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## MAYANG : THE LAND WITH A TRADITION OF MAGICAL BELIEF SYSTEM IN ASSAM

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**Abstract:** Mayang in Assam is perhaps best known as the 'land of black magic and witchcraft'. Situated in the Morigaon district of Assam, the erstwhile kingdom of Mayang is today one of the largest development blocks in the state. Human society is a dynamic entity with its varied peculiarities. Societies in different parts of the world have developed a spectrum of rituals, habits, rules, norms and belief systems depending upon their convenience and natural environment. In an attempt to reconstruct the past we are bound to face lots of obstacles with distinctive features of their own. Despite of that each society should be analysed in conformity with the environment in which they lived and their reaction to their surroundings with its institutions that had emerged in the process of change. Mayang is famous for the tradition of magical belief system and the manuscripts i.e. mantraputhis still prevalent in the area refers about that rich heritage.

**Keywords:** Magic, Bez, Occult, Tantricism.

### INTRODUCTION :-

Mayang in Assam is perhaps best known as the 'land of black magic and witchcraft'. Situated in the Morigaon district of Assam, the erstwhile kingdom of Mayang is today one of the largest development blocks in the state. The area borders Darrang in the north and Kamrup (Metro) in the south-west and lies on the banks of the rivers Brahmaputra and the Kolong. Till today the traditional healers viz; *bez* and *kabiraz* play a crucial role in the lives of the people. The coming of the Brahmanas and gradual absorption of Saivism, Saktism etc by the people brought about changes in the tradition and society of Mayang. There are images of Hara Gauri in Mayang which indicates prevalence of tantricism in its religious history. The Archaeological Survey of India, Guwahati has conducted excavations which reveal that Mayang is rich in archaeological relics and artefacts. Swords and sharp weapons that resemble tools used for human sacrifice (*narabali*) were discovered and are traced to the Ahom period. The Mayang Central Museum and Emporium has preserved artefacts such as swords and pots that are believed to have been used in mysterious black magic rituals. The manuscripts called '*Mantraputhis*' provide details on black magic practices. There are innumerable *mantras* such as *Luki mantra* (for disappearing from human sight), *Murarbikhar mantra* (for curing headache), Bhut *bakhikaran mantra* (for control over ghost) etc. Still exist in the area. Magic and superstition are central to the religious beliefs and practices of the people. The *mantras* were handed down by word of mouth; though some have also been preserved in written form. The objective of the paper is to discuss about the traditional belief system of magic that had emerged at Mayang. The methodologies applied in this paper are survey & interview method. Regarding source material both, primary and secondary data are consulted.

### NEXUS BETWEEN MAGIC AND RELIGION:

A religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural views and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. It is a set of beliefs, dogmas and practices which define the relations between human being and divinity. Many religions have narratives, symbols and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life and to explain the origin of life or the universe. The *mantraputhis* found at Mayang contains the names of different Hindu gods and goddesses that refer about the nexus between religion and the traditional belief system. The term "religion" may be used in more than one way; it may mean the whole way of life of a people, because in the culture concerned no clear cut distinction has been made between beliefs and practices which are specifically religious, that is, concerned with question of ultimate reality and man's relationship with it and other expressions of life, social, economic, political, aesthetic and the like.

Religious beliefs and rituals may involve prayer or even sacrifice to a deity, where the deity is urged to intervene on

behalf of the supplicant. Sometimes, the magical rite itself contains the power while in others, the strength of the magician's will achieve the desired result, or the potency of the magician to instruct spiritual beings addressed by his spells. The power is accumulated in the hands of the magician or the magical rites, not a deity with a free will. Though, magic has been often practiced in its own rituals but even then it has also been a part of different religions. Religion may be regarded as a cultural tool by means of which man has been able to accommodate himself to his experiences in his total environment.<sup>2</sup> The folk magic is handed down from generation to generation. Though, not associated with any religion, folk magic includes practices like the use of herbs for diseases, or charms to ward off evil spirits. The use of herbs and charms is a common feature in different cultures around the globe. Some religions embrace magic while others consider any kind of magical practice as evil. The study of magic is often linked to the study of the development of religion in the hypothesized evolutionary progression from magic to religion to science. Religion plays an important role in the life of the people of Mayang since early period. The mantraputhis (the books that contains the spells) and archaeology plays a pivotal role to reconstruct the religious life of the area. For instance the *Raj Muhini or Sabha Muhini* mantra (used for fascination in public assemblies) found at Mayang refers the name of the goddess Kamakhya which was an important tantric goddess as follows:

“*Rajak muhulu Prajak muhulu Muhilu Sabhasd Luk.....*  
*Kamrup Kamakhya Ma Hung Hung Swaha Pha*  
*Muhini muhini Raj muhini.....*”

The practice of a religion may also include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration of a deity, gods or goddesses, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, meditation, prayer, music, public service or other aspects of human culture. The word *religion* is sometimes used interchangeably with faith, belief or sometimes set of duties; however, in the words of Emile Durkheim, religion differs from private belief in that it is "something eminently social". Further, the priests constitute a class of holy persons trained in the art of performing ritual: they preserve the religious tradition and customs<sup>3</sup>. The contents of the mantraputhis and the archaeological remains indicate about the predominance of Hinduism in the area with its different folds. Magic or sorcery is an attempt to understand experience and influence the world using rituals, symbols, actions, gestures and language. Western magicians generally observed magic's primary purpose to be personal spiritual growth. Modern theories of magic may see it as the result of a universal sympathy where some act can produce a result somewhere else, or as collaboration with spirits who cause the effect. The belief in and the practice of magic has been present since the earliest human cultures and continues to have an important spiritual, religious and medicinal role in many cultures today. Magic is often viewed with suspicion by the wider community, and is sometimes practiced in isolation and secrecy.

In 1902, Marcel Mauss published his *A General Theory of Magic*, a study of magic throughout various cultures. He declared that, in order to be considered magical, a belief or act must be held by most people in a given society. In his view, magic is essentially traditional and social: "We held that sacred things, involved in sacrifice, did not constitute a system of propagated illusions, but were social, consequently real."

The foremost perspectives on magic in anthropology are functionalist, symbolist and intellectualist. These three perspectives are used to describe how magic works in a society. The functionalist perspective, usually associated with Bronislaw Malinowski, maintains that all aspects of society are meaningful and interrelated. In the functionalist perspective, magic performs a latent function in the society. The symbolist perspective researches the subtle meaning in rituals and myths that define a society. Finally the intellectualist perspective regards magic as logical, but based on a flawed understanding of the world. The lines of demarcation between science, magic, and religion all have origins dating to times when established thought processes were challenged. The rise of Western thought essentially initiated the differentiation between the three disciplines. Whereas science could be revised and developed through rational thought, magic was seen as less scientific and systematic than science and religion, making it the least respected of the three.

In his essay "Magic, Science and Religion", Malinowski contends that every person, no matter how primitive, uses both magic and science. To make this distinction he breaks up this category into the "sacred" and the "profane" or "magic/religion" and science. He theorizes that feelings of reverence and awe rely on observation of nature and a dependence on its regularity. This observation and reasoning about nature is a type of science. Magic and science are both based on knowledge; magic is knowledge of the self and of emotion, while science is knowledge of nature. According to Malinowski, magic and religion are also similar in that they often serve the same function in a society. The difference is that magic is more about the personal power of the individual and religion is about faith in the power of God. Magic is also something that is passed down over generations to a specific group while religion is more broadly available to the community. Malinowski poses the question, "why magic?" He writes, "Magic supplies primitive man with a number of ready-made rituals, acts and beliefs, with a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation. Cultural anthropologist Evans Pritchard wrote the *Witchcraft: Oracles and Magic among the Azande* in 1937. His approach was very different from that of Malinowski. In 1965, Evans-Pritchard published his seminal work *Theories of Primitive Religion*, where he argued that anthropologists should study cultures "from within," entering the minds of the people they studied, trying to understand the background of why people believe something or behave in a certain way. He claimed that believers and non-believers approach the study of religion in vastly different ways. Non-believers, he noted, are quick to come up with biological, sociological, or psychological theories to explain religious experience as illusion, whereas believers are more likely to develop theories explaining religion as a method of conceptualizing and relating to reality. For believers, religion is a special dimension of reality. The same can be said of the study of magic. Both magic and religion contain rituals. While many rituals focus on personal communion with the divine and spiritual

purification, others often seek "magical" favourable results, such as healing or good luck in battle. Magic and religion are categories of beliefs and systems of knowledge used within societies. Magic is a ritualistic action that implements forces and objects outside the realm of the gods and the supernatural. These objects and events are said to be intrinsically efficacious, so that the supernatural is unnecessary. To some, including the Greeks, magic was considered a "proto-science." Magic has other historical importance as well. Atharva Veda deals with mantras that can be used for both good and bad. Many ascetics after long periods of penance and meditation are alleged to attain a state where they may utilize supernatural powers. However, many say that they choose not to use them and instead focus on transcending beyond physical power into the realm of spirituality.

Magic, is a conceptual system that asserts human ability to control the natural world through mystical, paranormal, or supernatural means. The term can also indicate to the practices employed by a person asserting this influence, and to beliefs that explain various events and phenomena in such terms. While some deny any form of magic as authentic, those that practice it regard the influencing of events, objects, people, and physical phenomena through mystical, paranormal or supernatural means as real. Appearing from tribes in Australia and New Zealand to rainforest tribes in South America, tribes in Africa some form of shamanism and belief in a spirit world seems to be common in the early development of human communities. Although indigenous magical traditions persist to this day, very early on some communities transitioned from nomadic to agricultural civilizations, and with this shift, the development of spiritual life mirrored that of civic life.

#### USES OF THE MANTRAS:-

Mantras or spells were practiced for different purposes. Mantra means a sacred utterance, numinous sound, or a syllable, word, phonemes, or group of words believed by some to have psychological and spiritual power. Mantra may or may not be syntactic or have literal meaning; the spiritual value of mantra comes when it is audible, visible, or present in thought. Earliest mantras were composed in Vedic times by Hindus in India, and those are more than 2000 years old. Mantras serve a central role in the tantric school of Hinduism. In this school, mantras are considered equivalent to deities, a sacred formula and deeply personal ritual, and considered to be effective only after initiation.

They were used to scare away devils and evil spirits who were supposed to be the cause of human ailments, to cure snakebite, to remove the bad effect of dreams, to secure release from misfortune, to protect the fields from the evil eye, for the prosperity of the home and the harvest, and for a hundred and one other purposes. Significant among these mantra-puthis are the following: Sapardharani-mantra (Snake-catching charm), Narasingha mantra, Muhini Mantra, Karati-mantra, Sarvadhakmantra, Kamaratna-mantra, Bhutar-mantra, Khetra-mantra etc. It may not have much literary value, but they are important as documents of popular beliefs and superstitions. Many make a distinction between "black" magic and "white" magic; black magic being practiced for selfish, evil gains, and white magic for good. Others prefer not to use these terms, as the term "black magic" implies that the magic itself is evil. They note that magic can be compared to a tool, which can be put towards evil purposes by evil men or beneficial purposes by good people. Both were available in the society of Mayang. The best-known type of magical practice is the spell, a ritualistic formula intended to bring about a specific effect. Spells are often spoken or written or physically constructed using a particular set of ingredients.

#### The Language, Scripts and materials used:

The performance of magic often involves the use of language. Whether spoken out loud or unspoken, words are generally used to access or guide supernatural power. The language used in the Mantraputhis of Mayang is old Assamese. In "The Magical Power of Words" (1968) S. J. Tambiah opined that the nexus between language and magic is due to a belief in the inherent ability of words to influence the universe. Bronisław Malinowski, in *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1935), observed that this belief is an extension of man's basic use of language to describe his surroundings, in which "the knowledge of the right words, appropriate phrases and the more highly developed forms of speech, gives man a power over and above his own limited field of personal action." Hence, Magical speech is a ritual act and is of equal or even greater importance to the performance of magic than non-verbal acts. Another significant source of the strength of words is its secrecy and exclusivity. Yet believers of magic are still able to use and to value the magical function of words by believing in the inherent power of the words themselves and in the meaning that they must provide for those who do understand them.

The scripts used in the *mantraputhis* of Mayang were Kaithali, Bamunia and modern Assamese. Presently, around fifty *mantraputhis* are preserved in the Mayang Central Museum and Emporium and rest of them are scattered in different villages of the area under individual ownership. A large section of the *mantraputhis* got preventive treatment performed by Field Lab., Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Panjabari, Guwahati-37 and National Mission for Manuscripts, New Delhi.

The *Mantraputhis* found at Mayang were written in different periods of time. Only in some of the *mantraputhis* there is reference about the period in which it has been written. Therefore, the materials were selected from the available options in any specific period of time. The bark of the *Sanchi* tree and paper was used for writing the Mantras. Some of the *mantraputhis* are written in the papers used by the revenue department of the government. Some of the *mantraputhis* are not in a complete form.

#### RITUALSPECIALISTS:

The ritual specialists of the area are known as *bez* and *kabiraz*. Till today these traditional healers *viz*; *bez* and *kabiraz* play a crucial role in the lives of the people. It is noteworthy that there is no caste or sex restriction to become a ritual specialist.



People belonging to different castes had proved their expertise in the field that indicates that the foremost requirement to be a good practitioner was ones true dedication to the field, nothing else. Besides, it can be surmised that the women of Mayang actively participated in the field as because till today a large section of the women of the area are conversant with different mantras. Further, every individual can practice tantricism without any discrimination to caste or creed<sup>1</sup>. The followers of tantricism use to believe that it will lead them towards salvation<sup>5</sup>. Generally, magician is a person who practices the art of magic, bringing desired results through the use of spells, charms, and other means. He often claims to be able to manipulate supernatural entities or the forces of nature. Initiations are perhaps the most commonly used ceremonies to establish and to differentiate magicians from common people. In these rites the magician's relationship to the supernatural and his entry into a closed professional class is established, often through rituals that simulate death and rebirth into a new life. The best-known type of magical practice is the spell, a formula intended to bring about a specific result and in Mayang these are found in the pages of the *mantraputhis*. Generally, they are often spoken or organised by a particular set of ingredients. The failure of a spell to work may be attributed to many causes, such as a failure to follow the exact mantra, to a lack of ability, to a lack of willpower or to fraud. Magical rituals are the precisely defined actions (including speech) used to work magic. Bronisław Malinowski describes ritual language as possessing a high "coefficient of weirdness", by which he means that the language used in ritual is archaic and out of the ordinary, which helps foster the proper mindset to believe in the ritual. Émile Durkheim stresses the importance of rituals as a tool to achieve "collective effervescence", which serves to help unify society.

#### CONCLUSION:

The above discussion shows that religion plays an important role in the life of the people of Mayang since early period. During my field survey I found that some families are not interested to share the *mantraputhis* with others as they consider them as quite sacred<sup>6</sup>. Further, a large section of the *mantraputhis* from the area was destroyed in the river because of the prevailing believe that they (i.e. *mantraputhis*) may bring misfortune to the family if they are not kept under proper care and protection<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the natural calamities like flood played a major role towards the destruction of the *mantraputhis* as the area is situated in a flood prone zone<sup>8</sup>. Prominent scholar Dr. N.N. Bhattacharya opined that in tantrikism, *maithuna mudra* is an important ritual, therefore the existence of the *umalingana* images of the area may indicate about the dominance of that cult in the society. Further, it is noteworthy that the *Sattra* institutions play a major role in the spiritual and cultural life of Assam. As like the other parts of Assam, Mayang was also influenced by the wave of neo vaishnavite movement and several *Sattras* were established in the area for spreading the spiritual and cultural values of the movement. The neo vaishnavite movement may have played an antagonistic role against the traditional belief system because of its ideological differences.

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5. Ibid, p. 44.
6. In my interview with one of the owner of *mantraputhis*, Mr. Pranab Saikia, age- 61 years, village- Ouguri, Mayang (date- 5/6/2014), he informed that the *mantraputhis* should be kept under certain rituals, therefore there is practical problem to give it to others. But, he allowed me to take photographs of the *mantraputhis* at his home and fully cooperated in the process.
7. In my interview with one of the practitioner (bez) of the area, Mr. Deben Saikia, age-70 years, vill- Sativeti, Mayang (date: - 6/6/2014), informed me that his father has destroyed their family *mantraputhis* and even prevented them to learn it as he (i.e. father) had believed that they may bring misfortune to his progenies, if they fails to preserve them with due care.
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