

## Article

# Using Verbal Art to Deal with Conflicts: Women's Voices on Family and Kinship in Kāmākhyā (Assam)

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**Abstract:** Analyzing two women's rituals in which verbal art on family and kinship is prominent, this article explores situations in which tales and songs in Assamese are staged by newly married and about-to-be-married young women. Active participation in stories and song sessions, under the guidance of older storytellers or singers, imparts practical knowledge to young women about the possible ways by which to retaliate against male domination and domestic tensions with one's mother-in-law. The young women who participate are not merely engaged in the performance but are also encouraged to place themselves in the story. This performance study, based on the ecology of Assam and the annual calendar of festivals at the great temple of the goddess Kāmākhyā, combines the exploration of these narratives with the observation of rituals. It also seeks to question whether social language practices endow women with the power to affirm themselves and with the knowledge, through ritual performance, to deal with conflict. Finally, it shows how the use of an original ritual object—a small house—can be put into perspective with the concept of “house” as understood in particular by Lévi-Strauss.

**Keywords:** performance studies; ethnopoetics; gender; family; kinship; Assamese; Kāmākhyā; Hindu goddesses

## 1. Introduction

The goddess Kāmākhyā, whose name (ākhyā) is love (Kāma), holds a special place among the worshippers of Tantric Hinduism. Her temple, the most visited site in northeast India, is perched on a hill overlooking the Brahmaputra River at the entrance to Guwahati, the capital of Assam. The iconic representation of the genitals of the goddess is worshipped there. Texts from Sanskrit literature tell different versions of the original myth of this goddess; for example, in some tellings, the goddess' death is linked to her anger with her father, and in others, her death is linked to her anger with her husband (Urban 2010; Dold 2005, p. 48). However, it is not the official stories that spring to the forefront of women's minds when they speak of the goddess' exploits to counter male domination. At Kāmākhyā, where more than 200 families associated with the temple service reside, the women who gather at nightfall for devotional singing have developed their own oral tradition in *kamrupi*, the dialect of Assamese spoken in Lower Assam. Many devotional singing sessions are organized and led by the most experienced women. However, two of these performances have become integral to specific rituals for young female participants: one is to find an agreeable husband, and the other is to gain insight about how to establish themselves within their new household after marriage.

In this article, I focus on these two ritual performances as seen by the women living in Kāmākhyā, who invariably refer to both of them whenever they talk about the rituals that ought to be followed to find a good husband. More specifically, the first ritual is organized for young women who will be getting married very soon, whereas the second is for young women who have just gotten married. The former takes place in June, before *Ambuvācī*, the most important festival of the temple, and the latter takes place in November. Though these two rituals do not take place at the same time, there are

two striking similarities between them. Except for the brief participation of a priest at the beginning of the rituals, both are marked by the absence of males. The theatrical performance of the audience is the other significant common feature. To understand how these two rituals engage the women themselves, I will discuss each of them by studying the stories that the women embody through their voices and actions.

My work on these rituals, and on lived religion at Kāmākhyā more broadly, is grounded in field data—mainly from verbal arts recorded in the field since 2005 and translated by me with detailed attention to the live performances in which these verbal arts were expressed (Arrago-Boruah 2015). The systematic recall of context is intended to allow readers to better understand how these songs and stories are lived, produced, and received and, indeed, how they generate meaning for the participants and their audiences. My premise is therefore that the oral productions must be seen as communication events (Bauman 1984) and not as mere texts. Throughout my translations, contextualizations, and interpretations, particular attention is also paid to sound effects, both in terms of voice and rhyme modulation, to ensure that the translation retains the poetry and the flavor of the original language<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. The Power of Words

The temple of Kāmākhyā has become famous for attracting more than 100,000 pilgrims each year at the beginning of the monsoon season, when the goddess' menstrual period is understood to occur. This great celebration, *Ambuvācī*, lasts four days, during which the doors of the temple are closed, which expresses (*vācin*) the arrival of the menstruation of the earth. "The water" (*ambu*) of the new rains is identified as the menstrual flow of the earth, and the word *ambu* takes on the figurative meaning of menstruation. A less known and more discreet element of *Ambuvācī* is a women's ritual conducted several days before the temple closes, which predicts the arrival of the rains. The timing of this women's ritual is therefore not when the earth is already in its menstrual period but just prior to it—just before the rains, at a moment when the earth burns with drought.

This rain prediction ritual is called *xāthā bōrōt*<sup>2</sup>. The term *bōrōt* derives from the Sanskrit *vrata*, which refers to "a votive rite"—in other words, a wish rather than an obligation. In 2006, I observed this ritual with Durga Devi, a Brahmin woman whose father-in-law was a priest at the temple, who told me that Kāmākhyā had appeared in her dreams to ask her to follow the ritual. However, as we talked, she eventually confessed to me that behind this nocturnal apparition, there was an unspoken desire: to quickly marry off her two daughters. The other participants, all local residents but not necessarily Brahmin, saw in the word *xāthā* the number seven, *xāt* in Assamese, and related its meaning to the seven seeds sown and the seven freshly plucked plants that are used at the end of the ritual, which takes place over seven days. However, this rite refers especially to the metaphorical suffering that the earth endures before the rains, which the participants compare to the suffering of their lower bellies as their menstruation approaches. They speak of *bhūmidāha*, "the burning of the earth", employing a Sanskrit term referenced in the ancient local literature of *smṛti*, the Hindu law, in particular in Damodara Misra's fourteenth-century text, *Smṛti Jyoti Sārasaṃgraha* (82–84), which provides a precise calendric reference for the days when the earth burns with heat before "its period". This text seems to have been forgotten today. However, the ritualistic prediction of rainfall by the women of Kāmākhyā takes place at precisely the same time specified by Misra.

<sup>1</sup> In Appendix A, phonetic material relating to the Assamese language and the transliteration system adopted here are provided.

<sup>2</sup> *Ambuvācī* takes place between the tenth and fourteenth day of the decreasing moon of the month of *āhār*, while *xāthā bōrōt* begins three days before the end of the month of *jeth*. The month of *jeth* corresponds to a period between mid-May and mid-June, and the month *āhār* is between mid-June and mid-July.



On the first day, all the participants gather different kinds of seeds consisting of rice (*dhān*<sup>3</sup>), white and black mustard (*bogā* and *kālā xoriyoh*<sup>4</sup>), sesame (*til*<sup>5</sup>), green and black gram (*mogu* and *māṭi māh*<sup>6</sup>), and peas (*məṭor māh*<sup>7</sup>). Then, in a landscape still drowned in winter mist, they proceed in single file to the sacred pond of the temple. Upon their arrival, the two elders of the group slowly submerge themselves in the water and collect lumps of muddy soil by diving into the depths. Then, they “collect the earth”, *māṭi tolā*. Once the collection is complete, they place the mud in a dish and then surround it with banana-shaped pieces of clay. They place the dish on a small wooden stool (*pīrā*) and consider it to be an altar (*bedī*). The divinity is thus established. The participants then moisten the earth by pouring water on it from the palms of their hands. Thus, a series of offerings is begun. They offer a few betel nuts, seasonal fruits, and a knife covered with red powder, *xindūr*. They call this knife *phul-kəṭārī*, which means “flower-knife” or even “a small knife”<sup>8</sup>. The participants then sow different varieties of sesame seeds and lentils, moisten the soil again, insert small bamboo sticks decorated with jasmine flowers, and begin singing the following in unison:

*phul-kəṭārī jāgā*

Flower-knife, wake up

*āmār kāse lāgā*

Near us, bloom

*həllir pərə məlli dim*

Devotion, we will give

*phul kəṭārī gəlot dim*

Flower-knife in [the] neck, we will give

*āpənte pənte həi*

Bad becomes good

*bhəngā ghore Śiva həi*

In a broken house Śiva appears

*māṭi muṭhi tulili*

Handful of earth, if one brings

*xindūr muṭhi pāi*

Handful of vermillion, one may get

*lārbā sārbbā prāne nāmāribā*

Shake [but] do not kill

*tumi kərə nite nite*

You do [it] everyday

*āmi kəro bəṣor dine*

We do [it] every year

*xāthāk diyā ji bər*

What boon you give to *xāthā* [bərət]

<sup>3</sup> *Oryza sativa* in Latin and *dhānya* in Sanskrit

<sup>4</sup> Respectively *Brassica alba* and *Brassica nigra* in Latin. In Sanskrit, the equivalent is *sarṣapa*.

<sup>5</sup> *Sesamum indicum* in Latin and *tila* in Sanskrit.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively *Vigna radiata* and *Vigna mungo* in Latin. In Sanskrit, equivalents are *mudga* and *māṣa*.

<sup>7</sup> *Pisum sativum* in Latin and *satina* in Sanskrit.

<sup>8</sup> The word *phul* means “flower” in Assamese, but in some compound words, it is used as an adjective for something small. This is the case for *phul-sirī*, “a small bamboo rod used to weave”, or *phul-cerekī*, “a small instrument for winding the weaving yarn”.

*āmāk diyā xei bər*

Give the same boon to us.

At Kāmākhyā, all the women know this song by heart, even if they no longer participate in this ritual. According to them, it is a powerful mantra that seems to be effective, because each line is based on the interplay of rhymes and an economical syntax. The formula is actually repeated four more times in exactly the same way, except for the word *phul-kəṭārī*, “flower-knife”, which is replaced each time by the different name of a local goddess<sup>9</sup>. With the completion of all of the steps of the rite, a deified image of the earth and plants is before them (Figure 1). The goddess is installed in this natural image: seeds in soil as they mature to germination. At the end of the mantra recitations, the flowering stems, planted in the pile of soil, simultaneously evoke germination and blooming. Two days later, at the intersection of the months of *jəṭh* and *āhār*, the participants in the house of Durga Devi sow seeds again. Then, two days after that, if germination has occurred, it is interpreted thus: “agriculture [has] a good omen”, *kheti-bātir məngəl kāmənā*. In other words, because water is to plants what the blood of menstruation is to fertility, the forecast of the abundant rainfall promises a good harvesting. As a metaphor, the arrival of the rains announces the arrival of menstruation and, by extension, that of female fertility, which ensures happiness and recognition for married women, adorned with “vermilion” as in the mantra.



**Figure 1.** Vegetal icon of the Goddess during *xāthā bərcət*<sup>10</sup>.

Phonetics, semantics, and pragmatics are therefore closely associated. Considered an active and effective verbal form, this mantra guarantees women a power that they may put to use for other purposes. This is the case on the last day of the ritual, during which the purpose and ritualistic framework of its enunciation are quite different. Tales are recited that particular day. Gathered in the house of Durga Devi, all the participants of the ritual sing this mantra when Bate Devi, an expert storyteller, refers to certain family conflicts in her tales. However, before beginning to recite the tales, each of the women arrives with bunches of assorted green plants, consisting of taro (*kəcu*<sup>11</sup>),

<sup>9</sup> The knife is a symbol of protection: according to local custom, women always hide one under the mattress of the marital bed on their wedding night.

<sup>10</sup> All the photographs were taken by me in 2006.

<sup>11</sup> *Colocasia esculenta* in Latin.

jute (*mārāpāt*<sup>12</sup>), and other local plant leaves, such as *dūbōri bōn*<sup>13</sup>, *mūr phulā*<sup>14</sup>, *dhēkīyā*<sup>15</sup>, and *xoṇā rūpā*<sup>16</sup>. This is a kind of symbolic proof of the effectiveness of the mantra to bring the rains and guarantee good harvests. However, before reciting it again, each participant begins to manipulate the freshly plucked plants as if they were mimicking the actions described by the storyteller who brought them together. Most of the stories for this occasion focus their plot on the harassment that women may encounter during their marriage, whether it is their relationship with their mother-in-law or their husband. Let us consider one such story, probably the most famous of all—the story of Opṇīgourī.

This tale was transcribed by a professor from the Department of Folklore at the University of Guwahati into a small leaflet (Sarma 1992). More recently, Korobi Devi, who grew up in Kāmākhyā, published her third short collection on the oral traditions of the hill. One of them is dedicated to this ritual (Devi 2011). While these documents are valuable for reflecting on the question of the transmission of cultural memory and on the relationship between orality and the written word, my discussion here is based exclusively on my recordings of live performances in 2006. My method aims to transmit, as much as possible, the whole scene of recital, because the tale does not appear or function as a fixed text but as a shared social–religious practice, carried out by several people. However, before moving on to the reading of the second orality (Ong 1982), I will briefly summarize the story.

The story begins with a young man who runs away from home, because he is offended when his mother puts ashes in his rice. He later learns that this was a punishment his father wanted to inflict upon him, because he thought his son was not serious enough at school. After he leaves home, the young boy meets Opṇīgourī, who takes him under her wing and subsequently marries him. However, he commits vile deeds towards her. Every morning, he secretly throws his belongings into the river and emotionally blackmails his wife, saying that he will fast until his belongings are recovered. On one occasion, he even kills his own child, who is luckily resurrected by his wife. On another occasion, he presents his wife to his parents as his housemaid. However, Opṇīgourī perseveres and, in the end, through her patient devotion, becomes, in the eyes of all, including her husband, a true goddess and venerated wife. In fact, it is the aforementioned mantra that finally allows her to overcome all kinds of repeated psychological abuse and violence from her husband. It is at these points in the story, with each abusive act of the husband, that the participants sing the manta. A simple reading of the story is therefore not possible (even if written versions exist). The talent of the storyteller is essential, as shown here, as she moves between direct and indirect speeches. In the first case, she plays the role of the young boy (before he leaves his natal place), in the second case she functions as the narrator, and finally, she acts as the performance guide instructing the audience to participate:

Storyteller (as the young boy):

- *oi mā bhāt di*
- Oh Mother! give [me] rice!
- *xe bhāt di*
- Oh! give [me] rice!

Storyteller (as the narrator):

*āji sāi pāti dise*

Today, she has put ashes

*sāi pāti dise*

<sup>12</sup> *Corchorus capsularis* in Latin.

<sup>13</sup> *Cynodon dactylon* in Latin and *dūrṇā* in Sanskrit.

<sup>14</sup> *Cyperus pilosus* in Latin.

<sup>15</sup> *Diplazium esculentum* in Latin.

<sup>16</sup> *Mussaenda glabra* in Latin.

she has put ashes

Storyteller (as the young boy):

- *mɔi bhāt nākhāō ei buli āru xei ...*
- I don't eat, he says and that ...

Storyteller (as the narrator):

*śātāto lolā*

He takes an umbrella

*xe jāpiṭo lolā*

he takes a *jāpi*

*kitāpkhɔn lolā*

he takes a book

*lāṭhi dāl lolā*

he takes a stick

*loi pelāi jāi āse*

by taking [all of these], he goes away

*jāōte xei ...*

it's when he is going that ...

Storyteller addressing the audience:

*heri jokār deyāson jokār di*

Do *jokār* please, do *jokār*.

This last line is addressed to the listeners, who immediately start rolling their tongues to produce a festive unison sound called *urili* in Assamese and *jokār* in *kamrupi*.

The storyteller assumes that the story is known by all and so sees no need to summarize the entire narrative context. The use of common expressions, such as *bhāt di*, literally “give rice” or “give me something to eat”, immediately propels this tale into the familiar world of the audience. The use of the imperative is not surprising, because it is in this way that children (or husbands) address the lady of the house when they are hungry. As for the poetic dimension, the repetition of information creates rhymes. Therefore, to preserve it in English and to present this text as “more attractive” (Hymes 2004, p. 341)—that is, to underline oral narrative as verse—I have divided the text into lines to highlight the musicality that can be found throughout this passage. However, the poetic dimension is not just an example of the leader's virtuosity as a storyteller. One of my points in this article is precisely to show that certain formal features, such as the rhyming and the storyteller's direction of the audience to do *jokār*, are arguably techniques for getting the audience members to be actively involved. We will see in the following pages that this active participation is essential and that verbal arts are used by women to deal with domestic tensions and conflicts<sup>17</sup>.

With all the performers engaged and actively participating, the significance of the later parts of the performance is heightened. I examine two such excerpts here. First, I will show that the audience recites the abovementioned mantra to resolve one of the bad tricks of the heroine's husband as narrated

<sup>17</sup> To appreciate the oral virtuosity of Bate Devi, transcribed here by a visual alignment, see Appendix B, where I have reproduced a transcription of a separate example of the same narrative, in which the storyteller (or rather the researcher) does not seem to take into account the performance aspects in the same way.

by the storyteller. I will endeavor to show the extent to which the storyteller's social position allows her the freedom to comment on such behavior. Moreover, I will also examine an interesting sociological point regarding the fact that, in some rare cases, a married couple will reside in the wife's parents' house. In the second example, I will analyze the audience's participation in the formulation of the story. The active participation in the performance not only sensitizes and educates the performers but also energizes them to protect themselves against possible adverse situations and to patiently resolve inevitable family conflicts.

Let us start with the first excerpt, in which the young man, after marrying Opōnīgourī, throws his *jāpi*—the traditional Assamese bamboo hat—into the river to blackmail her, threatening not to eat anything until his hat is recovered:

Storyteller (as Opōnīgourī's mother):

- *hei Opōnīgourī bhāt nākhāō kiyō ei?*
- Oh Opōnīgourī, why you are not taking rice?

Storyteller (as Opōnīgourī):

- *rōbāhe, bāmunōr sōli āhōk*
- wait, let the son of the Brahmin come

Storyteller (as Opōnīgourī's mother):

- *tomār xeye kām hoise rōbā? xōdāi deri hōy*
- is it your business to wait? He is always late

Storyteller (as Opōnīgourī):

- *āhil ... āru ...*
- he has come

Storyteller (as the narrator):

- *bāmunōr sōli bole mōi bhāt nākhāō*
- the son of the Brahmin said that "I will not eat"
- *kiyō ei?*
- why?

Storyteller (as the young husband):

- *mor xei jāpiṭo pānīte porī goise*
- my *jāpi* has fallen in the pond
- *jāpiṭo ānīlehe mōi bhāt khām*
- if someone brings it, only then I will eat

Audience:

mantra of *xāthā bōrōt* (song).

According to this sample of oral text, the young husband of Opōnīgourī resides in his wife's parents' house. In Assam, several tribes observe this practice, especially those who follow the matrilineal descent system. However, when the filiation is patrilineal, as in the case of Hindu Assamese castes, residence of a married couple with the bride's parents may be explained when a family has no son, thus ensuring that the property will pass to a male heir. When the bride wealth (which is more popular



in Assam than a dowry) is too high, a young man could also be adopted on an occasional basis to replace the bride wealth with compensation by service. In this case, the son-in-law is called *ghor-jowāl*, literally “the son-in-law in residence”. Because she is living with her parents, one can imagine why Opōnīgourī’s mother ends up defending her daughter, even if it means ridiculing her: “is it your business to wait [for him]?”. The social context described above is important in interpreting this passage. Indeed, no husband lives in his in-law’s home in Kāmākhyā, and what is even less common is expressing the possibility of not waiting for her husband to eat. Even today, in the villages, the husband and sons still eat before the wife/mother. Opōnīgourī’s mother’s words are therefore subversive, and it is possible that only an elderly and respectable woman—in other words, the storyteller—can get away with saying such words. Underlying this tale, the idea seems to be to prevent women from possible abuses of male domination by showing them that they can overcome such treatment through words, which may be as effective as they believe the mantra to be.

The second excerpt to be examined will illustrate my main argument from a narrative, as well as a linguistic, point of view, because the audience not only sings the mantra, they also participate in the co-production of the tale by indicating to the storyteller her omissions or by expressing their impatience for some striking details, especially when the husband asks men working in the paddy field to kill his child and deliver the butchered pieces of the child to his wife.

Storyteller (as the young husband):

- *dhān-or xe*
- Oh! [you] in paddy field!
- *dhān kəṭā, xe manuh khini*
- Oh! the reaper (of the rice)
- *solitok māre*
- kill the boy

Audience:

- *āji ki khām? kāli ki khām*
- What will I eat today? tomorrow what will I eat?
- *xei bilāk kəṭhā nəkəṭā*
- you have not told this story

Storyteller (as the young husband):

- *xei xei dhān kəṭā, colitok kəṭe hei*
- Oh! the reaper, cut [kill] this boy
- *kāti pelā māri pelā colitok*
- cut this boy, kill the boy
- *ei āg-məñəh tukurā ... məi pəhu āniso*
- these are liver’s pieces ... I brought deer meat
- *eire āñjā rāṇḍhā*
- make curry with it

Storyteller (as Opōnīgourī):

- *āhā bhāt dišo*
- come! come! I am giving rice

Storyteller (as the young husband):

- *bole mɔi nɔhɔy, mɔi bhāt nākhāō*
- he said: “No, I’m not eating”
- *sɔli kɔi? mok sɔlik āni diyā*
- where is the boy, bring the boy to me

Audience:

mantra of *xāthā bɔrɔt* (song).

Opōnīgourī is not fooled, she puts the pieces of her son, brought back by her husband, aside and prepares a curry with something else. When the husband’s cruelty manifests: “I will only eat when you find my son”, the listeners again recite the mantra that will make the son reappear. Beyond the story, however, is what Hill and Irvine call the audience’s responsibility in the performance (Hill and Irvine 1992). Obviously, in the example above, the storyteller forgot some detail, or at the very least, the listeners were impatient when the storyteller used the verb *kɔtā*, “to cut”. One of them probably associated the rice cutting with the cutting of the boy’s body, so she spontaneously interjected, reminding the storyteller of a detail that she (the listener) thought the narrator had neglected but without revealing the plot: “And today, what will you eat?”. The storyteller, reminded by her listener, picked up on the suggestion and immediately made it part of the performance. The production of the tale in performance, in action, before an audience, certainly references the oral transmission of the text, which was inherited from an immemorial past, but it is by no means an unchangeable heritage. As verbal art, it is a co-construction that depends on the storyteller’s art and the participation of the audience. As co-constructed verbal art, all are participating in the performance and its messages of resistance to the violence of male behavior.

### 3. The Conciliatory Power of a New “House”

The second ritual performed in connection with the status of young wives takes place in November, during the full moon day, in the month of *āghon*<sup>18</sup>. It is called *Kātyāyanī pūjā*. Unlike the previous example, this ritual is performed publicly in one of the temple’s aisles. According to legend, Kātyāyanī is the sixth form of Durgā shaped by the gods to destroy the buffalo demon. Because she was victorious, this goddess was eventually given great powers. The *gopī* of Vrindavan also adored this goddess in their intimate desire to have Kṛṣṇa as their husband, which can be observed here. When I asked the women what they will gain by participating in this ritual, they answered, *swāmī hen bāndɔ teōke pāi*, “I will get a husband as a friend”.

In this ritual, about 50 women dressed in red saris are seated in line in the center of the stage before several sacred images representing goddesses, a small house about 50 centimeters high and wide called *xobheri*—which resembles the miniature temple that Hindus have at home throughout Assam—and a water jar that they call *bāxum*—seen as the God Kṛṣṇa—and to which the youngest women are linked by a silk thread (Figure 2). In the background, behind them, a group of elderly women constitute both the audience and the choir (Figure 3). Compared with the active ritual gestures of the young women sitting in the foreground of the stage, they are part of the audience. However, they are also participants in the ritual; they are the ones who really know the songs of Kātyāyanī by heart and lend this festival a musical tone. As in the previous example, the study of the songs in their context will show that behind this highly supervised religious celebration remains a hidden lesson, passing on and sharing wisdom regarding the relationships between family, kinship, and gender.

<sup>18</sup> The month of *āghon* corresponds to a period between mid-November and mid-December.



**Figure 2.** Women linked to the *bāxum* by a silk thread (the water jar is considered to be Kṛṣṇa or a perfect husband).



**Figure 3.** The performers and audience during *Kātyāyanī pūjā*.

Indeed, it was a specific incident that pointed my thinking toward this hidden meaning when I attended this ritual performance. A few minutes before the official commencement, as the crowd was settling in, some women moved offstage, not very far from the ritual stage but in a more intimate place. There were only a few dozen women there when a few of them started washing the small house with lentils and turmeric (*hāl̥dhi*<sup>19</sup>) while others dug two holes in the ground. The first one, called *gākhir̥r pukhurī*, was filled with milk and the second, called *mās̥r pukhurī*, with water, in which a fish locally known as *māgur mās* was also placed. When everything was ready, three recently married young women approached the holes. The first one lifted the small house above her head and crossed

<sup>19</sup> *Curcuma longa* in Latin and *haridrā* in Sanskrit.

over the holes several times while another woman whipped her with jujube (*bəḡərī*<sup>20</sup>) twigs and recited the following verse several times (Figure 4):

*khutərə śākər śutət dhər*

Take the *khutərə* grass in the root!

*pārvətī kənyā hək pār*

Pārvatī, young woman, cross.

The word *khutərə*<sup>21</sup> refers literally to a vegetable herb and figuratively to male desire as evidenced by other oral traditions in Kāmākhya, where this word in particular is used as a metaphor for sperm. The participants further implicitly explain that the fish evokes the image of a phallus, and consequently, the hole represents the female genitals, which are entered by a man. In the same way, the milk hole evokes the idea of semen. As she crosses back and forth, the young woman symbolically makes her partner ejaculate. This ritualistic performance that honors young newly married women therefore seems to show the domination they can have over their husbands through their sexuality.



**Figure 4.** Crossing over the holes with a small house (*xobheri*) during *Kātyāyanī pūjā*.

This oral tradition is of course rich, but we can see from the previous example that the sung ritual is the sign of possible female domination, which can only be developed through the performance of the oral tradition. In other words, the stories alone do not manifest the full logic of the performance. It is therefore precisely by taking a new interest in the performance of these songs that we will analyze the continuation of this sung ritual. Korobi Devi, who has already written a small collection of stories about the rain prediction rite, has published a small leaflet of these songs written in the original language

<sup>20</sup> *Ziziphus jujuba* in Latin and *badarī* in Sanskrit.

<sup>21</sup> *Amaranthus viridis* in Latin and *tanḍulīya* in Sanskrit.



but without any particular chronology. However, songs in performance always form an internal logic. This is precisely what I wish to show now through a sequence of five songs that follow one another in chronological order while shedding light on what the small house may mean in this community and also when considered in light of anthropologists' theories on the interrelations between "house", people, kinship, and family (Lévi-Strauss 1979; Gillespie 2000).

The sequence of these five recorded songs lasts ten minutes. Each song works in the same way, a soloist recites the first verse, which is immediately repeated by the choir, creating a rhyme. Sometimes, when the message reflects an intense life story, whether it is conflict or an erotic scene, the verse is shorter and repeated twice by the soloist and then twice by the choir. In that case, the melody of these stanzas of four verses becomes particularly rhythmic. The first song introduces the rite of Kātyāyanī and its protagonists, the young participants located in the center of the stage and referred to here as *āyoti*, "married woman [whose husband is alive]"<sup>22</sup>:

*Kātyāyanī mōhāgourī āhilā āpuni*

Kātyāyanī mahāgourī<sup>23</sup> has arrived [by] herself

*tomār cōrōṇ bōr māgo āmi*

[At] your feet, we ask a boon

*ki bōr māgo /re<sup>24</sup>/āyotixōkəl?*

What boon do you ask, *āyoti*?

*swāmī bōr māgo /re/ ājōy cōmōr hōk*

I ask the boon [of] husband, let [him] be immortal.

The song continues, repeating the first three stanzas but changing the last one to a wish for a long life for her children, brother, and father:

...

*beṭā-beṭī bōr māgo /re/ ājōy cōmōr hōk*

I ask the boon [of] son and daughter, let [them] be immortal

...

*bhāi-bābā bōr māgo /re/ ājōy cōmōr hōk*

I ask the boon [of] brother and father, let [them] be immortal.

Unlike a married woman, isolated with her in-laws, the woman who performs this song, herself a young wife or soon to become one, asserts her existential belonging to an extended family whose emotional ties give her the strength: her husband and her children, who also represent her husband's lineage, as well as representatives of her paternal lineage. The first-person singular is also very much essential to this ritual. The omnipresence of the "I" has the consequence that family and kinship are defined here from the point of view of the female ego, the young wife. In the following verses, the existence of society as a whole seems to come from female domestic acts, because several key elements are combined: food, birth, and home. We are gradually coming to this idea of society in the

<sup>22</sup> That is, they are not widows.

<sup>23</sup> Mahāgourī is another name of the goddess, which means "the Great (*mōhā*) Gourī".

<sup>24</sup> An oblique line // is used to indicate a term without referential function but with sound meaning. The /re/, pronounced here /rɛ/ according to the phonetic system, creates a caesura transliterated in our translation by a comma.



home, but before that, let us note that the lexical field of the following verses refers to abundance and blossoming through the juxtaposition of the words *dhāne* (rice) and *cāule* (husked rice), which conveys the idea of “wealth” and, when combined with the notion of flowering, gives a strong performative dimension to the words, because, though we are literally talking about rice seeds, we are figuratively talking about birth:

*dhāne cāule bhōril kulā*

Rice filled the winnowing basket

*tāte utpatti pōdmō phule*

There [taking] birth, lotus bloom

*pōdmō phule /oi/ jīyōn thou bōr*

Lotus bloom, Oh life keep the boon

*āmār swāmīk jīyōn thou cōndrō dibākōr*<sup>25</sup>

For my husband life [like] the moon and sun

*ālā cāulōkhini kālūt*<sup>26</sup> *loi bāco*

I sort rice by putting [it] in the plate

*āmāre swāmīk cowāro*<sup>27</sup> *biso*

I refresh my husband with a fly whisk

*āmāre swāmī sirōṇjīwi hōk*

Let my husband be immortal

*āmār bōrōtok legi xobheri xāji dek*<sup>28</sup>

Construct *xobheri* [the small house] for my ritual.

The ritual behind the scenes where the new wives carry the small house over the two holes and the link of this house to the wife’s family show that the word *xobheri* does not mean the birth house (paternal) nor the husband’s house (the house of allies); it is therefore neither filiation nor affinity. Rather, it is the house that will become the wife’s house, especially when she herself becomes a pivot point—that is, when she herself becomes a mother-in-law. The concept of “house” in the writings of Lévi-Strauss (1979) is seen as an institutional creation composed of different rivalries between individual and collective strategies and seems perfectly embodied in this symbolic image of the Assamese feminine house, which, instead of opposing filiation and alliance, envelops the whole family (husband, children, ancestors), as well as the concepts of kinship (mother-in-law and father-in-law) and gender (it is the house where the young wife will become the pivot). This ritual instrument of the house could also serve as an illustration of new approaches to kinship by which relationships are

<sup>25</sup> These four stanzas are repeated twice by changing the word *swāmī*, “husband” by *beṭā-beṭī*, “son and daughter” and *bhāī-bābā*, “frère et père”.

<sup>26</sup> This term refers to traditional dishes made on bell metal, one of the oldest industries of Assam.

<sup>27</sup> The *cowār* was generally made with the hairs of the tail of a yak.

<sup>28</sup> These four stanzas are repeated twice by referring in the third stanzas to *beṭā-beṭīk*, “son and daughter”, and *bhāī-bābāk*, “frère et père”.

constructed in everyday social life rather than on abstract concepts or, to quote Susan Gillespie, where “people conceive and enact kin or ‘kin-like’ relationships as a group by virtue of their joint localization to a house” (Gillespie 2000, p. 1).

The second song, initiated by another soloist, precisely evokes the internal rivalries within the house. The soloist, who speaks in the first person, refers to an insult inflicted by the mother-in-law (*śahu*) and the return of the crying young wife to her mother’s home—the place of her paternal lineage. In her father’s garden, she plants “lemon trees”, but the “lemons” produced are not used in the paternal lineage. They are instead sent by boat on the Brahmaputra to the allied lineage, to the “mother-in-law”, who incidentally falls sick as a consequence. However, the return to the mother-in-law’s home illustrates a phase of reconciliation, because the young wife wants her mother-in-law to recover:

*xoru kuhiyār ḍāli ghən ghən gāṭhi*<sup>29</sup>

A lean sugar cane full of joints

*kəkār hātət ciri āṅgoṭhi*

In the grand-father’s hand, a beautiful ring

*oi kəkāi oi kəkāi oi bər bou kādne*

Oh elder brother, oh elder brother, *bər bou*<sup>30</sup> [your wife] cries

*xudhi cowā xarasvatī kiyo loi kādne*

Ask Sarasvatī why she cries

*məi xudhilo bərət kəribā*

I have asked [permission] to do the ritual

*śahui nidile teṅgā kinibā*

The mother-in-law did not allow [me] to buy lemon

*xei apəmāne āir tāt gəlo*

For that insult, I went to [my] mother’s place

*bārī bhərāi teṅgā rowalo*

I made lemon be planted throughout the garden

*āji bopāi ther bərət nāi*

Today at father’s place there is no ritual

*teṅgā di khedile ṣāṭhi nāō*

Lemons are sent on sixty boats

*teṅgār tələt səyəkuri bāti*

<sup>29</sup> Those verses are repeated twice by the soloist and twice by the choir.

<sup>30</sup> In Assamese, *bər bou* refers to an elder brother’s wife.

Under a lemon tree, sixty lights

*teṅgā bācote puwāl rāti*

Sorting the lemons, the morning comes

*jālīni śāhu mor bulenik gel*

My irritated mother-in-law took a walk

*teṅgār nām śuni p̄ori moh gel*

Hearing the name “lemon”, she lost consciousness

*diyore p̄ob̄on̄or bā*

Give the blast of air

*jīyāi uṭok mor śāhu āi*

Make my mother-in-law revive.

Let us examine more closely the kinship terms in use here. This passage, which obviously relates to an anecdote of conflict, refers to the mother-in-law, *śāhu*, and also *śāhu*’s father-in-law, who is the grandfather, *kākā*, mentioned in the beginning of the song. In other words, we are in the presence of three generations in a patrilocal residence. However, things are also becoming more complex with regard to the other female voices. There is a person close to *kākāi*, “the elder brother”, and another one called *b̄or bou*, who is the wife of the elder brother and who cries and only speaks in the second part of the except. However, who is this person close to *kākāi* who seems to sympathize with the wife’s sadness? The answer is revealed during the performance, when the soloist who follows the sequence makes this person speak again by specifying her identity:

*śukler bh̄on̄i ah̄alyā nām*

Sukle’s younger sister’s name is Ahalyā

*b̄or̄ot̄ k̄aribā legi m̄onisyok jām*

To do the ritual, I will go to Monisyok<sup>31</sup>

*āge nāhilā āi āḡob̄ār̄hiyā*

Before you have not come forward mother

*kār pāt̄oli kāk dim kāt̄iyā*

Whose *pāt̄oli* [banana leaf used in ritual] to whom I will give by taking by force.

By choosing this sequence of songs and reflecting on the “production format” (Goffman 1981), the soloists almost become the authors. When Korobi Devi collected and transcribed the songs of Kātyāyani, her aim was to preserve this oral tradition, but when soloists choose to sequence one couplet after another, they recreate the story by choosing a coherent narrative, because the songs complement and enlighten each other. Thus, the groom’s younger sister, who was pleading the

<sup>31</sup> A place I could not identify.

case of her sister-in-law who was being tormented by the mother-in-law, is called Ahalyā—a name that introduces considerable complexities around gender roles and loyalties. In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (I.48–49), the god Indra disguises himself as Gautama, the husband of Ahalyā, and destroys through this deceit, Ahalyā's fidelity. Despite Indra's trickery, Gautama curses his wife for infidelity and turns her into an invisible ghost for thousands of years, until Rāma comes to deliver her from this curse. However, in other versions of this story, Ahalyā is a loving woman abandoned by her husband. This is especially the case in different modern short stories selected and translated by Paula Richman (2008). However, the story of Indra and Ahalyā is also one of the initiatory stories from *Yogavāsishṭha-mahārāmāyaṇa*, an ancient text translated by Michel Hulin, where loving passion is depicted as being against Brahmanic rules (Hulin 1987). Described with an ambiguous character and accused of infidelity, Ahalyā is also revered in many popular songs for fighting gender norms. Therefore, her role here, in the Kāmākhya songs, seems significant, because she acts in solidarity with the humiliated wife. In interpreting these songs, a young wife becomes conscious of the different possible allies with whom she shares the same gender. Gender—the solidarity of the two young women—thus prevails over kinship in this balance of power, in resistance to the authority of the mother-in-law. It is this gender solidarity that seems to empower the wife and allow her to move forward, as we can see in the end of the last part of the song when she finally performs the ritual with *pātoli*, which was previously refused by her mother-in-law. Having overcome the mother-in-law's refusal to cooperate or, maybe, anticipating support from her sister-in-law Ahalyā, the next part of the song depicts the intimate encounter between the new bride and the groom. As can be observed, it illustrates how the new wife builds, with the involvement of her husband, "her" family in "her" new home. Moreover, if we accept that agriculture is a symbol of sexuality and the fertilization of the earth a metaphor for human procreation, the following song makes their conjugal love triumph over the dictates of the mother-in-law:

*kōlā kōmōlāi jurilā hāl*<sup>32</sup>

The ploughing start with *kōlā* and *kōmōlā*

*kōlāt koi kōmōlā cār*

*Kōmōlā* is more active than *kōlā*

*hāl boi gōl cōhil māṭi*

The ploughing has been done, the soil is ready

*kon kon phulor xicim guṭi*

Which flower seed am I going to sow?

*dupā bole mōi āge phulim*

Dupā says: I will flower at first

*xājor māṭāt cōri phurim*

I will settle around Xājo's head<sup>33</sup>

*xājoi bole mor dīgōl keś*

Xājo says: I have long hair

<sup>32</sup> Those verses are repeated twice by the soloist and twice by the choir.

<sup>33</sup> According the singers, *xājo* represents here the groom.

*məi nəhəle nuśuwāi deh*

Without me, body is not beautiful.

This series of agricultural images around the plough (*hāl*) and the land ready to be ploughed clearly symbolizes a sexual relationship that should be fertile. The word *īorā*, which here gives the agricultural expression *īurilā hāl*, evokes an agricultural and bodily image: it refers to “a pair” but also to the verb “to join”, because a plough always depends on a team with two animals—here, the two spouses, *Kōlā* and *Kōmōlā*, who speak to each other in the last verses. This sequence of songs could almost stop here, but one last soloist starts, and in order to complete the loop of the ritual, we go back to the story at the beginning when the young woman is still waiting to be married and she is waiting for the matchmaker (the florist) to go to Dorehi’s market to acquire for her a good husband and a good “house”, *xobheri*:

*nəḍḍīr kule /te/ nodḍīr kule ṭipəcī atokh jāi*

By the bank of the river, by the bank of the river, [the bird] *ṭipəcī* fly

*gāre kāporkhəni jilike māṭhār phul śukāi*

The apparel of the body shines, flowers on the head get dry

*śukāk śukāk māṭhār phul mālinīk bulim bāi*

Let the flowers on head dry, I’ll call the florist “sister”

*her mālādhār gāṭhiyā dibo dorehī hāṭok jāi*

She will knit the garland by going to market of Dorehi

*dorehī hāṭor buṛhī pəhərī tāi xəmbəndhər bāi*

The old saleswoman from the market of Dorehi is a sister by relation

*āmāk lekhi xobheri ānibə bhāl bhāl cāi*

For me, bring *xobheri* [the house] by selecting the best

The same song is repeated again, but the last line changes: *āmāk lekhi bāxum ānibə bhāl bhāl cāi*

“For me, bring *bāxum* [the husband] by selecting the best”!

#### 4. Conclusions

In both cases, the stories of *xāthā bəṛət* and songs of *Kātyāyanī pūjā* depict the daily experiences of new brides, especially the conflicts that await a young wife when she leaves her paternal home to join her husband’s, where she will live with her in-laws. By participating actively in these stories and songs, the young women, about to be married or just married, accept their new status while learning at the same time to defend themselves in their new family. My main argument was that the verbal arts, translated here in performance, are used by women to resist or retaliate against male domination and negotiate domestic tensions. The strength they acquire during these performances comes not only from the fact that they have a common affinity with the goddess regarding menstruation and the ability to nourish, just as the monsoon ensures the fertility of the earth, but also from the iconic figures that these oral traditions have taken from the legends and stories of *purāṇas* and epic poems, whether it is the goddess *Kātyāyanī* or the character *Ahalyā*.

For the women of *Kāmākhyā*, singing is a process of learning to assert themselves, to speak, and to go beyond the literal meaning of words—that is, how storytellers, who are older women, communicate



the fantastic plots of these stories that are never seen as real but, rather, support women more broadly regarding male whims, jealousy, and rivalry. Participation in song performance is one way to learn how to deal with conflicts, bearing in mind the polysemy of the verb “to deal”, which simultaneously means “to achieve peace”, “to adjust”, and “to face something”. I have shown that verbal art in performance is, here, a real, experiential lesson on family and kinship terminology. It is also where women learn about the utilities of different vegetal species. The ritual instrument and the concept designated by *xobheri* also seem to play crucial roles. They encompass the whole family (husband, children, and ancestors) and concepts of kinship (mother-in-law and paternal lineage) and gender (it is the house where the young wife will become the pivot) by reference to the sexuality that protects the couple from quarrels and resentment. All these representations, related to sex and home, thus provide another image of kinship, in which the woman is no longer merely a subordinate but a partner involved in the life of the couple.

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## Appendix A. Phonetic Material of Assamese Language and Its Transliteration

When an Assamese word appears in this article, it is italicized, except proper names of people, which are not italicized and are spelled with diacritical marks. All transliterations from Assamese follow a standard lexicographical method used for Sanskrit, with the following exceptions:

1. The first vowel “a”, which is inherent in any consonant and is pronounced “o” in Assamese, is indicated by the sign “ɔ”, except in cases where the word begins with this letter, such as in Assam, which will be written *axɔm*.
2. Long Sanskrit vowels “ai” and “au” are respectively written “oi”—pronounced /oi/—and “ou”.
3. The three Sanskrit sibilants (palatal sibilant śa; cerebral sibilant ṣa, and dental sibilant sa) lost their distinctive sounds in Assamese. They are all pronounced /x/, whose phonic realization is close to the scraping of the throat bottom of the Spanish sucked guttural, usually written with a j (h strongly sucked). Because it is extremely frequent in Assamese, we adopt, for the dental sibilant, a properly Assamese transliteration, “xɔ”, which reflects its phonic realization. Although the phonic realization of the other two sibilants (palatal and cerebral) is identical to that of the dental, we have kept the same transliteration as the Sanskrit (śa and ṣa), especially because, when one of these three sibilants enters in ligature, their phonic realization is close to their Sanskrit equivalent.
4. The Sanskrit semi-consonant “va” is always pronounced /wo/. We translate it by “wɔ”.
5. As is the case in Bengali, there are two Assamese graphemes for the semi-consonant “r” /ro/. The first, transliterated by “rɔ” is always pronounced with an inherent vowel. The second, transliterated by “ṛɔ” is never in the initial position and is sometimes pronounced without an inherent vowel. There is also an aspirated correspondent “ṛʰɔ” that we transliterate as “ṛʰɔ”.
6. The former Sanskrit semi-consonant y (yod) is pronounced /ʒo/ in Assamese. To distinguish this consonant from the other “jɔ”, we write it “jɔ”. It should be noted that the Sanskrit y (yod) is nevertheless identical in Assamese (outside the initial position) and is then transliterated by “yɔ”.

## Appendix B. From Oral into Written

The example of the beginning of Opōnīgourī’s tale compiled and edited by Nabin Chandra Sarma (1992, pp. 1–2):

“Oh mother! Why have you given ashes along with rice?”

Then the mother said: “No, I have not given ashes in the dish. It may fall from elsewhere.”

The boy had the rice after removing the ashes from the dish.

On the second day he was given rice by his mother without mixing ashes. On the third day also the mother gave rice to her son without mixing the ashes. After knowing that the poor boy had been given rice without ashes the Brahmin (i.e., father of the boy) became angry with his wife and cursed her: “Oh wicked woman! you don’t pay heed to what I am saying. You devour the heads of your husband and son”.

The cursed woman finding no other alternative was compelled to give a large quantity of ashes in the dish meant for her son.

The son came to take rice. Having seen ashes in a large quantity he became very much astonished. Out of curiosity he asked his mother: “Oh mother! Why have you mixed so much ashes with my rice?

His mother told:

“Oh my son! You do not write and read well. So your father directed me to give ashes in lieu of rice”.

Being overwhelmed with sorrow he decided to leave his father’s house. So one day he left his father’s house secretly with an umbrella, a late and an earthen pencil. He walked and walked and reached far away home.

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