

# Analysis of the Oral Ballads of Monai Maji

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## Abstract

Change is inevitable in a society. The culture therein encounters numerous experiences with those changes in due course of time. Sometimes it even faces crisis and goes to the verge of extinction. The oral culture, including folk songs, ballads and such narratives has been suffering more than the material-culture. The professional shift from agriculture to other ways of living creates a vacuum of naturally and spontaneously developed creative minds in the society. Such is the case with the oral narratives of Monai Maji, once an abode of numerous oral ballads and lyrics. Now there is none to sing the song of 'Henduri Pomili', a ballad to commemorate a love story of two sisters, and the beautiful lyric on Monai Maji, in the entire region in North-West Jorhat, comprising of 14 villages. The demise of the last exponent of these oral songs, Bogai Bora Ojha a few years back, was the death blow on this tradition. The oral songs have met a crucial moment under such flux. The paper aims at representing the different perspectives of folk tradition in this region. It casts light upon the existential crisis faced by the oral traditions of Monai Maji. It also tries to find out ways to recover the lost numbers of the past, once sung by generations with impulsive fervor.

**Keywords:** Oral Culture, Oral Narratives, Ballads.

## Introduction

*"How shall I go to town (Jila)?  
I can't set out on foot  
As no umbrella, no sandal do I own.  
You spoke to me with love and care  
But keep looking back to me  
While parting, and I am sure,  
There was love there.  
"How shall I go to town (Jila)?  
I can't set out on foot  
As no umbrella, no sandal do I own.  
You spoke to me with love and care,  
Yet stepped out gently,  
Thinking me to be a stranger,  
As I belong to the countryside of Monai-Majhi"  
(Translated by Suryya Kumar Chetia)*

## (Original

*Chaati nai jilaloi jame kenekori,  
Silpot nai nachale vori,  
O Aikon, ekhuj dukhuj kori,  
Golagoi ulati, golagoi uvati  
Amaloi Uloti chai,  
O Aikon, chale morom lagi jai.  
Chaati nai jilaloi jame kenekori,  
Silpot nai nachale vori,  
O Aikon, baru baru buli  
Golagoi atori, golagoi atori,  
Amake bhabila por,  
O Aikon, amar Monai Majit ghor.)*

(Source: A song sung by Ashok Bora of Monai Maji on 20-02-2016 at a meeting at the residence of Ganesh Bora of Bura Kuri, Monai Maji)

These two stanzas of the oral song of Monai Maji have portrayed a picture of the place. It is situated away from the town or district-headquarter (Jila). And it requires a considerable amount of time to reach the town on foot. So, one should always carry an umbrella with him while

crossing the distance as the weather may change anytime during his tour. It is hard to cross that long uneven path without footwear too.

It is a rural area. As most of the girls want to be courted by a wealthy person in the town, the girl mentioned in the song deserts the singer knowing him to be from the countryside.

This is the picture of Monai Maji, a vast rural area in North-West Jorhat, Assam consisting of several villages on both the fertile banks of river Bhogdoi, a few Kilometers away from the headquarter of Jorhat district in the state of Assam. Earlier Jorhat was the last capital of Ahom Kingdom. Now it is a district ranging from Naga Hills to river Brahmaputra.

History says, Bhogdoi, the only river dug by men during Ahom rule in Assam during the rule of King Gaurinath Singha, (1780 - 94) (Rajkumar, Sarbananda, Itihase Soaura Chashata Bachar, Banalata, Gueahati, 2000, p. 280) was the lifeline of the entire area ensuring peace and prosperity among the inhabitants there. The vast paddy field, named after the Manipuri people coming with the queen Kuranganayani (during the reign of King Rajeswar Singha), was known as Malow Pathar or Magalow Khat was the fertile ground for water-harvesting since the centuries. The productivity of rice in the fields is a blessing to the inhabitants of the area which guaranteed a secured, carefree life. In such an idyllic backdrop, the folk culture in the form of oral songs and ballads appeared there reflecting creativity of the unknown composers with the use of appropriate words to have desired sound to sing with traditional musical instruments.

But gone are the days of those Bihu performers of Monai Maji. Bogai Bora Borbayon, the last renowned exponent of folk culture of Burakuri village of Monai Maji passed away a few years back. Most of the oral Bihu songs and ballads he learnt from his predecessors went with him as no worthy disciple was there to learn those in complete during his lifetime. So, the existing generation can recite and perform few of those ballads in the original tune. It is worthy to be mentioned here that Bohag Bihu is the national festival of Assam which is celebrated in Spring season. Beautiful Bihu songs and colourful dances with the musical instruments are the main attraction of Bohag Bihu.

#### **Objective of the Study**

1. The study aims to categorize the oral ballads found in Monai Maji area.
2. The research aims to study the existential crisis faced by the oral traditions of Monai Maji.

#### **Review of Literature**

Gogoi, Leela (1968) 'Bibidh Malita', *Asomiya Loka Sahityar Ruprekha*, Nabin Prakashan, Golaghat is an essay on various ballads found in Assam. In the essay the author has mentioned a number of ballads found in the villages of Assam. He also wrote a small note on the ballads of Monai Maji area in Assam. But, his writing on the ballads of Monai Maji is not comprehensive. He has given only the glimpse of the one ballad of Monai Maji area in which the love story of a youth from Nepal and two sisters of Monai Maji is described. But the essay did not go deeper to

categorize all the ballads available in the Monai Maji area in Assam. That is why, this research work aims to go further to categorise the ballads available in Monai Maji area.

Neog, Dimbeswar (2008), *Natun Poharat Asomiyar Sahityar Buranji*, Suwoni Prakash, discusses the place of oral tradition in Assamese literature. The tradition of oral ballads is also discussed in the book. But no specific remark on the ballads of Monai Maji was found in the book. So, the discussion and the analysis technique of the book can be considered as a guideline while conducting the research work on the oral ballads of Monai Maji. Therefore, the present research on oral ballads of Monai Maji is completely new area in which very few specific research has been conducted till date. So, there lies the importance of this present research on the oral tradition of Monai Maji.

Sarma, Nabin Chandra (2004), *Asomor parampara got Bachik Kotha: Rup-Varna-Sourabh aru Adhyan Paddhati*, Tai Studies and Research Centre, Moranhat is a book which deals with the systematic analysis of the oral ballads, tales and fables existing in Assamese language. In the book the folk lore is considered as universal living tradition. Since the prehistoric age of civilization till date, folk lore has been prevailing in different forms. The folk lore can offer the evidence of education, culture, history, anthropology ect. different fields in different periods. The book presents the characteristics of the Assamese folk lore and ballads and found the universality in them. The book tries to find out common type and motifs available in almost every culture in the world. It also tried to explain the psychological aspects of the folk lore and ballads.

The analytical method of categorizing ballads in Assam pointed out in the book is followed by the researcher to analyse the ballads found in Monai Maji area of Assam too. So, it has shown a path to this research work to categorise the oral ballads found in Monai Maji.

Sarmah, Dr. Satyendra Nath (2017), *Moukhik Luksahitya, Asomiya Sahityar Samikhyatmak Itibritta*, Soumar Prakash, Orunodoi Press, Guwahati is a chapter of a book in which the oral literature in Assamese language is discussed. In the chapter all the three components of oral literature folk song (including ballad), phrases and idioms and proverbs and folk tales are discussed in details. Though, the writer tried to encompass the entire folk literature, there is hardly any discussion about the oral ballads of Monai Maji. However, this chapter is a guideline to direct the current research work.

#### **Data Collection Tools**

As the ballads in the Monai Maji area are not in written form, during the course of research the researcher had to record them as sung by the practitioners of that area. So, the method of Oral History was followed by the researchers to collect the texts of the ballads.

#### **Data Analysis Technique**

In this research the content Analysis is used to analyse the data. The texts of the ballads are considered to be the texts for the study. So, the

ballads found in Monai Maji are categorized according to their subjects. In this research, the patterns of the ballads are studied according to the words, epithets and expressions used in them.

#### Types of Ballads found in Monai Maji

The ballads in Assamese are categorized into three categories according to their subject matter. These are historical, oral anecdote (hearsay) and imaginary (Sarma, Hemanta Kumar, pp – 10-13). On the other hand according to origin these may be classified as folk ballad and literary ballad.

The historical ballads tell the stories from history. In Assamese, ballad of Maniram Dewan, Naharor Geet, Gaurinath Singhar Geet are some examples of historical ballads. No single individual is known as the originator or composer of these ballads. Though the subject matters were taken from history, these received the form of ballad in the lips of farmer singers throughout the ages.

Likewise, the ballads having subject matters from oral anecdotes in Assamese (*Kimbadanti*) describe some stories continuing through the ages generation after generation. Some of the examples are *Phul Konwar Aru Moni Konwaror Geet*, *Joona Gabharur Geet*, *Moinamoti Geet* and *Kamala Konwarir Geet*.

There are some other ballads dealing with some imaginary subject matters. *Kanya Baramahi Geet*, *Dubla Santi Geet*, *Madhumati Geet*, *Jaydhan Baniar Geet*. etc. are of this kind.

The ballads of Monai Maji also may be categorized into two broad categories; folk and literary respectively. But it is quite difficult to categorize the ballads of Monai Maji as the subject matters sometimes overlap both history and anecdote.

Here is an attempt to show the categories of the ballads of Monai Maji:

Ballads of Monai Maji		
Folk Ballads		Literary Ballads
Historical	Anecdote	
		Imaginary

#### Historical Ballads of Monai Maji

*Moniram Dewanr Geet* was the most common historical ballad sung in Monai Maji. The difference of tone in the song is remarkable from other parts of the state. The long elegiac note performed with different gestures of the body and hands made it unique. Ganesh Bora, a resident of Monai Maji and son of Bogai Bora Borbayon (Oja) informed that in Huchari (performance of song with group dance and musical instruments during Springtime) they still practice this song. The ballad ends with 'Dolakhariya Chapor', a unique style of beating traditional drum.

*(Ujaye ahile Moniram Dewane  
Moinahot O,  
Batote porile dhora na oi.  
Kenekoi dhorile tuke oi Moniram  
Chithi likhi dhorile  
Muke na oi)*

(Source: A song sung by Ashok Bora and Ganesh Bora)

[Translation:

*Moniram Dewan came to upper Assam*

*He was caught in the way*

*How he was caught?*

*He was caught through the letter]*

#### Ballads based on Anecdote (Kimbadanti) of Monai Maji

Like other parts of Assam, the *Phulkonwor and Monikonwarr Geet* were also practiced in Monai Maji. As Ganesh Bora informed, these songs were hardly sung in present time.

#### Literary and Imaginary Ballad

The most popular and widely performed ballad was *Baralar Charitra*. Ganesh Bora, a resident of Monai Maji informed that he heard from his father Late Bogai Bora Borbayon (Oja) that this ballad was written by the Satradhikar (head of a religious sect) of Letugram Satra (A religious institute to promote Vaishnavite religion and culture), Late Mitraddev Mahanta. Though no written evidence is available now to support this statement, it may be taken for granted that Late Mahanta was the creator of the ballad. Late Bogai Bora was the Borbayon (chief music player) of that Satra. The pattern of rhyme in the song is quite interesting. The words used in the song are taken from the then colloquial form of Assamese language prevailing in this part of undivided Sibsagar district during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It describes the plight of a bachelor in his middle age. The hurdle he has to overcome without any support appears unsurpassable for the single person family. Though the song makes people laugh, at the same time it remains successful to arouse sympathy in the minds of listeners for the poor bachelor. The mastery of the master-creator of the ballad in the art is quite obvious as he successfully blends the 'laughter and tears' (comedy and pity) through the lines of the ballad.

Though it is an imaginary story, it is applicable to all the bachelors in the world. They have to face various problems due to their singleness. The universal appeal of the subject matter can be felt even in the modern or post modern era.

It is important to note that the ballad was sung exclusively by the Huchari performers of Moni Maji area. No other singers can sing the entire song continuously, as it requires enough practice.

#### Folk Ballad but overlapping both history and anecdote

The most special ballad of Monai Mai is the ballad of Senduri Pomili or Henduri Pomili. Ashok Bora, a resident of Dhekar Gorha, Monai Maji said that it was a ballad based on fact. There are still some relatives' descendents of Henduri and Pomili in the village. People know the family as 'Phandi Burarr Ghar'. The descendents of the Henduri and Pomili's relatives engaged in capturing elephants. So, they were known as 'Phandi' in local Assamese language meaning 'elephant catcher'. It is worthy to be mentioned here that Hatigar, the embankment made during the Ahom rule to catch elephant is only a few kilometers away from Monai Maji. So, it is very likely that the family of Henduri-Pomili, the two sisters were from that clan who served as Phandi during Ahom

rule. The mentioning of the 'Nepali' person in the ballad indicates that the ballad was composed either during the last few years of Ahom rule just after the invasion of Mayans in Assam or during the British rule in Assam. The period may be early or middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Leela Gogoi had the opinion that this song was composed in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup> (Gogoi, Leela, pp. 240-241). During that time Nepali people started coming to Assam particularly to conduct the dairy business.

*"The Nepali from 'Bhati' (western part of the country) came upstream*

*Aiming at the end of Mohgar*

*Henduri and Pamili of Monai Maji, the two sisters*

*Go the take a bath in the river*

*Henduri goes first*

*Pomili follows her*

*Nepali goes in between the both."*

It is a 'promiscuous' love story. Both the sisters, Henduri and Pomili fell in love with the same person of origin from Nepal. The Nepali settled at Kalbari, some three-four kilometers away from Monai Maji and started his dairy business there. It is not known well wherefrom he came to that place. He used to supply milk to the people of Monai Maji area. He used to come to the family of Akhoi Bura of Monai Maji who had two beautiful daughters namely Henduri and Pomili. As the parents remained busy with their day to day affairs and cultivation, Henduri and Pomili, the two sisters used to spend time with the Nepali. Both started conversation with him on the bank of river Bhogdoi, in a secluded area where no-one visited usually. Even then, some playmates of the duo had the information and discovered the trio in that place. The Nepali flew away quickly from the place. So, the Henduri and Pomily became the centre of rumour in the village.

But the Nepali was shrewd enough to woo both of them. He even managed to influence the parents of Henduri and Pomili with milk and money. The parents noticed no wrong in the day to day behavior of the daughters even the rumour spread in the village. And it was very likely that somebody in the village might inform the fact to the parents, but they paid little attention to it. It was the power of money that Nepali possessed. The supremacy of business over cultivation is felt in the lines of the ballad.

The two beautiful sisters were very fashionable. The lover knew their weakness. He offered gifts like vermilion powder to Henduri and artificial flower to wear in head to Pomili. It unveils how the craze to appear beautiful can lead the girls in to such a situation in which they had to love only one and the same man.

Nepali, the opportunist lover, used to come to Henduri when she remained busy with her handloom weaving cloths. He was given snacks (Jalpan) every time he comes to their place. It is also a reflection of the then society. Girls are taught to weave in their looms right from their childhood. The handloom was their most important equipment which determined their expertise. Earlier, girls assemble near the loom and started talking on various matters

while weaving. That was a private place where a man did not usually trespass. It was the private place of informal meeting of the female folk in the village.

One day, the two sisters, Henduri and Pomili eloped with the Nepali, the lover while their father was away from home. Her mother, who had some problem in eyesight, could not find the hint earlier. Thus, it shows how the marriages occurred during the earlier times when the society was hesitant to approve it. The inter community marriage was a new concept particularly with the people who came to do business in the land.

The presentation is made interesting with the comments of the singer. He in the song warned the Henduri and Pomili that the Nepali is a cunning person. He may persuade them to go away with him leaving the old parents at home. The colloquial vocabulary used in the ballad made it the song of the people of Monai Maji. The word like 'khayanko' is not found in any Assamese dictionary. But according to Ashok Bora, from whom the song was collected said that it means 'devastate'.

As the ballad depicted a true incident, Ashok Bora had the opinion that it is a historical ballad. But Henduri and Pomili or any other character of the ballad were not important personalities to be found in history. So, these two statements perplex one to decide in which category the ballad should be placed.

Leela Gogoi's version of written song is different from the song now which is in the lips of Ganesh Bora or Ashok Bora. In the final stanza of the song as collected by Leela Gogoi depicted that though Telegraph message was sent to Namti Railway Station in search of the two sisters, no information received. Later it was known that Henduri went to the border of Sadiya, the extreme Eastern border of Assam. But Pomili could not be traced out.

#### **Performance of the Ballads**

Most of the ballads in Monai Maji were performed as Hucharies, a kind of song sung by a group of people with musical instruments during the springtime, Bohag Bihu. Dhol (traditional drum), Taal (brass disc like musical instrument) and Mohor Singor Pepa (horn). Sometimes, flute was also played with it. There were several styles of beating the traditional drum. Those were *Khora Chapor*, *Miri Chapor*, *Dolakakhoriya Chapor* etc. The styles of beating the drums in Monai Maji were unique and different from the styles of other places of Assam. The dance is also accompanied with the song and music. As Late Bogai Bora Borbayan said, "Bihu is not the dance of *Parvati*, it is the dance of *Sadasiva*". According to him there was no rule of Bihu dance. The sound of Dhol and the song determines how to move the body and other organs. Those who love Bihu, cannot stay away without dancing for once. Bihu dance is spontaneous. That is why in Assamese it is said that one is possessed by Bihu when he is seen quite in high spirits.

#### **Garakhiya Naam or Song in Private**

There were some other songs in Monai Maji which were practiced by the cowherd boys. Those were not to perform in public. The young boys sing those songs in secluded areas while watching their

cattle in the midday. Those were songs with erotic flavor, talking about the youthful aspirations. In other words their repressed sexuality got a creative way to come out in the form of songs. Those songs are also known in Assamese as 'Bon-Ghosha', the songs sung in the forest.

#### Other songs

*"Semiz, Petikot and scarf you wear,  
How far is it to your residence?  
I shall cross your place on the way,  
But call you on during my way back."  
[*"Semij Petikut scarf khoni tumar gat.  
Tumar ghoroloi kiman bat  
Jaute jamegoi tumar ghor pare hoi  
Ghuri ahi, ghuri ahi logai jam mat"*]*

It was heard singing by one Mihiram Boruah of Monai Maji when he went with his bullock cart loaded with sacks of rice passing through the village road. The song was basically designed to tease the young girls he met on the road.

There were several such songs. But as Ashok Bora said, "We know very little about some songs. Though we heard the songs once or twice during childhood days, we could not learn those how to sing."

#### Issues Related To Preservation of These Melodious Songs

Earlier there was no bridge to connect the both banks of river Bhogdoi in Monai Maji. A boatman (Maji) used to help the commuters with his boat to cross the river taking a certain amount of fee. His name was Monai. After his name the place received its name Monai Maji. Now there is no boatman or Maji to help people to cross the river. Several concrete bridges are there to connect both banks of the river. The old picture found in the ballads has undergone a sea change in modern times.

Mechanization in cultivation reduced the number of farmers working in the field. It reduced the time involved in the process of cultivation. So, a huge number of people have switched their profession from cultivation to other trades. In such a situation few people remain to hold the age old tradition of performing songs in the style of the early times which are mostly related to nature and cultivation.

Moreover, the dances with those songs were performed by the male folk only. The dance of the girls along with the men was not practiced in those days. But during the changing time, the Bihu Huchari came out from the precincts of the houses to the public stage. In the month of Bohag (April), the fairs (Bihu Mela) have been organized in the state. In those Bihu Melas, the women dancers are the main attraction. But the styles of dancing with the songs of Monai Maji are difficult for the girls for which the

Huchari performers are reluctant to adopt those songs readily.

Late Bogai Bora Borbayan accused that the tape recorders and cassettes were responsible for degeneration of the Assamese traditional songs like Bihu Naam and ballads. That means, due to the easy access to media, one can record songs or videos. But those who do so are not careful enough to maintain quality for which the original songs become distorted. It simply annoys the people and generates distaste for those songs.

It may be mentioned here that some of the words used in those songs have become obsolete now a days. For that reason, the new generations, who have studied in English Medium Schools, find those difficult to understand. The archaic words have alienated the songs from the people of new generation.

#### Conclusion

From the above Analysis it may be concluded that there are two types of oral ballads in Monai Maji area. One is folk ballad, another is literary ballad. Folk ballads are either historical or some anecdotes. But on the other hand literary ballads which are composed by a person are basically based on imaginary characters or incidents.

#### Suggestion

No systematic attempts have been done by anyone to preserve the oral ballads of Monai Maji till date. As the lifestyle of the people of Monai Maji has been changed due to the modern day technology, the oral ballads, sung in different situations have almost lost their relevance. A huge number of earlier oral ballads of the region had lost along with the death of the late practitioners. So, it is the need of the hour to preserve the remaining ballads of Monai Maji.

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