

# “A Very Naughty Place!” The Attraction to the Frightening Other Reflected in Narratives about Assam

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## Abstract

According to many Hindus, travelling to Assam, in North-East India, is dangerous. The Assamese woman might trap the male outsider, using her magic to transform him into a goat and turn him back into a man at night. Unable to leave, the man would become the sex-toy of his mistress. Fear is the emotion many Hindus once felt (and still feel) about remote Assam. Still, many set off on a pilgrimage to Assam's most famous temple – the Kāmākhyā temple in Guwahati. In many narratives, Assam, though frightening, is the source of occult knowledge for those who are prepared to cope with such awe-inspiring power. Through the analysis of several narratives about Assam, the paper advances a reflection on our notion of fear and shows how the latter is often tightly connected to attraction. The narratives are taken from several field visits by the author and her research focusing on the Kāmākhyā temple, as well as common stories from Hindu folklore. Together they explore a frightening picture of Assam. To make sense of these data, the paper evokes the notion of *śakti* and analyses the way Assamese women are depicted in the narratives under consideration.

**Keywords:** Assam, Kāmākhyā temple, *śakti*, Tantrism, construction of otherness, fear

## Introduction

In 2012, while I was conducting fieldwork research at the Kāmākhyā temple in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, my mother travelled from Delhi in order to spend some time with me. After queuing outside Delhi domestic airport, her turn came to gain admission into the departures hall. She gave her ticket to the policeman at the entrance so he could check it:

Policeman (P): Madam, you are going to Assam?

My mother (M): Yes.

P: Why are you going to Assam?

M: Because my daughter is there.

P: Madam, you're going to a very naughty place!

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The policeman's reaction exemplifies the general North-Indian understanding of Assam. As this paper will show, Assam is often considered to be beyond accepted morality – probably what the policeman meant by “naughty”<sup>1</sup> – odd and even dangerous. The easternmost corner of India inspires fear. As Boscoboinik highlights, fear is not only an individually felt emotion, but is also shaped by the socio-cultural context in which the individual resides<sup>2</sup> (Boscoboinik 2009). Things and situations that are feared in one society are not considered risky in another one. The perception of danger and risk can be (and often is) manipulated so that what is feared in a particular moment is considered safe later on.

The choice of risks to be taken into consideration reveals the beliefs of a society concerning values, social institutions, nature and morally acceptable behaviour. Thus, risks are exaggerated or minimised following social, cultural or economic criteria. Certain objects, elements or phenomena, considered as inoffensive at a certain point in time, can be almost demonised at another moment. Though well known at the time, the harmfulness of cigarettes was not as much an issue in the past as it is today. Today attempts are being made to ban cigarettes everywhere, because they are no longer a danger merely for the individual, but for the community as well. After a lengthy moratorium, nuclear energy is again in demand, as concerns about oil increase. Today the risks it involves are again being minimised.<sup>3</sup> (Boscoboinik 2009: 123–124, translated from French by author)

Boscoboinik's reflection on fear and risk is inspired by the now classic work of Mary Douglas. According to Douglas, “[risk] is not a thing, it is a way of thinking, and a highly artificial contrivance at that” (Douglas 1992: 46). To this it should be added that risk and danger are often perceived through a religious lens, as the following episode from my fieldwork reveals.

As Indianists know well, the cobra is connected to the god Śiva. One day, while I was conducting fieldwork research at the Kāmākhyā temple in 2011, a priest told me how he had (allegedly) met with a cobra. According to his story, he entered the sanctum of a Śiva temple – situated near the Kāmākhyā temple – at dawn, in order to conduct the morning service of the god. Around the stone *liṅga* – the god's phallic emblem – was a huge cobra. While recalling the

1 “Naughty” generally has a playful connotation. It is impossible to know what exactly the policeman meant by “naughty” (the conversation between them was very brief). He may have had in mind images of licentious women or of wicked magicians. What is relevant is that the policeman was surprised to meet a Western woman heading alone to Assam and that he actually warned her about the nature of her destination.

2 For a survey of social constructionism – the trend that studies the socio-cultural pertinence of emotions – see, among others, Lynch 1990.

3 The original text: “Le choix des risques à prendre en considération reflète les croyances d'une société concernant les valeurs, les institutions sociales, la nature et le comportement moral. Les risques sont ainsi exagérés ou minimisés en fonction de critères sociaux, culturels, voire économiques. Certains objets, éléments ou phénomènes, considérés inoffensifs à un certain moment, peuvent être quasiment diabolisés à un autre moment. La nocivité de la cigarette, bien que connue, n'était pas prise en compte dans le passé comme aujourd'hui, où l'on cherche à la bannir partout car elle est devenue un danger non plus seulement individuel, mais public. L'énergie nucléaire, après un moratoire de plusieurs années, est à nouveau sollicitée et saluée, au moment de la crise du pétrole. Les risques qu'elle comporte sont aujourd'hui à nouveau minimisés”.

episode, the priest expressed mainly awe. As far as I can understand, the presence of the cobra confirmed the presence of the god in the temple sanctum. By this, I do not mean that cobras are not feared at all by Kāmākhyā temple priests. The latter, and the Assamese people in general, do fear cobras. The myth and cult of Manasā – the vengeful goddess of cobras and Śiva’s daughter – are illuminating in this regard (for the annual worship of Manasā at the Kāmākhyā temple see Majo Garigliano 2015: Chapter 1). The point I want to make is that, in the Hindu worldview, the undeniable danger inherent in cobras becomes part of the divine persona. Fear mixes with awe and devotion.

Fear is moulded by religious and cultural models, by the social milieu in which one lives; it is stimulated or inhibited by political calculations and propaganda, etc. With these premises let us now turn our attention to the content of this paper. At the outset, I will concentrate on the Kāmākhyā temple, not only because it is where I conducted the largest part of my fieldwork research,<sup>4</sup> but also because the temple appears in several of the accounts reported in this paper.<sup>5</sup> The following pages bring together a wide range of narratives in which Assam appears as mysterious and dangerous. I will employ Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances in order to explore the multiple connections among the data I collected in the field, at the Kāmākhyā temple and in North India (Wittgenstein 2001: 27–31). In addition, I will quote accounts about Assam reported by other scholars. In an intriguing paper, Kar reports a number of narratives in which Assam is described as a mysterious land of seductive women capable of trapping men with their magic (Kar 2008). As will be shown, the otherness of Assam is often in relation to the highly ambiguous nature attributed to feminine sexuality in Hindu thought. The narratives about fear presented in this paper can be better understood by analysing them in light of the double-edged notion of *śakti*, the feminine energy that is both creative and destructive.

The paper’s second part explores further narratives in which Assam appears as the ultimate source of occult knowledge, for those who are prepared to cope with such awe-inspiring energy. Through the analysis of different accounts of Assam, this paper aims to develop our understanding of fear – that what is feared is also attractive: “The fear of the unknown involves curiosity

4 This paper is based on my long dedication to the study of the Kāmākhyā temple and Assamese culture. I visited Assam for the first time in 2006 during my M.A. studies. The first consistent period of fieldwork research lasted two months (November 2008–January 2009). Between 2011 and 2013, as part of my PhD, I carried out several periods of fieldwork research, in total fifteen months. During the same period, I travelled to North India (New Delhi and Rajasthan). I went back to the Kāmākhyā temple in 2018 for one month. While in the field, I always resided near the temple. This privileged position allowed me to form significant ties with both priests and pilgrims. Since the majority of priests do not speak English, I have been studying Assamese as an autodidact since 2008. My knowledge of Hindi helped me communicate with Hindi-speaking pilgrims.

5 The reader may be surprised to see that temple priests are not quoted in this paper. During my fieldwork, I conducted interviews with the priests, but never discussed the prejudices about Assam with them, to avoid hurting their feelings.

and the spirit of discovery”<sup>6</sup> (Boscoboinik 2016: 123). I will then investigate the elements that possibly contribute to constructing the ambiguous frightening/enticing image of Assam.

Before proceeding to the core of this paper, I want to clarify that I do not support the idea that Assam is strange or unfathomable. Assam is not “a very naughty place” at all. It is now more than a decade since I first visited the enchanting Brahmaputra valley. During my travels in Assam, people of different social and economic backgrounds welcomed me wholeheartedly. The study of Assam and the Kāmākhyā temple has immensely enriched my life.

## The Kāmākhyā temple

The Kāmākhyā temple<sup>7</sup> lies on the Nilachal (*nīlācala*, “the Blue Hill”), within the town of Guwahati, the gateway to North-East India. The mighty river Brahmaputra runs along the northern slope of the verdant hill. The earlier part of the temple dates back to the 16th century, but it was destroyed and rebuilt in the course of history.<sup>8</sup> The goddess Kāmākhyā is not the only deity inhabiting the hill, whose natural beauty strikes the visitor – notwithstanding rampant pollution. The hill hosts some thirty temples, dedicated to Hindu gods and goddesses, and innumerable small shrines: divine presence on the hill is multifaceted and vibrant. Around the Kāmākhyā temple are the houses of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin functionaries of the temple, as well as guest-houses and restaurants for pilgrims.

The goddess Kāmākhyā is considered by her innumerable devotees to be extremely powerful. Pilgrims from different parts of South Asia flock to her temple to pay homage to her. In the temple sanctum, a subterranean cave, is a spring. From a natural rock, furrowed by a long slit, water flows spontaneously. The spring is understood to be the *yoni* (vagina) of the goddess Satī, consort of the god Śiva. After Satī’s death, her body was dismembered into fif-

6 The original text: “El miedo a lo desconocido implica curiosidad y espíritu de descubrimiento” (translated from Catalanian by author).

7 Literature about the Kāmākhyā temple includes: Kakati 1948; Goswami 1998; Urban 2001 and 2008; Mishra 2004; Arrago-Boruah 2015, Majo Garigliano 2015; and Rosati 2016.

8 The temple history is puzzling, to say the least. In the first half of the 16th century, Koch-Bihar king Visva Singha conquered Lower Assam and built a temple for the goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal. And yet, the Kālikāpurāṇa – composed between the 7th and the 11th century – talks extensively about the goddess Kāmākhyā and affirms that the Nilachal is the place where Satī’s *yoni* fell. Urban advances the hypothesis that the Kālikāpurāṇa was composed under one of the Pāla kings (10th–12th century), in order to bring together “both traditional Brahminical rites drawn from the Vedas and indigenous practices drawn from the hill people of Assam” (Urban 2001: 791–792). His argument is fascinating, but not historically proven. To sum up, the first evidence about the temple history dates back to the 16th century, but the study of the Kālikāpurāṇa suggests that, if not a temple, the cult of goddess Kāmākhyā had already long been in existence at the site. The sources I employed for this rapid sketch of the temple’s history are: Gait 2008, Baruah 2012 and Acharyya (2003, 2007). For a more detailed account of the temple’s history see Majo Garigliano 2015: Chapter 1.

ty-one parts that fell to earth in different regions of South Asia. Fifty-one *pīṭhas* (seats) of the *devī* (goddess, par excellence) stand on the sites where the parts of Satī's body fell.<sup>9</sup>

The passionate worship the spring receives is only understandable in light of the notion of *śakti* – the (divine) feminine energy. It is an awesome, overwhelming, frightening power. Intrinsicly ambivalent, *śakti* is responsible for the creation of life in all its forms, but is also capable of destroying life. The destructive side of *śakti* is often connected to the image of the warrior goddess and to kingly power (see, among others, Skoda 2015). Kāmākhyā is understood to be a form of *śakti* or Mahādevī: she is one with Parvatī, Kālī, Durgā, etc. As a young Brahmin put it: “Kāmākhyā is a nickname”. At the same time, priests and pilgrims understand the goddess Kāmākhyā, the particular form of Mahādevī set on the Nilachal, to be extremely powerful. That the temple enshrines no less than Satī's *yoni*, the organ of sexuality and generation, is the reason for its renown. I have been told that visiting the Kāmākhyā temple is equal to visiting all other *pīṭhas* combined. The priests affirm that if Satī's *yoni* had not fallen on the Nilachal, the *sṛṣṭi* (“emission”, “creation” of the Universe) would not have taken place. “Kāmākhyā is a vortex of power,” said an Assamese Vedic astrologer I met in 2018. He repeatedly stressed the overwhelming, terrific power of the goddess. “Not everyone can handle it,” he concluded.

The number of pilgrims visiting the Kāmākhyā temple is rising day by day, stimulating the emergence of a flourishing pilgrimage industry. The temple priests are becoming more and more skilful in providing pilgrims with various facilities. Hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops, whose number are increasing dramatically, are transforming the landscape of the temple-town (see Majo Garigliano 2018a).

## Dangerous females

In 2012 I met a group of Bihari pilgrims at the Kāmākhyā temple. One day, we started chatting and, as usual, the conversation soon turned to religious matters. One of the pilgrims was a Brahmin in his early forties. I will call him Pranay.<sup>10</sup> I asked him when he had first come to the temple (interview in July 2012, Guwahati, my translation from Hindi<sup>11</sup>):

9 For a comprehensive analysis of the numerous texts containing variants of Satī's myth see Sircar 1948. As Sircar highlights, the myth is composed of different layers. Moreover, although the list of the fifty-one *pīṭhas* is widespread in contemporary India, the number of pieces into which Satī's body was dismembered varies from text to text. For a summary of Sircar's arguments see Majo Garigliano 2015: Chapter 1.

10 I use pseudonyms for all the people who appear in this paper.

11 Some of the dialogues and monologue that appear in this paper happened in Hindi or in Assamese. When this is the case, I explicitly declare that I have translated the text. If not otherwise stated, the conversations happened in English.

Pranay (P): I first came here six years back.

Author (IMG): How did you decide to come?

P: I had known about the Kāmākhyā temple for a long time and had heard scary things. I had heard that a man who comes here risks being transformed into a goat by the women who live here.

Others: ... into a parrot, or into an elephant ...

P: Then during the night they'll change him back into a man. Women here can trap men [using the English verb "to trap"]. They won't let them go. To make it short, I knew that anyone who goes [to Assam] cannot be sure that he will come back home.

The other people in the group kept nodding and saying repeatedly that they used to hear similar things.

IMG: Then how did you decide to come here? Weren't you afraid?

P: I was afraid (*dar lagtā thā*).

IMG: So ...

P: After my son was born [pointing out his seven-year-old child, sitting in the group] I came here for the first time. I said to myself, even if I don't come back, my son is there. I have passed on my name. I can go.

The words of Pranay resonate with the affirmations of a group of female pilgrims from Bombay I met in 2011 at the Kāmākhyā temple: Puja, an energetic middle-aged businesswoman, Pallavi, her niece in her twenties, and the latter's friend of a similar age. After completing the rituals, they were relaxing in the room where their priest had accommodated them. I joined them and we started chatting about different things. Puja told me about "black magic". She pointed out a silent man in his fifties who is always to be seen in the temple. According to her, that man was versed in black magic. At that, Pallavi started talking, in turn. She said that when an Assamese woman wants a man for herself, she places a *supari*, a betel nut, in her vagina during her periods. Then, she gives that *supari* to the man she loves. Eating it, he will fall in love with her.

In both Pranay and Pallavi's accounts, Assamese women are able to subjugate men for their pleasure.<sup>12</sup> Their power involves magic and sexuality. Similarly, Hindu imaginary is replete with figures of (divine, semi-divine, human and demonic) females who are powerful and intimidating. Sexuality is intrinsic

12 The impressively wide variety of forms this idea takes intrigues the anthropologist. Kar (2008) surveys several distinct stories relating to the "erotic excess and magical prowess of the Assamese women" and says that these stories "were commonplace in British India, particularly in British Bengal" (ibid.: 1). He mentions that the colloquial expression "'Kāmākhyā's sheep' continues in the daily conversation to convey the image of an enchanted, docile male who is entirely under the control of a seductive woman" (ibid.). Some among the several sources quoted by Kar, in which Assamese women appear as sensual, threatening and versed in magic are: the twentieth-century Bengali novelists (ibid.), "the seventeenth-century *janam-sākhīs* or biographies of Nānāk, the first guru of Sikhism" (ibid.: 4–5), the so-called "fake tantras", spread in Kolkata in the nineteenth century, along with "the interdependent market of aphrodisiacs and amulets" (ibid.: 16). According to Kar, nineteenth century Assamese and Bengali *savants* attributed Assam's ambiguous fame to lack of communication with North India. They dismissed the recurring frightening narratives about Assam as "mere legends" (ibid.: 18–19). More than a century later, as my fieldwork demonstrates, the same image of Assam remains current.

sically connected with their frightening energy. Erotic desire irremediably pushes these single females to aggressive action, to seize (and annihilate) males.

In *Servants of the Goddess*, Fuller affirms that in Tamil folklore “[g]oddesses [...] are often ritually presented alone, without husbands, and this is especially true of village goddesses, who are normally assumed to be fiercer, more capricious and potentially more vengeful than the wifely goddesses. In ritual, a connection is postulated between a goddess’s regular sexual relations with her husband and her relative pacificity” (Fuller 1984: 9). This is indeed a very widespread notion that permeates Hindu thought (see, among others, Tapper 1979: 14–15 and White 2003). In *Oh Terrifying Mother* – a title that is revealing of the ambiguous nature of *śakti* – Caldwell explains that furious Kālī is placated either by sexual intercourse with Śiva or by the sight of the baby gods, Gaṇeśa and Nandikeśan (Caldwell 1999: 169 – 170). “Milk begins to flow in Kālī’s breasts and her mood is suddenly transformed from one of anger to one of peaceful motherly love as she picks up and suckles the two male babies” (ibid.). In Kerala folklore, “[v]irgins are considered in folk conceptions to be overheated due to lack of access to sexual satisfaction, posing a danger to males” (ibid.: 162). Virgin girls are associated with *yakṣīs*, “unhappy, seductive and bloodthirsty female tree spirits out to entice and destroy virtuous men” (ibid.: 163). According to Tapper, who writes about Telugu-speaking Gavara farmers of Andhra-Pradesh, in the festival in honour of Baṇḍamma, “the goddess is repeatedly associated with uncontained sexuality and danger” (Tapper 1979: 20). Tapper sees in the goddess’s threatening energy a parallel of women’s *āśa*. *Āśa* is translated as “passion, desire, lust, emotion, love, hope, and worldly attachment” (ibid.: 6). Women have more *āśa* than men – and that is why they need to be controlled by men.

More examples could be given, but the point is already clear enough. Goddesses, women and other female beings exist in a continuum. They all have *śakti*, an excessive power that enables them to give life but is also potentially destructive. Sexually satiated or calmed by maternal feelings, the female is pacific. In contrast, the single, sexually agitated female is threatening. Assamese women, as they appear in these narratives, have a lot in common with Mohinī, the nymph who, in Tamil folklore, continuously makes love to young men, thus draining their virility and energy<sup>13</sup> (Racine 1999). Exhausted, her victims become impotent, weak, apathetic. They give up their studies and work. Similarly, the man who is trapped by an Assamese woman becomes her sex-toy at night, while living as a goat during the day. The transformation

13 According to the story, Mohinī was a woman; she was seduced, abused and abandoned by a king. Desperate, she committed suicide and became a nymph. Frustrated by her premature death, obsessed by the erotic desire she could not satisfy during her life, Mohinī comes back to earth to capture young men in her voluptuous, yet destructive embrace (see Racine 1999).

theme describes a man who is no longer a man in his own right. Both the victims of Mohinī and the prey of Assamese women lose their agency and social role.

Assamese women are a threat to the layman, as much as for the ascetic. In 2012 I met a man in his thirties who belonged to the *nāth sampradāyā* (the Nath sect<sup>14</sup>). Originally from Madhya Pradesh, he was on his second visit to the Kāmākhya temple. One evening we were chatting in the temple campus; I mentioned what Pranay, the Bihari Brahmin, had told me that day. My words instantly drove the Nath to give me his version of the tale: “I will tell you how it went.” In a vigorous, uninterrupted flow of words he told me the following story (interview in July 2012, Guwahati, my translation from Hindi):

In Assam there were only women; Rānī Maināki was the ruler there. When the women became pregnant [with a male foetus], they used to pray to Hanumān, who, with his scream, would help them to abort. In this way only female babies were saved. But they had no *mokṣā* [release from the cycle of rebirth] and the place was full of *bhūtas* [ghosts]. One day Rānī Maināki prayed to Hanumān to find her a man who would live with her permanently. After some time Matsyendranāth [the guru of Gorakhnāth, the founder of the Nath *sampradāyā*] happened to arrive in Assam and Hanumān asked him to live with Rānī Maināki. At this Matsyendranāth objected that he was a *sādhu*. Hanumān insisted. In the end Matsyendranāth settled down with the queen, became king and fathered children.

After some time rumours reached Gorakhnāth. People started to blame him, “Your guru is married, he has children!” One day Gorakhnāth thought that was enough: he would go to Assam in order to rescue his guru. When he was just approaching Assam, he protected himself with some mantras [...]. Informed of Gorakhnāth’s arrival, Rānī Maināki sent girls of exquisite beauty to seduce him. But Gorakhnāth resisted them. He turned all the women, including the queen, into statues [at this the Nath pointed at the stone bas-reliefs embedded in the Kāmākhya temple’s outer wall]. In this way they all reached *mokṣā*. Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth left Assam and founded many temples throughout India.

With the same suddenness with which he had started to talk, the Nath stopped. He remained silent for a few seconds and then left.

Bouillier (2008: 90) and Kar (2008: 4–5) report various versions of “the reign of women” narrative. As Kar rightly points out, “it is not the whimper of anxiety but the laughter of mastery that organizes these narratives” (ibid.). The ascetic eventually subjugates the sensual Assamese women, taming their feminine, threatening element. The Nath’s narrative has to do with the complex relation that Hindu thought poses between asceticism and married life, between celibacy and eroticism. The married man disperses his semen to procreate and then has to attend to his family’s needs. The ascetic retains his precious semen, because with the semen he would lose his *tapas* (“heat”, ascetic power accumulated through spiritual practices) as well.<sup>15</sup>

14 On the Nath sect see Bouillier 2008.

15 On the ascetic’s austerities see, among others, Tarabout 2005: 146–150. According to van der Veer: “To keep one’s semen is to keep one’s power. Celibacy is therefore a means of acquiring religious, magical pow-

In the following narrative from my fieldwork, the magic aspect of Assamese women's power is played down and more practical issues are brought to the fore. In 2012 I met a Bengali pilgrim who had been living in Assam for eleven years. He and his family had been visiting the temple complex since their arrival in Assam (interview in June 2012, Guwahati):

There are three "Ws" which attract people here: Weather, Wine and Women. The weather is much too good here; people love this place, they love the greenery. This is the magic. Wine is cheap, easy available. If you go Kolkata, it's much more tough to find foreign liquor. Women here are hot, hotter than anywhere else. If a man has some extra money and comes here, he'll find himself in trouble. She [the Assamese woman] will try to keep him with her. With or without magic. People become addicted to staying here, they try to forget their past, they start a new life here. So this is the magic.

As these words show, it is not easy to disentangle magic treats from more material ones. Assamese women are sometimes portrayed as single women willing to keep male strangers with them for their pleasure; in this narrative, they seem to be interested in the material advantages that a relationship with a man from elsewhere can bring as well. Women are not the only menacing presence in Assam, though. The Bengali pilgrim went on:

Beforehand *sādhu-māhātma* [ascetics] used to come here in number for their studies [meditative practices]. People used to think that the *sādhus* here would transform them into statues. People were scared.

## Venturing into the unknown

Notwithstanding the frightening stories he had heard, Pranay, the Brahmin from Bihar, decided to travel to Assam to visit the Kāmākhyā temple. His desire to worship the goddess overcame his fears. We need to believe that the other is odd, bizarre or immoral in order to posit the normality and morality of what is familiar. When the odd is relegated to somewhere else, we can comfortably live where we are.<sup>16</sup> And yet, the incomprehensible, the bizarre arouses our curiosity, it attracts us and pushes us to peek through the keyhole of our door.

Assamese women, often depicted as potent magicians, are sometimes portrayed as having occult knowledge. The following narrative, quoted by Kar, was collected by a 19th century Christian missionary, P. O. Bodding who worked with the Santals of Chotanagpur in Eastern India. Under British rule, the Santals were forced to migrate to Assam to work in the tea gardens.

er as is clearly illustrated by many myths relating to the power of a saint's asceticism, which may even threaten the world order. A recurring theme is that of a sage cursing a king with the result that rain does not fall. The only way to end such a drought is to send a prostitute, so that the saint may lose his semen and therefore his curse its power" (van der Veer 1988: 74).

16 As Crapanzano pointed out, "the irreality of the imaginary impresses the real on reality and the real of reality compels the irreality of the imaginary" (Crapanzano 2004: 15).

The [Kāmru] country<sup>17</sup> is very rich and fertile, and there are only women living there, or else the women predominate, and no one is able to go there and stay. Another report is that there are men also, but they are not liked by the women (definite reasons that cannot be recorded are given). Once a Santal had gone there and was at once caught by a woman. He told that he had come to learn their “science”, and was kept for five years by the Kāmru woman who during daytime had him covered by a *dixmi*, a large bamboo basket, and instructed him during the night. At last he got his *sid* [“science”]; the woman turned him into a *kyte* [sic] and he flew into his own country. (Kar 2008: 6, square brackets were added by Kar)

As in earlier narratives, the Assamese woman transforms the man into something else, but this time to help him leave her, not to retain him. The night/day opposition we saw in some of the earlier narratives is present here too: interaction between the Assamese woman and the stranger man happens at night. Unlike earlier narratives, though, this woman does not exploit the man (economically or sexually). On the contrary, she gives him something: her occult knowledge.

Power resides in danger, in what is mysterious, hazardous and yet attractive. Within the limitations of what is safe and known, one does not gain any esoteric knowledge. According to Torella:

A basic classification is between what belongs to “our” world, the *hortus conclusus* in which we can feel relatively safe, and the rest, the immense extraneous world that encircles and potentially menaces our little world on all sides. Broadly speaking, the difficult task that all societies have to confront with is to defend their own little world from the assault of the immense universe, but without negating it: life itself needs the contribution of, or the dialogue with, the obscure world of power just outside the boundaries. (Torella 2015: 6)

Mollex dedicates a very rich M.A. thesis to the *vaidyas*, therapists of the Chakma community of Bangladesh (Mollex 2010). According to her, the *vaidyas*’ therapeutic methodology combines the knowledge and use of medicinal plants and animal and mineral substances with activities that belong to the sphere of ritual (ibid.: 5). As we will shortly see, “Kamrup Kamakhya”<sup>18</sup> appears in the *vaidyas*’ discourses as a legitimating source of knowledge (ibid.: 19, note 29). Mollex describes the *tumro khel*, public contests in which *vaidyas* confront each other. Two *vaidyas* sit in front of each other and cast spells on one another:

17 Kāmru or Kāmarūpa are ancient names of Assam. These names have to do with a local adaptation of the well-known myth in which Śiva burns Kāma, the god of desire, to ashes. Later on, Śiva brings Kāma back to life. But, in the Assamese adaptation of the myth, Kāma, emerging from his ashes, is ugly. Desperate, Kāma and his wife pray to Śiva. The latter eventually restores Kāma’s beauty on the condition that he will build a temple for goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal. Assam, the place where Kāma regained his form (*rūpa*) came to be known as “Kāmarūpa” (see also Majo Garigliano 2015: 31–32). This version of the pan-Indian myth clearly connects Assam with the god of desire. It is interesting to note how many elements pertaining to the sphere of sexuality contribute to create the image of Assam. See the next section for a consideration of the name “Kāmākhyā”.

18 On the term “Kāmarūpa” see note 17.

Tumro Khel are power jousts. There is a place where, according to Priyajon Vaidya, *vaidyas* and other persons such as ascetics, sanyasin and fakirs actually confront one another at their own risk. This place is Kamrup Kamakhya, in the Indian State of Assam. The majority of *vaidyas* know about Kamrup Kamakhya, without necessarily having been there. This locality seems to have a prominent place in the imaginary of many of them.<sup>19</sup> (ibid.: 33, translation from French by IMG)

As in the story of the Assamese woman who instructs the Santal man, here, too, Assam is the abode of people who have some special spiritual or magic expertise.

## Why Assam?

Why does Assam have such an ambiguous reputation?<sup>20</sup> Why is the image of the sensual, threatening Assamese woman so persistent in Hindu folklore?<sup>21</sup> Providing a definitive answer to such a question is beyond the scope of the present paper. However, some considerations can be tentatively advanced. The first element that came to mind when I approached these wide issues is the Kāmākhyā temple itself, the most famous temple in all of North-East India. Priests, pilgrims and scriptures largely agree in affirming that the *yoni* of goddess Satī is enshrined in the temple sanctum. And indeed it is on this basis that

19 The original text: “Tumro Khel sont des joutes de pouvoirs. Il est un endroit où selon Priyajon Vaidya, des vaidya ou autres personnes telles que des renoncants, sanyasin et fakir s'affrontements réellement à leurs propres risques, ce serait Kamrup Kamakhya dans l'état indien d'Assam. La plupart des vaidya connaissent Kamrup Kamakhya sans y être forcément allés. Cette localité semble habiter l'imaginaire de beaucoup”.

20 The Assamese I talked to never said that other Hindus held harsh prejudices concerning Assam. Instead, they report similar prejudices regarding a specific place in Assam, named Mayang. Mayang is famed for (black) magic (see Valk 2015). From the time of my first fieldwork, I heard about Mayang from words gleaned here and there from conversations. I soon started to feel that there was scope for investigation. When I said to a Kāmākhyā temple priest, who is a good friend of mine, that I wanted to go to Mayang, he opened his eyes wide and stared at me silently. I asked for some explanation. As I was soon to realise, for him, Mayang is the land of every sort of sorcery and witchcraft; the most absurd practices one can imagine happen there. The wife of another priest intervened in the conversation, alarmed. She said that in Mayang, when women have no more wood to fuel the fire for cooking, they will put a leg into the fire, without getting injured. Kāmākhyā temple priests are not the only ones to fear and blame Mayang. Philippe Ramirez, who works on North-East India, was warned in the same way by his interlocutors (personal communication): “In Assam you can go anywhere; there is no problem. But never go to Mayang!” An Assamese friend of mine from Tezpur (central Assam) once told me that she had heard strange stories about Mayang. She is now in her thirties and recalls that in her childhood her uncle used to say that those who marry people from Mayang will suffer on the day of the marriage. The entire party will not be able to digest the food offered in the feast and will have to endure severe stomach pain for the entire day. It is tempting to assume that Mayang serves as the scapegoat for Assamese people. This technique sounds to me like a subliminal message: “The naughty place you heard about is not the whole of Assam, it is this specific place I'm telling you about.”

21 Like Assam, several other regions in South Asia have an ambiguous reputation in the eyes of many Hindus. For instance, Sax (1998: 295) reports that villagers in the Eastern district of Garhwal (Uttarkhand) warned him not to travel to the Tons basin area: there local women not only used to enslave men “for their pleasure”, but even sacrifice them to the supernatural beings they worshipped. It should be noted incidentally that the figure of sexually unrestrained women, unmarried or with husbands who are somehow absent from the story, who subjugate men, exploit them sexually or kill them, are to be found outside South Asia too.

priests and pilgrims affirm the pre-eminence of the Kāmākhyā temple over the other *śākta pīṭhas*. This belief clearly links the Kāmākhyā temple with feminine sexuality. The name “Kāmākhyā” (*kāma* or *kāmā* + *ākhyā*) can be translated as “she who is called desire”. Before proceeding, it needs to be pointed out that priests and pilgrims tend to portray the goddess Kāmākhyā as a loving divine mother, and not as a dangerous, sexually voracious goddess. The Kālikāpurāṇa openly refers to the goddess’s sexuality:

Because the goddess has come to the great mountain Nilakūta to have sexual enjoyment with me [Śiva], she is called Kāmākhyā, who resides there in secret.<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, female desire, the sexual appeal exercised by women on men and the loss of semen are problematic in the Hindu worldview. Padoux clearly describes the two sides of the woman’s image:

The woman has power. The man can obtain that power from her, but always at the risk of losing it, as he loses his semen. Thus, the woman is thought of in ambiguous terms: source of power, mother, protective, she is also dangerous – undermining and fearsome.<sup>23</sup> (Padoux 2010: 147, translation from French by IMG)

Extolling the role of the mother in the family, a male Assamese friend of mine argued (interview in April 2013, Guwahati, my translation from Assamese):

Who is the father? No one. The father will see a beautiful girl passing by and will run after her. But the mother will always be there for her children. She’ll take care of them. “Did you eat?” she’ll ask, “are you all right?”

These words clarify well the supposed vulnerability of men to female sexual appeal. They also clarify the opposition between the two images of the female: the caring mother and the threatening single woman. In the narratives included in this paper, the threatening side of feminine sexuality is projected onto Assamese women.

The Kāmākhyā temple is widely considered to be a tantric temple. Tantrism and the study of it are too complex to be approached here.<sup>24</sup> To put it simply, Tantrism is a trend (or, rather, a set of trends) that developed within Hinduism over the centuries. Recurring practices and ideas – such as secrecy, the pro-

22 This translation is provided by Urban (2008: 1). According to him the relevant passage is contained at the very beginning of Kālikāpurāṇa, chapter 62.

23 The original text: “Elle [la femme] détient la puissance que l’homme peut puiser en elle, mais qu’il risque toujours de perdre en laissant échapper sa semence. D’où une approche ambiguë de la femme: source de puissance, mère, protectrice, elle est aussi dangereuse – affaiblissant ou redoutable.”

24 Tantrism, the transgressive current of Hinduism, seems to escape any unilateral definition. “Because it is born in the Indian framework and evolved with and in it, the universe of tantric vision and life is difficult to distinguish and to describe,” says Padoux in the Introduction to *Comprendre le Tantrisme* (Padoux 2010: 11, the original text: “[P]arce qu’il est né dans le fonds indien et a évolué avec et en lui au cours de siècles, l’univers de la vision et de la vie tantrique est difficile à cerner et à décrire”, translation by the author). According to Brooks: “[t]he acknowledgement of pervasive Tantric influence in Indian religion has made defining Tantrism and classifying different Hinduisms only more difficult” (Brooks 1992: 405). Again, Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances is, in my opinion, the best way to think about “Tantrism”. I will employ this term for the sake of commodity. By doing so, I do not mean that Tantrism is a homogenous phenomenon, but rather the cluster of several distinct but (somehow) related traditions.

grammatical use of impure substances and antonymic behaviour, the merging of the worshipper and the deity – are to be found in religious persuasions that are far from each other in time and space, but no single element is common to all these traditions.<sup>25</sup> My focus here will not be on Tantrism itself, but rather on the way Tantrism is perceived and associated with Assam. What is relevant for the present purpose is that Tantrism is often considered to be a set of incomprehensible, strange, indecent practices.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the Kāmākhyā temple is associated with Tantrism may add to the ambiguous, somewhat obscure image many people have of it and of Assam.<sup>27</sup>

Another element to be kept in mind is constituted by the so-called “tribal” populations inhabiting North-East India. Some of them, like the Khasis and the Garos, transmit names and the property through matrilinearity and are matrilocal.<sup>28</sup> These customs, distorted by hearsay, can contribute to shaping the image of a dominant femininity.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to everything that has been said thus far, a (brief) look at the history of Assam provides some hints about its marginality.<sup>30</sup> The long-lasting rule of the Ahoms is relevant here.<sup>31</sup> In the 1220s, the Ahom prince Sukhapha, originally from Yunnan, conquered the upper Brahmaputra valley. With the passage of time, Sukhapha’s heirs expanded their rule over the entire Brahmaputra valley; in the 16th century they defeated the Koch Bihar kings, who had

25 When it comes to complex realities, sharp-edged definitions rarely work. The positions of two eminent scholars are illustrative in this regard. According to White, sex is Tantrism’s landmark: “sexualized ritual practice is the sole truly distinctive feature of South Asian tantric traditions” (White 2003: 13). By contrast, McDaniel shows how sex was not at all a priority for the Bengali tantric practitioners he encountered. “In West Bengal [...] the real tantric preoccupation was death” (McDaniel 2012: 161). The tantrics Mc Daniel met were engaged in the meditation about death and overcoming it. Thus two great scholars, such as White and McDaniel, disagree about the relevance of sexual intercourse in tantric ritual. The sharply different arguments they advance clearly illustrate how difficult (and probably useless) it is to squeeze Tantrism into a clear-cut definition. As I have shown elsewhere, it is not easy to give an unambiguous definition of Tantrism, even if one takes into consideration the Kāmākhyā temple alone. The temple priests have diverging ideas about who is a tantric and who is not. They do not agree among themselves about the value of the three levels of initiation that can be obtained from the temple gurus. See Majo Garigliano 2018c.

26 For prejudices about Tantrism and tantric practitioners, see, among others, Brooks (1992) and McDaniel (2012). Many Hindus simply associate Tantrism with black magic – typically, people with prejudices do not try to differentiate. Knowing about my research, a Marwari friend of mine from Rajasthan in his early twenties genuinely asked me “Tantrism is black magic, isn’t it?”

27 None of the narrators quoted in this paper openly referred to Tantrism. And yet, their words resonate with some of Tantrism’s recurrent elements, such as the insistence on sexuality and the use of impure and powerful substances like menstrual blood and alcohol.

28 On matrilinearity and matrilocality among the Garos, see Momin (1995). On matrilinearity and matrilocality among the Khasis, see Bhattacharyya (1999: 272–275).

29 Apart from this, the populations of North-East India observe other habits which would sound at least extravagant, if not repellent, to other Hindus: for instance, they eat the meat of various animals (pork, dogs, etc.). To those Hindus who are aware of the head-hunting once practiced among the Nagas, this particular custom must really sound like an aberration. On head-hunting see Kumar (1998: 181–189) and Singh (1995: 35–40).

30 See footnote 8 for the sources I consulted regarding the history of Assam and the Kāmākhyā temple.

31 Very little is known about Assam’s ancient history. Three dynasties ruled Assam between the 5th and the 12th centuries: the Varmans (5th–7th century), the Śālastambhas (7th–10th century) and the Pālas (10th–12th century). We know the kings’ names and little more. The image becomes clearer from the 13th century, when Ahom kings start controlling Assam.

ruled in Lower Assam. The Ahom kings resisted the tentative invasions of Muslim kings from present-day Bangladesh, as well as the Moghul from Delhi. All in all, the Ahoms ruled over Assam for six centuries (13th–16th centuries). Thus Assam was politically isolated from the Gangetic plane for centuries altogether.<sup>32</sup> This fact can (partly) explain the harsh prejudices existing about Assam.

As the Ahoms' strength weakened, Assam came under British rule (1826). Kar explores the way the image of Assam was built by the colonial intelligentsia, engaged in bringing to light "the great Indian tradition" (Kar 2004: 4). In the 19th and 20th centuries, British intellectuals thought that it was their task to extract a reliable topography of India from Sanskrit texts; a solid, unassailable mapping of India was needed in order to study its "true" history and culture. Within this framework Assam received the attention of British intellectuals and, according to Kar, was soon dismissed as "a Mleccha [barbarian] kingdom" and a "frontier zone inhabited mostly by head-hunting savages and the opium-eaters idlers" (ibid.: 7).

Assam was ejected from the authoritative discourse on Indian civilisation. As is easy to imagine, Indian intellectuals engaged in research on Assamese history soon reacted to this posture. Their efforts to win Assam a place in the "ancient Indian civilisation" is impressive. For instance, in 1921 Agarwala, quoted by Kar, affirmed that:

The Aryan civilisation dawned in Assam, the land of the rising sun of India. It was justly called Prag-*jyotish* [Prägjyotiṣa], i.e. the light of the East. This light travelled towards east and west and illuminated Burma and eastern Peninsula and the whole of northern India. (Kar 2004: 19)

Such hyperbolic glorifications of Assam<sup>33</sup> and the reversal of the British intellectuals' paradigm – such that civilization proceeds from Assam to Northern India and not the other way round – betrays the awareness that Assam was indeed considered marginal, in comparison to Northern India.

Since his first visit, Pranay has repeatedly returned to the Kāmākhyā temple. When I met him in 2012, a group of some seven individuals were with him. All were somehow connected to him: his neighbours, the milkman serving the area where he lives, and so on. All these people decided to undertake the pilgrimage because he had gone to the temple and had told them that it was worth doing. Enquiring from other pilgrims, I detected numerous similar dy-

32 Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, agent of the French compagnie, visited Assam between 1755 and 1757, under Ahom rule. At the beginning of his journal he affirms that he had to wait six months on the border before he was admitted into Assam by an order of the king (Deloche 1984: 23–25). According to Deloche – the editor of Chevalier's journal – strangers were prohibited from entering Assam, the *royaume interdit* ("forbidden kingdom", ibid.: 9–11).

33 The echo of Agarwala's ideas spread quickly. One year later, in 1922, Vasu affirmed, again supporting his argument with creative etymologies, that Assamese traders "over four thousands years back, carried the torch of civilisation to Assyria, Babylon, Greece and other ancient countries" (Vasu, quoted by Kar 2004: 22).

namics. Indeed, it seems to me that word-of-mouth is a significant force pushing people to the Kāmākhyā temple.

During my 2011 fieldwork, I went to Jaipur for one week and stayed with some friends.<sup>34</sup> Krishna is now in his forties and belongs to a rich Marwari family, dealing mainly in precious stones and jewels. During my stay, Krishna and his family were going to celebrate the silver anniversary of Krishna's uncle. The day before, the *mehandī* ceremony<sup>35</sup> was held. When I arrived in the hall of the hotel that had been reserved for the purpose, some twenty women dressed in sumptuous saris were there. Some of them had already their hands and feet decorated with henna, while others were waiting for their turn. Five skinny female henna artists were at work. After some time my turn came. While one of them was decorating my hands, I suddenly realized that the henna artist next to me was talking about the Kāmākhyā temple to a Marwari woman, whose hands she was working on (interview in April 2011, Guwahati, my translation from Hindi):

My guru has been there. He said the temple is so powerful! So powerful! After the mother [goddess] has her periods, you may get a piece of that cloth which she used [the woman refers to the Ambuvācī-melā, the annual festival celebrating goddess Kāmākhyā's menstruation, see Majo Garigliano 2015: 194–201]. The priests give only a tiny bit of the cloth [making with her right hand the gesture signifying an extremely small quantity], it's so hard to get it! My guru has a tiny bit of that cloth and gave some to me. I preserve it at home.

The henna applier was talking in a very passionate way and the Marwari woman, listening attentively, was evidently impressed by her words. Although no one in Krishna's family had ever visited the Kāmākhyā temple, this episode demonstrates quite well how word-of-mouth spreads the idea that the goddess Kāmākhyā has tremendous power and that a visit to her temple is worth undertaking.

## Concluding remarks

The narratives reported in this paper are related to one another, but no single element unites all of them. What runs through these accounts is “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing”, to borrow Wittgenstein's words (2001: 27). In many of the narratives included in this paper,

34 Reader has devoted a very rich monography to the Japanese pilgrimage to Shikoku island (Reader 2005). I agree with him when he says that “the study of a pilgrimage should not be carried out only at the specific sites pilgrims visit” (ibid.: 35). When I went to Jaipur in 2012 my initial intent was not to undertake fieldwork, but while I was there I realised I was collecting significant data.

35 On this occasion *mehandī*, or henna – a plant-based dye – is applied to the bride's and her female relatives' hands with very complex designs. Once dried, the henna paste is removed; the designs remain visible on the skin for a few days. The *mehandī* ceremony is usually performed before a wedding takes place. In the case under consideration, it was performed before the anniversary.

Assam is mysterious and dangerous. In some, Assamese women are dangerous. But in the story about the Santal man who goes to Assam, the woman transmits him her secret science. In some narratives, women are absent, and male figures predominate. According to the Bangladeshi vaidya, it is ascetics who face each other in the Kāmākhyā temple. In some stories even the Kāmākhyā temple itself is not mentioned.

All the materials presented here call for a reflection on our notion of fear. A significant difference exists between the stance of those who see Assam exclusively as “a naughty place” and those who think travelling to Assam is a risky enterprise, but worth the risk. For the latter, there is a good reason to go to Assam, be it the Kāmākhyā temple – as for Pranay, Puja and Pallavi; the occult knowledge of Assamese women – in the narrative about the Santal man; or the arduous contests in which ascetics participate – as in the story of the vaidyas from Bangladesh. Danger and the acquisition of knowledge are tightly interconnected. The narratives resonate with tantric thought in that the acquisition of mystical knowledge occurs only when one challenges one’s limits and fears. The tantric initiate, for example, purposely uses impure substances, thus putting him/herself at risk, to evoke divine beings and to partake of their immense power.

Is the image of Assam going to change? I would like to conclude by hinting at Assam’s emerging tourism industry (see Majo Garigliano 2018b). Sensing the economic potential of Assam, politicians at both the national and local level are collaborating to attract domestic and international investment and to prompt the pilgrimage and tourism industry. The nostalgic image of Assam that is being spread is that of a land of pristine natural beauty, rooted in its age-old traditions. Assam thus becomes – as a brochure of the Assam Tourist Development Corporation promotes – a “paradise unexplored”.

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