquial speech (ঙ and ঞ are both pronounced "ngo"; ণ and ন are both pronounced "no"). Additionally, I have decided to transliterate both ঊ and ও as "u" because they are both pronounced closer to the English "u" in everyday speech, rather than following the LOC convention of transliterating ও as "ō," which I believe is misleading. Although dental consonants are listed separately, in colloquial speech, they are pronounced almost exactly the same as their cerebral counterparts, but I have preserved the distinction because there is a slight difference.

The vowel "o is implicit after all consonants and consonant clusters. I depart from the LOC convention of transcribing this vowel as "a" because the sound is closer to the IPA "ɒ" – the rounded open vowel produced in the back of the mouth (pronounced as the English word "awe"). The implicit vowel is present in transliteration, except in cases when another vowel is indicated by its appropriate sign, and when the absence of any vowel is indicated by the subscript symbol (্) called hasanta or birāma. I have used "Kohinoor Bangla" for Assamese script font.

Assamese Vowels and Diphthongs[1]

অ	o	আ	ā	Chandrabindu[2]	
ই	i	ঈ	ī	ঁ	ň
এ	e	ঐ	oi		
উ	u	ঊ	ū	Anusvāra	
ও	u	ঔ	ou	ং	ngo

Assamese Consonants

Gutturals		Palatals		Cerebrals		Dentals	
ক	ko	চ	so	ট	ṭo	ত	to
খ	kho	ছ	so	ঠ	ṭho	থ	tho
গ	go	জ	jo	ড	ḍo	দ	do
ঘ	gho	ঝ	jho	ঢ	ḍho	ধ	dho
ঙ	ngo	ঞ	ngo	ড়	ṛo	ৎ	t
				ঢ়	ṛho	ন	no
				ণ	no		

Labials		Semivowels		Sibilants		Aspirate	
প	po	য	jo	শ	xo	হ	ho
ফ	pho	য়	yo	ষ	xo		
ব	bo	ৰ	ro	স	xo		
ভ	bho	ল	lo				
ম	mo	ৱ	wo				

[1] These are the vowel forms that appear at the beginning of a syllable. The forms used for vowels following a consonant are not indicated here, but no distinction between the two is made in transliteration.

[2] The chandrabindu indicates a nasalization of the vowel. While LOC variously transliterates nasalization as ň and m̆, depending on the surrounding consonants, I have placed the chandrabindu directly above the nasalized vowel so as to avoid confusion. For example, while LOC would suggest *huňsori,* I instead write *hŭsori.*

Appendix B: Months of the Assamese Year

Assamese Calendar (Solar months)	*Gregorian Calendar*
Bohāg বহাগ	April 15 – May 15, 2015
Jeṭh জেঠ	May 16 – June 15, 2015
Āhār আহাৰ	June 16 – July 17, 2015
Xāunā শাওণা	July 18 – August 17, 2015
Bhādo ভাদ	August 18 – September 17, 2015
Āhin আহিন	September 18 – October 18, 2015
Kāti কাতি	October 19– November 17, 2015
Āghun আঘোণ	November 18 – December 17, 2015
Puho পুহ	December 18, 2015 – January 15, 2016
Māgh মাঘ	January 16 – February 13, 2016
Phāgun ফাগুন	February 14 – March 14, 2016
Sot চ'ত	March 15 – April 13, 2016

Glossary[1]

ādhunik Modern.
আধুনিক

ādivāsī Term identifying a person who is an original inhabitant of a place,
আদিবাসী indigenous, often used in India synonymously with "tribal." Assamese: *ādibāxī*.

Āhum Kingdom that ruled Assam after King Sukāphā (চুকাফা) and his followers traveled
আহোম from Southeast Asia (Burma or Thailand) in the 13th century until British rule beginning in 1826 with the Treaty of Yandaboo. Often transliterated as *Ahom.*

Āli-āi-Ligāng Spring New Year's festival celebrated by the Mising community in Assam.
আলি আই লিগাং

āmār Ours, belonging to us.
আমাৰ

āpong Mising name for distilled rice liquor.
আপং

bāideu Elder sister.
বাইদেউ

bāxī Resident, inhabitant, settler, a person who dwells in a place.
বাসী

bondho Strike, indicating road closures to avoid violent outbreaks during political
বন্ধ unrest. Hindi: *bandh*.

bengenā Eggplant.
বেঙেনা

bhadralok Bengali term used to refer to the Bengali elite, sometimes translated as "one who
ভদ্রলোক is considerate and courteous" as in "gentleman." Assamese: *bhodroluk*.

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[1] Definitions are derived from my own understanding of terms learned through everyday conversations in Assamese. I also incorporate definitions from the online user-generated dictionary http://www.xobdo.org and the digital version of the second edition of the Assamese-English dictionary *Candrakānta abhidhāna: Asamiyi sabdara butpatti aru udaharanere Asamiya-Ingraji dui bhashara artha thaka abhidhana*, published by Gauhati University in 1962, which is available online as part of the University of Chicago's Digital Dictionaries of South Asia Project at http://dsal.uchicago.edu.

bhāgor
ভাগৰ
Exhaustion, tiredness, fatigue.

bhokti
ভক্তি
Devotion. Hindi: *bhakti*.

bhāxā
ভাষা
Language.

bhokot
ভকত
Devotee. Also refers to a monk in the Xongkoriya Vaishnava tradition.

bhonggimā
ভঙ্গিমা
Gesture. Refers to *bihu* dance movements, in contrast to "*mudra*" and "*hastha*" which refer to movements in "classical" dances such as Bharata Natyam and *Xotrīyā.*

Bihu Rānī
বিহু ৰাণী
Bihu Queen.

bihutolī
বিহুতলী
A stage or open area, often covered with a tent, where *bihu* is celebrated through song and dance.

bihuwā
বিহুৱা
He who *bihu*-s (masculine). Used as a general term, not restricted to competitive performers. General definition is an adjective describing to anything related to *bihu*.

bihuwotī
বিহুৱতী
She who *bihu*-s (feminine). Used to describe a category of solo competitive *bihu* performance.

bisu
বিষু
Spring New Year's festival celebrated by the Deurī community in Assam.

biyā nām
বিয়া নাম
Wedding songs.

Bodo
বৰ'
Scheduled tribe community in Assam, sometimes transliterated as Boro. Bodo language is officially written in a modified Devanagari script. Assamese: Boṛo (বড়ো).

bohāg
বহাগ
First month of the Assamese calendar year.

boron
বৰণ
Color, hue, that aspect of things that is caused by differing qualities of the light reflected or emitted by them.

bostu
বস্তু
Thing, item, stuff.

Buronjī
বুৰঞ্জী
Historical chronicles produced by *Āhum* courts and subsequently by Assamese historians.

buwārī
বোৱাৰী
Daughter-in-law.

bwisāgu
ৰৈসাগু
Bodo Spring New Year's festival. Bodo language is officially written in a modified Devanagari script.

ḍāngor
ডাঙৰ
Big, large in size, old in age, having a high volume or intensity (of voice, sound).

dehā
দেহা
Body. Also used as a romantic address, as in "my beloved," for both female and male subjects.

ḍekā
ডেকা
Young man, a "youth."

ḍekā-gābhoru
ডেকা-গাভৰু
Descriptive term for the *bihu* performed by a mixed gender group of young people.

Deurī
দেউৰী
Scheduled tribe community in Assam, sometimes transliterated as Deori.

dex
দেশ
Country, nation. Hindi: *desh*.

dhāi nām
ধাই নাম
Lullaby. *Dhāi* means nurse or housemaid, and *dhāi nām* are often addressed to the child by this caretaker, assuring the child that the parents will return soon from working the fields, for example. Lullabies are also called *nisukoni gīt* (নিচুকনি গীত).

ḍhek
ঢেক
Lilting quality of speech associated with a Lower Assam dialect of Assamese, which is used to describe a desirable quality of the folk singing voice in *bihu.*

ḍhẽkī ঢেঁকী — Wooden foot-operated lever used to grind rice into flour.

dhuti ধুতি — Sarong-like garment worn by men around the lower body. It is a rectangular piece of cloth, usually around five yards long, wrapped around the waist and the legs, and knotted at the waist.

ḍhul ঢোল — Cylindrical drum played with one bare hand and one stick, used almost exclusively for *bihu* performance.

ḍhulīyā ঢুলীয়া — Performer who plays the *ḍhul* drum.

dol দল — Troupe (i.e. *bihu dol*), group, or party (i.e. political party).

dolpoti দলপতি — Troupe leader.

Eko-xoron nāmo dhormo এক-শৰণ নাম ধর্ম — "Religion of shelter in one name" i.e. the name of Krishna (Assamese: *Krisno* কৃষ্ণ). Xongkoriya Vaishnava religious tradition promoted by Xrīmonto Xongkordew (1449-1568).

gā গা — Body.

gābhoru গাভৰু — "Body-filled," i.e. adolescent, unmarried young woman.

gām-khāru গাম-খাৰু — Pair of bracelets worn by female *bihu* dancers, sometimes made of silver, gold, metal or plastic, and typically two to three inches long.

gāmusā গামোচা — A white rectangular piece of cloth (cotton or silk) with a red border on three sides and red woven pattern (*sānekī* চানেকী) on the fourth. Traditionally hand-woven by women on the loom (*tãtxāl* তাঁতশাল). Offered to guests and elders as a sign of respect, and also offered by a woman to a man as a sign of love. Sometimes worn by men draped around the neck as a sign of Assamese national belonging.

gāõ গাওঁ — Village.

gāॅobuṛha
গাঁওবুঢ়া
Village chief, village elder. The head of a village or panchayat.

ghor
ঘৰ
House, home.

grihosto
গৃহস্থ
Host. Family that welcomes the *bihu* troupe into the *sutāl* in order to receive their blessings for the new year. Also means "husband."

gogonā
গগনা
Mouth harp, or "Jew's" harp made of bamboo. Metal *gogonā*-s are less common.

gomrag
Dance associated with the Mising spring New Year's festival *Āli-āi-Ligāng.*

gupī
গোপী
Wife of a cowherd, especially referring to those who were consorts of Krishna in Hindu mythology. Hindi: *gopi*.

gur
গুৰ
Granulated cane sugar.

gyān
জ্ঞান
Knowledge derived from study, experience, or instruction.

gun
গুন
Skill, expertise, quality, characteristic, attribute, the ability to carry out a certain task by virtue of knowledge and practice.

hāॅsoti
হাঁচটি
Narrow cloth worn around the waist of a woman or girl to store betel nut for eating.

hāt
হাত
Hand, also sometimes used to refer to the whole arm.

hāli-jāli
হালি-জালি
Moving to and fro, imitating rice paddy or wheat bending as the wind blows.

hāuli
হাউলি
Bent over, used to refer to the leaning posture/gesture in *bihu* dance.

hĕsā
হেঁচা
Pressure, used to refer to the percussive vocal technique in *bihu* singing where breath pressure is applied, approximating a glottal stop, in order to mark the beat.

hoi
হয়
Yes. Interjection used to express affirmation or assent.

hosyo
শস্য
Crops, the cultivated produce of the ground, while growing or when gathered.

hŭsori
হুঁচৰি
Performance genre that incorporates devotional songs and nationalist ballads, performed by men in a circular ambulatory style that moves between contemplative and high-energy modes of expression.

jāpi
জাপি
Wide-brimmed woven bamboo hat used to shield farmers from the sun and rain during work in the fields, which has been taken up as a material symbol of Assamese identity.

jāt-nām
জাত-নাম
A style of *bihu* song that incorporates a repeating refrain. Often the refrain can be performed as a separate, stand-alone *bihu* song.

jākoi
জাকৈ
Basket used for fishing.

jāti
জাতি
Caste, community, nation.

jātīyo
জাতীয়
National, of the nation.

jeng bihu
জেং বিহু
Bihu performed by an all-female group.

jonogusṭī
জনগোষ্ঠী
Tribe.

jonojātī
জনজাতি
Tribe.

jurā-nām
যোৰা-নাম
Pair song.

kāsi
কাচি
Scythe; A hand-held agricultural tool with a curved blade typically used for harvesting grain crop or cutting grass for hay. Also used to describe the shape of the crescent moon.

khemtā
খেম্‌তা
Six-beat rhythmic cycle associated with folk and devotional songs across South Asia.

khupā
খোপা
Name of a particular type of hairstyle (bun) worn by the *nāsoni*, where the hair is tied back at the nape of the neck.

kirili
কিৰিলি
Vocal trill created by sustaining a high-pitched tone while trilling the tongue rapidly.

kolox
কলশ
Shapely earthen jug used to draw water from a river, associated with feminine labor.

kǒkāl
কঁকাল
Waist, lower back.

kǒkāl bhāngi
কঁকাল ভাঙি
To "break" the waist. One of the iconic movements associated with *bihu* dance.

konmāni
কণমানি
Small. Used to describe a category of *bihu* competitions for young (pre-pubescent) girls.

kopouphul
কপৌফুল
An orchid with a creeping stem which is worn as a hair ornament by *nāsoni*-s during *bihu* performance. *Rhynchostylis retusa*, also called Foxtail Orchid.

kuli
কুলি
A bird of the cuckoo family, *Eudynamys scolopaceus*, also called Asian Koel.

lāgise
লাগিছে
Feels like. Alternatively: sticking to something.

lāhe-lāhe
লাহে-লাহে
Slowly.

lāu
লাও
Gourd. For example: *Kerelā lāu, Rongā lāu, Jāti lāu.*

lorā
ল'ৰা
Boy.

luko-xongskriti Folk culture or folklore. The traditional beliefs, myths, tales, and practices
লোক-সংস্কৃতি of a group of people, understood to have been transmitted orally.

māṭi Earth, soil.
মাটি

mekhelā sādor Traditional Assamese dress worn by women. *Mekhelā* refers to the floor-length
মেখেলা চাদৰ skirt-like lower garment, and *sādor* refers to the long cloth wrapped around the upper body and draped over the left shoulder. Sometimes transliterated as *chadar*.

meli Spread, or open, as in clothes spread out on a clothesline to dry, opening the
মেলি eyes, or arms spread in the air.

Mising Scheduled tribe community in Assam, sometimes transliterated as Mishing.
মিচিং

mugā A light-brown or "golden" colored silk produced in Assam from the fiber of the
মুগা silkworm *Antherea assamensis*, which is native to Assam and feeds on *som* (*Machilus bombycina*) and *sualu* (*Litsaea polyantha*) leaves.

mukhṛā Hindi-Urdu word (মুখড়া) for the first phrase of a Hindustani classical song which
মুখড়া repeats.

muṭhi-khāru Pair of bracelets worn by female *bihu* dancers, sometimes made of silver, gold,
মুঠি-খাৰু metal or plastic, and typically one inch long (smaller than *gām-khāru*).

nām "Name." Devotional hymns associated with the Xongkoriya Vaishnava tradition,
নাম focused on intoning the name of Krishna. Also referred to as *nām-kīrton* (নাম-কীর্তন).

nāsoni "Dancer." Used to refer to the female *bihu* performer.
নাচনি

nobou Sister-in-law, the wife of one's elder brother.
নবৌ

obhigyotā Experience. The accumulation of knowledge or skill that results from direct
অভিজ্ঞতা participation in events or activities.

obhigyo
অভিজ্ঞ
Wise, well-informed, learned, erudite.

oi-ni:tom
Songs associated with the Mising spring New Year's festival *Āli-āi-Ligāng.*

ojāti
অজাতি
Out-caste, low caste.

Oxom
অসম
Assam.

Oxomīyā
অসমীয়া
Assamese. Sometimes transliterated as *Asomiya*, *Axamiya*, or *Axomiya.*

pāk
পাক
Turn, spin.

Panchasur
পঞ্চসুৰ
Guwahati-based folk music and dance school directed by Probin and Roshmi Saikia. Pronounced *ponsoxur*.

poromporā
পৰম্পৰা
Tradition. The passing down of cultural elements from generation to generation, especially by oral transmission. Hindi: *parampara*.

pāsoli
পাচলি
Vegetable(s).

pe̊pā
পেঁপা
Double-reed buffalo-horn played during *bihu* performance with circular breathing technique, normally by men.

phut
ফুট
Dot. Circular decoration worn by women between the eyebrows. Hindi: *bindi*.

pīrā
পীৰা
Short wooden stool used for sitting.

pīriti
পীৰিতি
Love, affection, intimacy, romance.

piṭhā
পিঠা
Sweets, often made from ground rice powder, sometimes fried, sometimes steamed. Many varieties are served to guests during *bihu.*

pokiyā lorā Mature boy, i.e. teenage boy.
পকিয়া *ল'ৰা*

polāi jā To kidnap, to elope, to go away (i.e. with a lover).
পলাই যা

poluwāi ne To kidnap, to elope, to take away (i.e. a lover).
পলুৱাই নে

puronā Old, ancient.
পুৰণা

rāiz A particular group of people in a community, state, or nation. "The people."
ৰাইজ

rihā Traditional Assamese dress worn by women. A long cloth wrapped around the upper body and draped over the left shoulder. Like a *sādor,* but more narrow and worn with more pleats. Associated with adolescent girls.
ৰিহা

rogor Drumroll, a rhythmic technique featuring continuous rapid succession of drum strikes.
ৰগৰ

rongālī Enjoying, showing, or marked by pleasure, satisfaction, or joy. Happy, delighted, joyful, blissful, cheerful, playful. The springtime *bihu* festival is often referred to as *rongālī bihu*.
ৰঙালী

sāloni Bamboo sieve or colander used for sifting husk from rice and for sifting flour.
চালনি

sānekī Pattern for weaving, design.
চানেকী

sāng ghor Home built on a raised platform, common among Mising families.
চাং ঘৰ

sāpor A sequence of *bihu ḍhul* drum strokes, also called *seu* (ছও).
চাপৰ

sārī A long piece of cloth worn wrapped around a woman's waist and draped across the chest over the left shoulder; a popular style of dress throughout India.
সাডী
Assamese: *xāṛī* (শাড়ী).

semonīyā
চেমনীয়া
Small. Used to describe a category of *bihu* competitions for young (pre-pubescent) girls.

sirā doi
চিৰা দৈ
Rice and yogurt dish served with *gur* on first morning of *bihu*, and enjoyed as a breakfast food or snack during other times.

sondo
ছন্দ
Poetic meter.

sposto
স্পষ্ট
Clear.

sristi
সৃষ্টি
The act or process of bringing into being, to create.

surā doi
চুৰা দৈ
A thick syrup produced during the refining of sugar.

sutāl
চোতাল
Courtyard of a village home.

suwā
ছোৱা
Impure, unclean, taboo.

suwālī
ছোৱালী
Girl.

tāl
তাল
Pair of concave brass cymbals played as a percussion instrument.

tāmul pān
তামোল পাণ
Betel nut (areca nut) and leaf, chewed with slaked lime (calcium hydroxide) as a mild stimulant. Offered to guests in Assam as a gesture of hospitality.

tām̆txāl
তাঁতশাল
Loom.

ṭhekā
ঠেকা
Hindi-Urdu word (ठेका) referring to the arrangement of drum strokes/syllables in a rhythmic cycle.

ṭokā
টকা
Bamboo clapper played as a percussion instrument.

tuloni biyā Ceremony commemorating a girl's first menstruation.
তোলনি বিয়া Also called *xānti biyā* (শান্তি বিয়া), "peace" wedding.

Ujoni Oxom Upper Assam, the northeast region of the state of Assam, considered to be the
উজনি অসম center of *Oxomīyā* culture, linked to the territorial boundaries of the *Āhum* kingdom.

urukā "Eve" (i.e. the eve of *bihu*, the night before the first day of the Assamese New
উৰুকা Year).

utsav An official ceremony, formal social occasion, festival, function, program.
উত্সৱ Assamese: *utxow, utxob*.

xādhu Fable, folktale.
সাধু

xāhityo Literature.
সাহিত্য

xāhityo xobhā Literary organization. Hindi: *sāhitya sabhā*.
সাহিত্য সভা

xāhumā Mother-in-law.
শাহুমা

xāk Green, leafy vegetable (like spinach). For example: *Lai xāk, Khutorā xāk, Jilmil*
শাক *xāk, Mulā xāk, Māimuni xāk, Lofā xāk, Pāleng xāk, Khutorā xāk, Dhekiyā xāk, Kosu xāk.*

xewā Prayer, worship, adoration, service. The act of making a reverent petition to God
সেৱা or an object of worship, the act of bowing in humility or veneration. Hindi: *sevā*.

xobhā Meeting or assembly of a committee. Hindi: *sabhā*.
সভা

Xrīmonto Xongkordew Spiritual and cultural reformer (1449-1568). Often transliterated as
শ্রীমন্ত শঙ্কৰদেৱ Srimanta Sankaradeva.

xotro Xongkoriya Vaishnava monastery. Often transliterated as *sattra*.
সত্ৰ

xotro-dhikār The main spiritual leader of a Xongkoriya Vaishnava monastery.
সত্র-ধিকাৰ

Xotrīyā Nrityo Devotional performance encompassing music and dance, recently transformed into and officially recognized as the classical dance form of the state of Assam. Often transliterated as *Sattriya Nritya*.
সত্রীয়া নৃত্য

xonmān Respect, honor, appreciation, often deferential regard.
সন্মান

xorāi Brass tray on a stand, normally with removable lid that has a sharp point on top.
শৰাই

xoron luwā Taking "shelter" or "asylum," i.e. converting to Xongkoriya Vaishnavism.
শৰণ লোৱা

xongskriti Culture. Hindi: *sanskriti*.
সংস্কৃতি

xumāle Past tense of *xumāboloi* (সোমাবলৈ), to enter, to penetrate, to make way into something; to go or come in; come or gain admission into a group.
সোমালে

xutulī Crescent-shaped clay flute with one hole for blowing air across the resonating cavity, and two finger holes to change pitch.
সুতুলী

yoni Vulva, vagina, source.
যোনি

zuzonā A song style which usually functions as an introductory piece that opens a *bihu* performance, and also as an interlude that connects a sequence of metered *bihu* songs in performance, accompanied by a drumroll (*rogor*) instead of the three-beat rhythmic pattern. The lyrics are normally sung in four melismatic phrases.
যোজনা

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