Oral Narrative Studies in Assam: Exploring Three *Tantric* Myths

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Abstract

Integral to folklore studies, oral narratives have garnered significant academic attention since the previous century, particularly among Western academia. These academic discourses largely influence the methodologies adopted for studying oral narratives worldwide. However, upon examining the diversity of indigenous oral narratives, particularly in regions such as the Northeast of Assam, several genres are identified that have not yet become significant documents in folklore studies. One such variety of oral narratives is the Tantric myths in Assam, India. The accessible tantric myths in Assam are important materials for folkloristic analysis as they represent a virgin area of folkloristic investigation. An integral part of the everyday practices of various tribes inhabiting Assam, their existence and relevance inform us of two major things about the people. First, the people of Assam have an intrinsic belief system, where they believe in the power of tantra as a magic-inducing factor. This is not only a result of 'fear' of the unexplained/unpredictable, but also a faith that the omnipotent and omniscient, if there is any, is Nature herself. Humans need to be in harmony with Nature at all times if they want to achieve their desired objectives, results, or protection. The 'magical' in Assam is not about the miraculous or the impossible, but actually about a 'wonder' to be gifted as a blessing by Nature, if/when appeased. Secondly, there is a sense of relevance in these myths among the people of Assam, as they are still practiced and performed, often with a sense of secrecy to preserve their mystical nature. A folkloristic investigation is attempted here, utilizing three available Tantric myth texts. The investigation includes a structural analysis, adopting Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of breaking down a myth into its smallest units, along with an exploration of the forms of the myth using the epic laws of folk narrative by Axel Olrik. I carried out the functional analysis of the myths using the participant observation method, the basis of which is formed by Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe Brown, and William Bascom's conceptions of the functions of folklore. Additionally, the investigation also ponders the process of transmitting narratives to establish the relevance of such myths in folk life.

Keywords: *Folklore studies, oral narratives, myths, mantra*

Introduction

As an important part of Assamese folk life, the idea of 'magic' has been prevalent among various tribes and folk groups. In the Assamese tradition, magic is expressed through practice and awe; the mantra serves as the medium for practicing magic. Some *mantra* books in the Assamese language claim that the Atharva Veda has a profound influence on mantra practice in Assam (Gogoi, 2008). Many legends and folktales are loaded with examples of mantra practice. Some examples of written *mantras* include the Karatiputhis (Rudra Karati, Brahma Karati, etc.), Kamratna Tantra, Yogini Tantra, and the Kalika Purana, among others.

Mantra is a valuable component of religious practice, particularly among tribal communities. These are non-Vedic mantras and have been carried forward from their pre-Vedic, non-institutionalised religious practices. The Tantric practice of mantra usually involves the conversations between *Siva (Sodasibo)* and *Parvati (Parboti)*. They are representatives of *Siva* and *Shakti*, respectively, who, in the Hindu philosophy, are the powers that govern life and its course on earth. *Tantric* mantras connect these powers to different parts of the human body.

Tantric myths are mantras in the form of a story used for tantric practices. As myths, they deal with the origin of matters and entities that disturb the human mind, such as supernatural powers, evil deities, illnesses, diseases, accidents, and the anxiety of conducting a certain activity smoothly, which is observed in the popular day-to-day practices of ordinary people. These myths and their usage completely depend on the folk psyche and the matters they believe in and are concerned with. Most of these *tantric* myths, which are part of the tantra practice, have been preserved in secrecy within practicing families for generations. The main practitioners of such practices are known as the *Bej* or the *Oja*. However, most of the time, the written sources are either lost or untraceable. Therefore, certain individuals are trained to recite these mantras orally. The language of such myths is usually a mixed one. The influences of Sanskrit, local dialects, and neighboring languages are evident in the language used to tell those myths. Some of the myths are also chanted in a lyrical form. The characters of *Sodasibo* and *Parboti* also frequent these myths.

The main purpose of tantric myths is to ward off illness, diseases, injuries caused by animal bites, etc. The people believe that chanting the mantra or reciting the myth related to the problem/occasion by the designated Bej will protect them from ghosts and other supernatural beings that hinder their peaceful and healthy day-to-day life. In folk life, people believe that canting myths shoo away ghosts and other supernatural beings that are harmful to a healthy lifestyle. Certain other myths are chanted so that an important activity, usually economic, runs smoothly. Folks and practitioners believe that the explanation of their origin reminds evil powers of their apparent powerlessness or the original purpose of their existence. This, along with the confident and fearless tone of the chanter, brings a positive effect to the folk psyche, accumulating strength and positivity in the sufferer's mind. This can be a psychological explanation of the effects of *mantras*. However, even at present, these means of healing are considered the only reliable method among certain groups of people. Some examples of *tantric* myths include the myths of poison, the myth of dogs and snakes, the myth of evils named Khuba and Khubuni, the myth of the *muga* cocoon, and others.

Origin myths, especially local variants of origin myths such as the *Tantric* myths, are less explored areas of folkloristic analysis. The main reason for this can be the non-availability of the texts, as these texts, even in their oral form, are not a part of folks' daily activities. They are, however, essential elements of folk life, especially in remote areas. A study of these myths, viewed through a folkloristic lens, will reveal facets of the tribal belief systems, symbols that convey social messages to guide individuals towards a particular

behavioral pattern. In this paper, by studying selected *tantric* myths from Assam, the researcher explores structural commonalities to understand their function in folk belief systems and the process of their transmission. The study aims to explore the commonalities within the structural patterns of tantric myths, using the selected myths as a basis. In addition to the structure, the study will look at the form of the myth narratives. To establish the relevance of the myths in folk life, a study of their functionality and transmission process will be conducted using accessible elements from the performance events of the myths.

Methodological Procedures and Theoretical Framework

The three *tantric* myths selected for the study are "The *mantra* of snake bite", "The *mantra* of evil eye", and "The *mantra* of growing *muga* cocoon". The tales are identified and collected from Birinchi Kumar Baruah's Asamor Loka Sanskriti (1967) and Nirmalprabha Bordoloi's Assamor Loka Sanskriti (2004). However, more such myths are yet to be documented for research, as they are still treasured within practising families only and are not passed on for public use. The folkloristic approaches referred to for this research are:

Claude Levi-Strauss's Theory of Structural Analysis

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) belonged to the structural school of critical analysis. According to Levi-Strauss, a myth, like language, is made of constituent units. His methodology for the structural study of a myth involved breaking down the story into the shortest possible units or sentences. These elemental units were used to analyze the underlying structure of relationships and binary opposition among the elements of the myth. According to him, "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution" (Levi-Strauss, 1963), i.e., myths basically consist of binary oppositions, which are (a) elements that contradict each other, and (b) elements that mediate or resolve these oppositions. While developing his theory of structural analysis of a myth, Levi-Strauss also proposed that universal laws must govern mythical thought, as similar myths exist in different cultures. These universal laws also resolve the paradox that, while mythical stories are fantastic and unpredictable, there are myths in different cultures that are surprisingly similar.

However, for the present research, Levi-Strauss's idea of breaking down the myths to the smaller (not the smallest, in this case) units only is applied to arrive at the various stages of a common structural pattern for the three selected myths. Each sentence of a myth is observed in relation to the corresponding sentence of the other two myths to identify the pattern.

Theories of Functional Analysis of Oral Narratives

From a functionalist point of view, the reality of the events is found in their manifestations in the present. Hence, their contemporary functioning should be observed and recorded to understand the events. The functionalists attempted to interpret societies as they operated at a single point in time. The earliest proponent of this school of thought, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), suggests that individuals have physiological needs (such as food, shelter, and reproduction) and that social institutions exist to meet these needs. His contemporary A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), a structural functionalist and a founding father of functionalism, suggests that society is a system of relationships and there are orderly sets of institutions whose function is to maintain the society. In other words, the social life of a community refers to the functioning of its social structure. The methodological emphasis of the functionalists is, hence, on intensive fieldwork involving participant observation. Later, the functionalist and anthropologist, Bascom (1954), suggests four primary functions of folklore. They are, (a) Folklore helps people to escape from repressions imposed by society,

(b) Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them, (c) As a pedagogical device, folklore reinforces morals and values and builds wit, and (d) Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control.

Axel Olrik's "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative"

Danish folklorist Axel Olrik, through his paper, introduces some principal laws that govern the composition of folk narrative. He maintains that these laws are found to be effective in some folk narrative genres, which he collectively terms the "Sage" or "Sagenwelt." Sage incorporates genres such as folktales, myth, legend, and folksongs within its purview. He argues that folklore composition maintains its own laws rather than the laws of everyday life; hence, the folk narratives are found in certain definite forms. Some of the laws introduced by Olrik include the Law of Opening and Closing, the Law of Repetition, the Law of Two to a Scene, the Law of Contrast, and the Law of Three, among others.

A Folkloristic Study of the Selected *Tantric* Myths

The myths selected for this study, i.e, "The *mantra* of snake bite" (Myth 1), "The *mantra* of evil eye" (Myth 2), and "The *mantra* of growing mugacocoon" (Myth 3), represent three different activities. Myth 1 is used as an accompaniment of a brief performance to treat the victims of snake-bite; Myth 2 is used to cure a person believed to be possessed by an 'evil eye' or a supernatural entity; Myth 3 is an activity-related *mantra*, which is believed to be invoking the magic of prosperity in growing the *muga-polu* (Muga-cocoon).

Since these myths are locally used, based on local belief systems and activities, they do not travel much. Therefore, numerous elements of local cultures are reflected in the myths, including characters, incidents, moments, gods and goddesses, and their names. Some elements are picked up from local cultural habits and religious practices. Gods and goddesses in the myths are sometimes local deities that are given superior status by societal beliefs, and at times are localized from institutionalized religions, mostly Hinduism. For example, the *Dimasas* call God *Siva* Brai Sibrai, the Lalungs call him Mohadeb, Assamese-speaking people call him Sodasibo, the Rabhas call him Rudra, and the *Deuris* call him *Burha*, and so on. Goddess *Durga* is also known as *Parboti, Burhi, Kesaikhati*, etc. The gods of institutionalized religions are localized and, at times, humanized in their myths. *Mohadeb*, in a *Lalung* myth, drinks a lot of local beer and falls asleep on the roadside. In the tantric myth of the Evil Eye, Siva begs for a livelihood, and Parboti fights with him for being unable to manage a household with a meager amount. *Siva* then borrows the necessities from minor gods and cultivates.

Exploration of the Structural Patterns of the *Tantric* Myths

A significant factor about *Tantric* myths is that their structures differ from other myth structures. The major difference is that these myths start abruptly, sometimes giving the impression of being in the middle of an ongoing half-told tale, then explain the origin of the 'being'/subject in question, its role in the world and among humanity as desired by the creator, and ends either with a suggestion of a way to appease this being or with a message of threat from the creator about punishment, if it deviates from its role.

Table 1 presents a basic structure for the *tantric* myths in Assam, using the three aforementioned myths as examples. The structure that arrived at is not absolute, as the nature and lengths of the mantras used as mediums to narrate the myths do not always hold uniformity. Many of these mantras are narrated in lyrical form too, and sometimes they are accompanied by certain archetypal utterances such as "*Hringhring*", "*Phuhphuh*", "*Thah, thah*", etc., at different stages, and there are manual activities also.

Table 1

Structural pattern of the tantric myths

Myth 1 (Snake Bite)	Myth 2 (Evil Eye)	Myth 3 (Growing *Muga* Cocoon)	The Resultant Structure
Once, *Sadasiva* wanted the company of *Parboti* during midday.	Once, *Parboti* told *Sadasiva* that they had had enough of begging and should now grow their own crops.	*Sadasiva* and *Parboti* fought over a domestic matter.	The abrupt beginning introduces a problem unrelated to the reason behind the mantra's utterance.
Parboti got angry and abused *Siva*.	She advised *Siva* to obtain the seeds from *Kuber*, the plough from *Balaram*, land from *Indra*, and the buffalo from *Yamaraj*, and to use his own cow, *Brishabha*. *Siva* did accordingly.	*Parboti* started crying and left the place.	A reaction to the problem occurs.
Out of the abusive language were born lots of snakes, including *Kali Sarpa*.	With the help of the can of seeds, he grew a vast cultivation from one mountain to another. The crops grew, and *Siva* forgot to go back home while being busy with cultivation.	Her teardrops became Muga cocoons.	The result or the outcome of the reaction.
Siva told *Kali Nag* to be the ruler of the Malaygiri Mountain. He divided the venom among all the snakes.	*Parboti* created a tiger and asked it to go and scare everyone away from the cultivation. The tiger went and scared the cow and the buffalo. So, *Siva* had beaten it up and shooed it away to *Parboti*.	While she was contemplating whom to give those cocoons to, she saw an old *Kachari* man. She gave the cocoons to the man, and the man left with them. He left the cocoons on a tree and	After the result or outcome, the search for a shareholder for execution.

		started guarding them from birds and insects.	
Kali was given a thousand *tolas* of venom, while *Dahi* snake got 7 *tolas*, *Kalantak* got 8 *tolas*, and so on.	Now, *Parboti* herself went to bring *Siva* back.		The next action.
After receiving the venom, the *Karsola* snake went to the hillocks, while *Dhorasap* had hidden his share in cow dung and went to the river. *Panimarolisaw* the hidden venom and drank it.	Seeing the prosperous cultivation of *Siva*, *Parboti* uttered the word "Aah!" Out of that word were born two supernatural beings. A male named *Khuba* and a female named *Khubuni*.	Many days went by, but the cocoons were still not ripening. He went to *Siva* and *Parboti* to seek help.	Another problem occurs.
Hence, *Panimaroli* is very poisonous, while Dhorasap is non-poisonous.	These two supernatural beings are said to have evil eyes on anything beautiful and prosperous.	They gave him a boon, saying the *muga* cocoons would be small in size and they would eat small amounts of leaves. The one who tells the story of the origin of the muga cocoon in their house, the muga cocoons will prosper.	The final result or outcome that explains the cause behind the utterance of the *mantra*.

The basic tantric myth structure arrived at with the help of the three myths is,

1ˢᵗ Stage: The abrupt beginning that introduces a problem, not linked with the reason behind the *mantra* utterance.

2ⁿᵈ Stage: A reaction to the problem occurs

3ʳᵈ Stage: The result or the outcome of the reaction.

4ᵗʰ Stage: Following the result or outcome, the search for a shareholder for execution.

5ᵗʰ Stage: The next action.

6ᵗʰ Stage: Another problem occurs.

7ᵗʰ Stage: The ultimate result or outcome that explains the cause behind the utterance of the *mantra*.

One important factor about the structure of these myths is that they often imbue a particular practice or activity with which the community is generally involved. Practice, social or religious, finds expression in several myths. For example, the reference to cultivating activity in the tantric myth 'Evil Eye', in which *Parboti* forces *Siva* to cultivate. Growing *muga* cocoons to produce muga silk is a traditional occupational practice in Assam. Its importance is evident from the fact that there is a *mantra* (the 'Growing *Muga* Cocoon' Myth) in Assam for the prosperous growth of the silk.

A Study of the Form of the *Tantric* Myths

The study of form reveals several similarities among narratives. These similarities are evident in the structure of the narrative (including the opening and ending, climax, different stages, themes, etc.), the storyline or content, the characters, and other aspects. The narrative's storyline or matter is structured into different stages, the study of which reveals a certain definite pattern or form common to the narratives. In long narratives, the arrangement of the message is elaborated, but typically follows a rigid structure. In this context, folklorist Axel Olrik introduces thirteen Epic Laws of Folk Narratives (1965), which he claims are factors that affect the structural formation of folk narratives. Out of the thirteen laws suggested by Olrik, certain laws that seem relevant in the present context are,

Law of Opening and Closing

The law of Opening and Closing is important in the discussion of the form of oral narratives. It is through the stylizing of these two points in the narration that the narrator attempts to fulfil the purpose of the narrative. These two points decide the fundamental structure of the narrative. Usually, certain specific types of Opening-Closing molds are noticed in different narrative genres. Thus, at times, it is possible to arrive at certain basic structural models for narrative genres. The tribal *Tantric* myths exhibit an abrupt opening. In these *mantras*, the narration is abruptly opened at a certain point, and the previous situation, in reference to the narrative, is usually unknown. Such openings directly introduce the problem, the focal part or the climax situation of the narrative. Similarly, abrupt closings are also important factors in the structuring of the *tantric* myths. The mantras end when the purpose of the recitation is accomplished. *Mantras* are context-dependent, and hence they opt for abrupt endings as soon as the desired part is uttered.

Law of Repetition

Repetitions are frequently noticed in folk narratives. Whether as repeated incidents, characters, objects, or as the repetition of particular lines, stanzas, or even the story itself, repetition remains an integral part of folk narratives. With the help of repetition, emphasis is

usually put on the repeated part, thus making it a necessary and strong element in the performance of the mantra.

Law of Two to a Scene

This law suggests that only two characters interact with each other at a certain stage in a folk narrative. Other characters may also be present at the same scene, but unlike literary texts, their role is limited to that of a mute onlooker. At any point in time, only two characters must interact, maintaining their characteristic attributes. This law also holds well in the *tantric* myths, as evident from the abovementioned myths.

Concentration on a Leading Character

It goes without saying that folktales and other folk narratives about a particular character are structured around the fate and adventures of the character. This law summarizes all the laws of folk narratives discussed so far, as suggested by Axel Olrik, in that the protagonist's life or a particular life event determines the storyline. Folktales about a person—imaginary or legendary— often feature other characters that also play the roles of helpers and harmers, influencing the protagonist's life in a certain direction. However, the focus is on the actions performed by the protagonist to tackle the adverse situations with the help of the helpers. For example, in Myth 2, we find Gods such as *Indra* playing the role of helpers to *Siva* to attain his goal, or the tiger in the same myth is another helper. In myth 3, we can see a *Kachari* man as a helper to *Parboti*.

Exploration of the Functions of Tantric Myths

The lifetime of a folk-narrative, from its creation to its eventual disuse, is decided by its function or usability. Analyzing these functions brings to light different aspects of the community that keep folklore alive. However, the functions of folk narratives can be well understood only within the context of performance, as when removed from this context, a narrative remains only as a text for literary analysis. Oral literature of a folk group is generally considered to be a vital source of their cultural survival information. Therefore, the primary function of oral narrative is to convey and transmit essential survival information to future generations. Folk beliefs about life, death, and survival, as well as nature, men, and their surroundings, are infused in the oral narratives and are thus stored and passed on with validation. As mentioned above, tantric myths are uttered only in their performance contexts.

Some common functions that the myths display are identified through the participant observation method, which involves the researcher's personal engagement with the Assamese community. The first function that the myths serve is as a medium to pass on information and wisdom of human experiences across generations. The contents of the myths display detailed instructions for physical, psychological, and worldly information necessary for survival, as well as other practices. For example, in Myth 3, the *Kachari* man instinctively knows that the cocoons he received from Parboti need to be kept on a tree and guarded.

Secondly, myths function as tools to disseminate the traditional knowledge of the world or the worldview of a community. In the second Myth, *Parboti* asks *Sadasiva* to cultivate their own crops, which teaches the people about the importance of hard work for survival, setting the gods as examples. Thirdly, myths develop a sense of self or community identity and help distinguish their position in the world. In this process, these myths lend meaning, whether good or bad, to the actions performed by human beings throughout their lifetime. Lastly, these narratives have maintained a sense of awe due to their secretive nature and non-regular, (only) occasional performance events. This sense of 'awe' or 'fear' gives birth to a sense of belief in the minds of the folks. The belief, on the other hand, can be viewed as a psychological agency that ultimately helps to manifest the desired result.

Process of Transmission of the *Tantric* Myths

The study of the accessible process of myth mantra performance reveals a development that is instantaneous and extended at the same time. The most important factor in the transmission of oral narratives is the bearer. In case of the performance of the myth *mantras*, the bearer is the *Bej* or the *Oja*. It is the responsibility of the bearer of tradition to decide how he understands the culture, what he acquires from it and what he decides to convey every time he delivers the folk-narrative. He is called the active-bearer, and the entire process of transmission of folklore depends on him. The next factor is the receptor and whether the receptor is an insider or an outsider to the tradition. The insider receptor acts as a passive bearer of the tradition. If the passive bearer decides to or is given access to transmit what he acquires from an active bearer to others, he too assumes the role of a responsible active bearer. In the case of the *tantric* performance, the receptor is often the sufferer or intender in dire need of the ritual. Such receptors do not usually become active bearers. However, the disciples or trainees of the *Bej* do acquire the status of active bearers after the knowledge has been completely passed on by the trainer *Bej*. The third important factor is the context and purpose of transmission, as the contextual requirement and the immediate purpose of summoning the myth *mantra* decide what is being conveyed and, more importantly, what is not being conveyed.

Specific important characteristics noticed in the transmission of *Tantric* myths are, first, that they are passed on orally between persons physically present in the same context. They are not available to others at the same time unless they are passed by word of mouth. Unlike other folk-narrative variants, these myths typically do not undergo a process of change. The myths, although at times dependent upon generationally preserved written sources, are often found to be in orally accessible forms, preserved in the memories of a few chosen tradition-bearers. Since the *tantric* myths are context-dependent and result-oriented, their transmission necessarily involves a strongly contextualised performance. However, such performances are typically conducted discreetly, out of the public eye.

Conclusion

Based on the above study of the three oral tantric myths, folks accept that a definite structural patterning is consciously or subconsciously accepted and adopted by folk composers when creating narratives of the same nature. Therefore, several different myths composed for different occasions, with a similar structural pattern, are found. The *tantric* myths carry forward many facets from the lives of the people. The *tantric* myths preserve and convey social messages in a covert manner. This is one of the basic characteristics of oral narratives. At the same time, these messages are ready-to-use survival information. They are heavily loaded with references to and examples from the practices of their bearing community.

Localization of imagination is also a major factor at work in the creation of the oral narratives. For example, localization is noticed when the Aryan god *Siva* assumes the name *Sodasibo* (*Sadasiva*) and behaves like an ordinary human being, fighting with his wife over petty matters. Several references to local names, gods and deities, household and social practices, beliefs, and local histories are noticed in all the oral narrative forms. This process of humanizing the divine is frequently adopted by ordinary people who picture their gods in situations not dissimilar to their own. In folk imagination, the humanized character of the goddess *Parvati (Parboti)* scolds her husband, Lord *Shiva*, for the hardships of running a household with the little income he brings home by begging.

Folk beliefs are intricately imbued in the oral narratives. Folks believe in what they know to be true. They consider their beliefs to be authentic information, passed on and experienced by their predecessors in practical incidents. The information and knowledge of predecessors needed validation for their survival in the lives of posterity. Therefore, the myths serve as one of the instruments to validate that information. On the other hand, for posterity, the information transmitted by the predecessors creates a belief system. However, the performance of these tantric ritual-based myths is usually rigid. Usually, a particular way of performing the ritual that correlates with the associated belief is accepted, and only a strict performance of the ritual is believed to yield the desired result. Therefore, functionality serves as a crucial factor in structuring performance. Mantras are believed to result in the success of the ritual only if they are uttered or sung in the proper order with correct pronunciation and tune, accompanied by proper breathing movements and the correct movements of the body, hands, and fingers.

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