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## Locating a cultural identity in the use of metaphorical proverbs among the Tai Ahoms of Assam: a study through oral literature

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### Abstract

This article is an attempt to explore the role of Tai Ahom proverbs as a marker of cultural identity in the realm of postmodern society. Using or choosing culturally driven speech in communication is a linguistic behaviour which reflects the character of the people, their worldview, and thus their uniqueness or difference from the ‘other’. In another way, this might be a conscious way of projecting self. This qualitative study on proverbs of Tai Ahom language and culture adopts the methods of ethnography and textual analysis. A cultural hermeneutic model, along with the participant observation method, was used to collect the data. Finally, the Tai Ahom community of Sivasagar district of Assam, India was chosen as the locus for the research. The findings show that the proverbs are deeply woven by the Ahom community’s cultural heritage, history, pride, advice, and satire. Hence, this article provides an insight into Tai Ahoms’ way of living and their worldview. In locating the Tai Ahom’s cultural identity within the homogenised bigger community of ‘Assamese’ or *akhomiya*, this study could help in understanding the differences or uniqueness of the Tai Ahom and thereby the Assamese identity in the present context.

**Keywords:** Proverbs; cultural identity; Tai Ahom; Assamese identity; ethnolinguistics

### Introduction

The Tai Ahom is a group of Shan people living in Assam, India,<sup>1</sup> with Assamese as their mother tongue.<sup>2</sup> Earlier they had their own language and script but later they shifted to Assamese for several political reasons.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is a strong representation of Tai Ahom language and culture in Assamese language and identity formation.<sup>4</sup> Those cultural and linguistic symbols now cannot be isolated or differentiated from Assamese

<sup>1</sup> C. Dohutia, D. Chetia and S. Upadhyaya, ‘Ethno-medical survey on Tai Ahom community of Assam’, *Studies on Ethno-Medicine* 10:4 (2016), pp. 361–471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09735070.2016.11905519>.

<sup>2</sup> P. Gogoi, ‘A methodology of studying Ahom manuscripts: how collocations help us’, *North East Indian Linguistics* 7 (2015), p. 287.

<sup>3</sup> S. Morey, ‘Tai languages of Assam, a progress report—Does anything remain of the Tai Ahom language’, in *Language Endangerment and Language Maintenance*, (eds) D. Bradley and M. Bradley (London, 2002), pp. 98–113.

<sup>4</sup> A. Ara, ‘Portraying the Tai-Ahoms in two Assamese films based on the legend of Joymoti’, in *Mmedia, Indigeneity and Nation in South Asia*, (eds) E. de Makker and M. Schleiter (London, 2019). See also K. Phukan and A. K. Nath, ‘Dictionary writing in Assam: a study through select classical text’, *Language in India* 19:7 (2019), pp. 189–199; B. Kar, ‘“Thoughts has no bone”. Fixing the Assamese language, c. 1800–c. 1930’, *Studies in History* 24: 1 (2008), pp. 27–76.

language and culture; rather, the entirety of 'Assamese' culture and literature has owned this variety of borrowing in its own culture.<sup>5</sup> Hence, some markers are still indexical to Tai Ahom culture, and one of them is the use of proverbs or wise sayings, known as *fokora jujona* in Assamese.

Proverbs are a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> They are philosophical in nature and also metaphorical in meaning, and an integral part of figurative language. As an Igbo (Nigeria) proverb goes: 'proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten'.<sup>7</sup> Characteristically proverbs are context-based. The original sources of proverbs are history, oral tradition, and past events that are significant and wittily contained within one or two sentences. Thus proverbs bring meaning to the life, values, and philosophy of a worldview. Their characteristics are unique as they are rhetorically sound and easily remembered due to their rhythm, rhyme, and (sometimes) colloquial tone. In Assamese, the majority of the proverbs are centred and evolved from an imaginary wise man called a '*daak*',<sup>8</sup> which is why these are called '*daakor boson*' (lit. sayings of a wise man). They are sometimes satirical and humorous, but for the most part, the tone of these proverbs is meaningful to Assamese culture, depicting its behaviour, social values, and depth of life knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Although this article is not going to look at the characteristics or the very proverbiality of the collected data, nevertheless, in principle, the proverbs contain noble values and provide sound advice and deep guidance for a particular ethnic group. For example, Japanese proverbs are often metaphorical in nature,<sup>10</sup> whereas Sasak proverbs consist of noun phrases, verb phrases, and adjective phrases containing metaphorical meaning.<sup>11</sup> As with metaphors, proverbs too are used to understand an abstract thought with the help of something concrete or by referring to familiar objects, expressions, etc. Thus proverbs are metaphorical and could be analysed using the mapping process.<sup>12</sup>

### Cultural identity: a conceptual understanding

Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions. On the one hand, culture and identity are never entirely separable. As Joseph points out that 'it is a defining trait of the concept of culture that whatever beliefs, values, inclinations, tastes, practices, and texts constitute it

<sup>5</sup> D. Crowley, 'The Assam dragon: folklore and folkloristics in India's long-closed Northeast Frontier', *The Journal of American Folklore* 110:435 (1997), pp. 68–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/541586>.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hussein, 'A discursive representation of women in sample proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya', *Research in African Literatures* 40:3 (2009), pp. 96–108. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468139>. See also T. H. Eriksen, 'The epistemological status of the concept of ethnicity', *Anthropological Notebooks* 25:1 (2019), pp. 27–36; W. Mieder, *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb* (New York, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Hussein, 'A discursive representation of women', pp. 96–108.

<sup>8</sup> M. Saikia, 'Oral tradition: a promising area of comparative literature reference to Assamese dakor Bachan', *Shanlax Journals* 6:1 (2017), pp. 48–57. See also P. R. T. Gurdon, *Some Assamese Proverbs* (Shillong, 1896).

<sup>9</sup> D. Sarma, 'Comparative literary history in Assamese: some possibilities', *Space and Culture, India* 4:3 (2017), pp. 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v4i3.245>.

<sup>10</sup> J. Fischer, and T. Yoshida, 'The nature of speech according to Japanese proverbs', *The Journal of American Folklore* 81:319 (1968), pp. 34–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/537436>.

<sup>11</sup> S. T. W. Hani'ah, S. Sarwiji, S. Kundhara and M. Bahtiar, 'Investigating the traditional proverbs and their impact on cultural identity and communication: lesson from the Madurese community', *Journal of Advanced Research in Dynamical and Control Systems* 11:s1–5 (2019), pp. 846–857. <https://www.jardcs.org/abstractphp?id=1212>.

<sup>12</sup> M. Aliakbari and F. Khsravian, 'A corpus analysis of color-term conceptual metaphors in Persian proverbs', *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 70 (2013), pp. 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.0333>.

must also serve an identity function for those who participate in the culture'.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, a cultural identity refers to the common values, epistemologies, and behaviours of a community.<sup>14</sup> In the present context, 'identity' is considered to be one of the most sensitive and widely researched topics. From the perspective of various disciplines, identity is seen in many ways. Small communities, ethnic/tribal communities, and marginal minority communities all seek a postmodern understanding of their individual selves among others. Cultural identity (as an integral element of 'identity') can be better understood by comparing and contrasting linguistic behaviour, through which 'shared knowledge', 'past glory', and 'pride' are expressed.

Ethnolinguistics, a fragile part of sociolinguistics, fosters its spectrum on communities' social/cultural identity and indexes this in a linguistic way. The way of talking, uses/selection of words (i.e. kinship terms), and phrases in communication make a member aware of a particular community, and in another way, speech demonstrates such commonalities within and between community groups. Proverbs, as such, play an important role in the identity construction of a community.<sup>15</sup> They are rooted in the reflections and perceptions about self and 'other' in the history of language, in the memory of people, in religion, in castes, in space, and in a geographical territory. They show their differentiation according to the perception of a community. For instance, an owl is a symbol of wisdom in English literature, whereas it is a symbol of misfortune in Persian literature.<sup>16</sup> Indian culture perceives the owl as a symbol of wealth and money (Lakshmi), and in Assamese culture, the beliefs of the people rest on the different 'hoot' of the owl. Sometimes nativisation (i.e. borrowing) helps in understanding a cultural corollary between two different cultures. Hakacham, for instance, shows the uses of *ramayanic* (based on an Indian epic called *Ramayana*) lexicons or concept (e.g. *Ramu nai Ayodhyau nai*: 'there is no Ram, no Ayodhya') in Assamese wise sayings.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, cultural identity can be described as a subjective sense of belonging to a community and the feelings and attitudes that accompany the sense of membership.<sup>18</sup> Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'; it belongs to the future as much as it belongs to the past.<sup>19</sup> It is a way of showing and projecting core values, such as language, religion, and culture, differently and idiosyncratically. Shared norms and practices among community members unfold the essence of being with someone. When a community is in the process of making a new world of identity, this sharing happens voluntarily or reflexively, which is how a cultural identity is formed. As humans, we make a phenomenological interpretation of our everyday existence through discourse, a construct that mediates our way of being in the world. Thus studying proverbs or paremiology might provide a greater insight into understanding identity.

<sup>13</sup> J. E. Joseph, 'Cultural identity', in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, (ed.) C. A. Chapelle (Hoboken, 2013), pp. 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0298>.

<sup>14</sup> A. Giddens, *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> J. Usman, L. J. Mustafa and M. N. Agu, 'Proverb as determinant of cultural identity: the imperative of the tree regional languages in Nigeria', *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature* 1 (2013), pp. 47–58. See also G. Khan, N. Sultana and A. Naz, 'The linguistic representation of gender identities in Pakhtu proverbs', *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry* 13:2 (2015), pp. 73–87.

<sup>16</sup> Aliakabri and Khosravian, 'A corpus analysis', pp. 11–17.

<sup>17</sup> U. R. Hakacham, 'The treatment of ramayanic lexicons in the languages of NE India', *The Journal of Open Learning and Research Communication* 1 (2015), pp. 13–25.

<sup>18</sup> J. S. Phinney, 'Ethnic identity and self-esteem: a review and integration', *Hispanic Journal of Behavioural Sciences* 13:2 (1991), pp. 193–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07399863910132005>. See also A. Bennett, *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (London, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> S. Hall, 'The question of cultural identity', in *Modernity and Its Futures*, (eds) S. Hall, D. Held and T. Mcgrew (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 274–316.

## Methodology

A qualitative method with an ethnolinguistic approach was used to study the proverbs in the community.<sup>20</sup> Through the approach, the study looks into the relationship between language and culture, and how people in the community perceive the world differently from another group of people. The data for the research were gathered from different sources such as collecting them from previous record-keeping in books and then by interviewing elderly Tai Ahom people who were the active users of proverbs. For data collection, the participant observation method was adopted in the field. The data analysis technique used a model of cultural hermeneutics and discourse analysis that aim to unearth various lingual phenomenon in human life through understanding and interpretation. The stages that are employed in this study are: collecting data, categorising the proverbs according to the research objectives, interpreting the data, and then drawing a conclusion.

## Results and discussion

When considering metaphors or proverbs of the Tai Ahom culture, it would be pertinent to clarify that the collected metaphors are presently categorised as a part of Assamese culture. In addition, the expressions are grammatically and even semantically constructed in the Assamese language. The Assamese literary canon has had a great impact on these metaphorical expressions.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the expressions are highly indexical to Tai Ahom culture and reveal past events, advice, hints, and suggestions. The analysis will show the literal meaning (LM) and then the intended meaning of the expressions. This will also highlight the Tai Ahom words present in the expressions. Table 1 below shows expressions and proverbs related to Tai Ahom culture.

The five expressions or proverbs below are related to the rooted culture of the Tai Ahom community. The intentions of the proverbs are to pass on knowledge and to teach the younger people. The first metaphor is typically a construction of the Ahom marriage ritual. The proverb hints at the transitional Ahom period. While in one way they are keeping to Ahom customs, in another, they are also accepting Hindu customs. At this juncture, a speaker of the proverb may be in dilemma as to what to choose and what to follow. So the speaker hands it over to the doer of the action. Thus the target meanings of the proverbs may imply trust from the other person, conversion, sacrifice for love, the identity of their own customs.

The second metaphorical expression is also derived from marriage rituals. The ritual is performed before the wedding. Thus the family members, including the father of the groom, visit the bride's home and ask for the daughter of the family as a wife for their son by offering a pair of betel nuts folded with a kind of handkerchief called a *pakhorutong* ('a piece of cloth'). But at the time of offering, the *pakhorutong* makes a noise and takes time to open. The extended meaning of the proverb is to warn or express that the intervention of an unauthorised person in an important conversation is not polite behaviour. Thus the target meaning of the proverb is to imply unexpected behaviour, the intervention of an unauthorised person, impolite behaviour, etc.

The third proverb is derived from the ancestral worship customs of Tai Ahom. According to folk beliefs, there are two types of spirits: one good, one bad. Good spirits are the deceased ancestors who always provide a protective presence for family members, and bad spirits are those who do bad things to people. Family members should not forget

<sup>20</sup> W. A. Foley, *Anthropological Linguistics* (Massachusetts, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> M. Baruah, 'Constructing female identity in consanguineal and affinal relationships: a study through select Assamese proverbs', *Labyrinth: An International Referred Journal of Postmodern Studies* 3:4 (2012), pp. 28–32.

**Table 1:** Customs/culture/ritual-related expressions

No.	Expressions	Literal meaning (LM)	Tai words
1	Ahomor <b>choklong</b> hindur bei tumar patolit porisu jei kora hei	Choklong is for Ahom wedding and bei <sup>22</sup> is for Hindu: I am in your hand, proceed according to your wish	<b>Choklong</b> (marriage ritual)
2	Bajibo lage temi katari bajise <b>pokhorutong</b>	It should be the knife and bottle, but it is the <i>pokhorutong</i> which makes the noise	<b>Pokhorutong</b> (a kind of cloth)
3	Ghar <b>dame</b> nerakhile poror <b>dame</b> pai poror dame nerakhile pikhasinie pai	If your home deceased one does not save you, then deceased of other family will save you but if no body saves you then bad spirit will catch you	<b>Dam</b> (dead ancestor)
4	edin sale rakhe edin bere rakhe edin kihe rakhe	Roof of your home saves one time, your home wall saves you the second time, but who will save you the third time	Although there is no use of Tai word specifically but the expression is a translation of Tai Ahom religious hymn
5	Habire haliya hak oi sadiya kesaikhatik puja kore heihe karone <b>deodhai</b> hokole huwe ujonir phale	Wild leafy vegetable called <i>haliya</i> . <i>Sadiya</i> offers prayer to Kesaikhati goddess, which is why, <i>deodhai</i> sleeps by heading towards the north ( <i>Sadiya</i> is a name of a person here) ( <i>Kesaikhati</i> is a goddess who eats raw meat)	<b>Deodhai</b> (a priestly family of Tai Ahom) The expression refers to the time of the Ahom period when the Ahom king tried to assimilate the <i>Kachari</i> clan of the land

Note: The table shows five proverbial expressions rooted in Tai Ahom culture.

their ancestors, for, although they are not a physical presence, their soul is among the family members. The extended meaning of the proverb is belief, worship, loyalty.

The fourth proverb is related to the objects that are used to construct a house. The Tai Ahom people, during the construction of the *bar ghar* (main house), foretell that the purpose of the house is to provide protection from all kinds of calamities, whether natural or artificial. At the time of 'knotting' the roof, they pronounce this proverb as a folk belief. Thus the proverb is used in a related context, for example, if a person has committed misdeeds several times and cannot be caught, then folk say that he may escape one day or the next day, but what happens in the days after that? Hence, while doing something bad, the person should think about it, as he must be caught someday. The intended meaning is being conscious, be honest, and loyal.

The fifth proverb is a wise saying derived from a Tai Ahom priestly family called *deodhai*. Historical evidence is that at the time of Sukapha's expedition, three priestly families accompanied him.<sup>23</sup> But at the time of assimilation with the Kacharis of Sadiya Division,

<sup>22</sup> 'Bei' means a wooden frame placed over the bride and the groom at the time of taking a bath. Here, it is related to the Hindu marriage ritual.

<sup>23</sup> G. C. Barua, *Ahom Buranji* (Calcutta, 1930).

the Deodhai priest started to worship a *kesaikhai* goddess (who eats raw meat), following the customs of the Kachari belief. From then on the Ahom people have also done this during worship in Sadiya which is on the northern side of Gargaon, the capital of the Ahom kingdom. Thus they cannot sleep with their legs pointing towards the north, otherwise they will dishonour the goddess. The proverb is now used to mean when something is to be remembered (customs) and showing dishonour to someone's culture. The intended meaning is respect, following own culture and tradition, affirming identity, etc.

### **Surname, professions, paik system as metaphor**

For the smooth 'functioning' of the state, the Ahom people were divided into many groups according to the nature of the work and their ability. Thus surnames were assigned to them by their professions,<sup>24</sup> such as *ghora suwa* (who looks after horses), *kukura suwa* (who looks after fowl), *xen suwa* (who looks after hawks), etc. In this way some proverbs were formed and orally transmitted over the ages. In the present day, those surnames have been retained, but the people with those surnames do not need to follow their earlier professional activities. The intended meanings of the proverbs are being used in different contexts. The proverbs in Table 2 below are some proverbs that are related to surnames/professions of Ahom rule. Without doubt, it can be said that these expressions find a distinctive place in Assamese literature.

The above metaphorical expressions convey the administrative tactics, hierarchical positions, history, and construction of society during the Ahom period. For instance, the *paik* system of the Ahom administration was a 'corvee' labour system. It had a great impact on Ahom's economy during medieval Assam. This system was constructed by taking the adult and able-bodied males from each family who lived in the Ahom territory to look after cultivation and form the military force. The *paiks* were organised within a hierarchical structure, where *Bora* (20 *paiks*), *Saikia* (100 *paiks*), and *Hazarika* (1,000 *paiks*) were placed in these categories. The important official *paiks*, namely *Phukon* (head of 6,000 *paiks*), *Rajkhow* (a governor of territory), and *Barua* (a superintending officer, who can command between 2,000 to 3,000 *paiks*), were nominated by the king and appointed in concurrence with the three great ministers (*Buragohain*, *Borgohain*, and *Borpatragohain*) of the king's court. Although some of the expressions are found in *Deodhai Asom Buranji* which was written in the eighteenth century, the Ahom people still use these expressions in day-to-day communication when necessary. Apparently, all the expressions show the glorious rule of Ahom. But at the same time, the proverbs show the nature of the people, values, conflicts, and then their stages of diminishing the status of the people.

The proverbs are relevant to the *barua* clan. After being assigned *barua* duty, that person could avail themselves of the facilities of the king's patronage. Hence, the first proverb says that no matter whether the person deserves to be served as *barua* in Ahom state policies, he can still be in the king's favour. The title is enough, for this reason. He may be allotted *barua* only for one day, but he would be said to be *barua* for future generations too. The intended meaning of this proverb is that once you get the patronage of the king, you can have it for your entire life and subsequent generations. Thus the target meaning is power, affection, etc.

The second proverb is on another clan surname of the Ahom people. *Phukon* was a clan assigned by the Ahom king to look after the Ahom *paik* system (with *phu* meaning white and *kon* meaning human). Another meaning of *phukon* is related to those priestly families

<sup>24</sup> L. Gogoi, *The History of the System of Ahom Administration* (Calcutta, 1991).

**Table 2:** Surname-related expressions

No.	Expressions	Literal meaning (LM)	Tai words
1	<i>edinor boruau barua sadinor baruau borua</i>	Whether a <i>barua</i> is for one day or for seven days, does not matter	<i>Barua</i> is the Assamese term for Tai Ahom surname <i>phu ke</i>
2	<i>swargadeu Ishwar hunibor hol, nopota phukan roja hol</i>	Swargadeo (address to Ahom king), it is time to look at, <i>nopota phukon</i> became king	<i>Phukon</i> is a Tai Ahom surname
3	<i>bora gharar tora gathi, bora thakibo kei rati</i>	Tora (a kind of plant, from which rope can be made in a traditional way) knotting in <i>bora ghar</i> , how many nights will he stay	<i>Bora</i> surname is derived from Tai Ahom administrative system
4	<i>nauboisar puali, naut tukor marilei gom pai</i>	A son of a <i>nauboisar</i> understands <u>only</u> <u>even</u> by knocking at the boat	<i>Nauboisar</i> is an allotted profession in Tai Ahom culture under kings' patronage

Note: The table shows the Tai Ahom proverbial expressions which include surnames derived from different professions.

who came along with Sukapha at the time of the expedition to Saumar Peeth.<sup>25</sup> *Phukon* people are mainly a subgroup of the Mohung Deodhai Bailing family who used to do Tai Ahom rituals at the kings' palace. But *nopota phukon* denotes a person who does not belong to the priestly families and who does not have legal rights to ascend the throne. If a person like him became king, then no one would even be able to imagine what would happen to the country. Hence, the proverb is derived from Tai Ahom history where a *phukon* of tender age<sup>26</sup> was made king in a process that involved tacit conspiracy. The self-proclaimed king was merely a puppet. The proverb is a warning not only to the king, which is termed *swargadeo* (heavenly person), but to the common people as well. State affairs are in danger and something should be done. The target meaning of the proverb is conspiracy, warning, coming bad times for the country, readiness etc.

The third proverb in this category is around the *bora* surname. *Bora* is also a *paik* of the Ahom administration.<sup>27</sup> *Bora* had to look after the entire system and had to move around, therefore he could not stay in one place for any length of time and for him no home is permanent. To make this sense literal, people transcribe this into a kind of saying. But now the proverb is used in the Tai Ahom community to denote the person who is unstable and uncertain of future projects. The intended meaning of the proverb is uncertain, instability, etc.

The fourth proverb is based on *nauboisar phukon* surname. During Ahom rule this authority was assigned to those people who were competent and well equipped to make boats. Making long-lasting and sound boats had been considered a crucial job as they were used for river voyages, in wars, during floods, and then for shelter too. The *nauboisar phukon* clan was created for those people involved in this work. Maintaining the legacy of work, even today's descendants of those families are called *nauboisar*. They enjoyed great patronage of the Ahom kings for their competence. Now the proverb is used to glorify the legacy and is used when someone is found competent in his father's or forefather's

<sup>25</sup> At the time of Ahom's migration, this land (now Assam) was divided into four geographical territories, namely Ratna peeth, Kam Peeth, Xubarna Peeth and Saumer Peeth. Saumer Peeth is now the upper Assam.

<sup>26</sup> E. Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati, 1905; 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Gogoi, *The History of the System*.

**Table 3:** Expression related to agriculture

No.	Expression	Literal meaning (LM)	Tai words
1	<i>ahin katit rakhiba pani rajai jenekoi rakhe rani</i>	Keep water over rice field in <i>ahin</i> and <i>kati</i> month (i.e. September and October) like a king keeps queens (mistress)	There is no Tai word as such but the expression is derived from the behaviour of Tai Ahom culture

Note: The table shows an agriculture-related proverbial expression derived from the Tai Ahom culture.

job, or in the job which is defined by his surname. The intended meaning is to confer a competence on someone, glorification, and pride.

Thus the wise sayings and proverbs related to culture and way of life are also deeply associated with the life of the Tai Ahom community in the present. This maintains a sense of living with the memory and glorious past of the Ahom dynasty. Using these cultural metaphors in humdrum life contours the ethnography of speaking as well as projecting the sameness in the identity of being Tai Ahom.

### Agriculture as metaphor

Guha says that the Ahom were the first cultivators of wet rice in the land.<sup>28</sup> However, they adapted various activities regarding wet-rice cultivation, depending on the climate of their land. In Table 3 above we see some wise sayings that were transmitted orally and sustained in Tai Ahom culture. They are the expressions of the country life of Tai Ahom that express belief in and perform nature and culture.

The proverb talks about the wet-rice cultivation procedure. Normally during the months of September and October, water in the rice fields dries out and winter's arrival means less rain. Therefore, the Ahom wet-rice farmers develop new ways to keep water in the field. In another way, the comparison shows the dominance or power of the king over his queens. They were confined within the palace and not allowed to go out without the king's permission. Thus the metaphorical expression means caution, mastery, limitations, inferior women.

### Gargaon as a metaphor

Gargaon was the capital of Ahom kingdom for a long period during the Ahom reign. Proverbs, myths, and stories centring on the city were created (Table 4 below). Then the city became a symbol of content and discontent for many, and therefore has been a subject of a huge branch of oral literature. Gargaon serves as hope, destiny, wealth, prejudices, war, etc. And the implication of this human psychology is patterned throughout the social life and ethnography of communication.

As in the first proverb, the intended meaning here is to convey the power and arrogance of the people who lived in Gargaon and had the patronage and favouring hand of the Ahom king. In the present situation, the proverb is used to refer to so-called political leaders and co-leaders who live in the capital or have a relationship with political leaders. Once they have achieved political power, they do not care to turn back. Thus the voice of the people remains unheard and their objectives and needs are never fulfilled.

<sup>28</sup> A. Guha, 'The Ahom political system: an inquiry into the state formation process in medieval Assam (1228-1714)', *Social Scientist* 11:12 (1983), pp. 3-34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3516963>.



The proverb aptly justifies the present political situation and Assamese people who use this metaphorical expression in their communication.

Then the second proverb is focused on political and social strategies modelled by the king and his people in the palace (ministry). If somebody is found doing misdeeds, he would be judged and penalised accordingly. Gargaon is the symbol of today's high court and justice. Even if the person is not found guilty, he would be assigned to do some work by the king. In such cases, both the sides of a knife from Gargaon are sharp. The intended meaning of the proverb is not to fall into any conspiracy related to the people in power, and be conscious of what you do and work for.

As the Gargaon remained the capital of the Ahoms for a long period of time, during those years Gargaon (Ahom) had to face various battles with neighbouring states and with the great Mughals. Secret messengers and informers were sent everywhere by the kings to spy on them. If something was heard against the king and the state, it instantly reached the Ahom kings. Thus the intended meaning of the third proverb was to be alert.

The fourth proverb presented here is also alike in meaning to the second proverb. Gargaon is the centre of all political nuances. Nobody can enter easily. If someone enters, the king's messengers keep their eyes on them, irrespective of their age. Everybody had to be accountable for everything that happened. Thus the proverb is used derogatorily to mean the undignified situation of Gargaon, the capital of Ahom king. The intended meaning of the proverb is to be careful while visiting Gargaon, suspicious, etc.

The fifth proverb is again related to power. If someone is dearest to a person who is in higher authority, then whatever be the guilt, it may be kept secret. In the proverb, if the wife breaks a dish which is used to eat rice, nobody judges her, which is not the case if a helper (*beti*) destroys a tiny bowl. The power conspiracy and discrimination between the master and slave is there in the proverb. Thus the intended meaning of the proverb is power, position, etc.

The sixth saying points out the common person who lives in Gargaon. It generates a sense of arrogance and power over the person who lives outside Gargaon, even kin. This may be a mythical construction but such people are present everywhere in the society. Thus to locate such people and to find humour about them, this saying is very often used by Ahom people. The intended meaning of the proverb is doubt/trust, generosity, code of conduct, etc.

In the end, it could be foregrounded that Gargaon, once the capital of Ahom kingdom, is also remembered as a metaphor for joy, judgement, fear, hope as well as desire, pride, and prejudice. Gargaon is now perceived as a memory of an Ahom identity marker. In the tourism and heritage identity of Assam, Gargaon is a cultural icon of both the Ahom and Assam. Taking Gargaon as a metaphor, a few Assamese laureates have emulated their thoughts and longing in poetical devices. For example, an eminent Assamese poet Binanda Chandra Barua wrote a poem called 'Gargaon'. The striking feature of evoking a sense of nationalism and patriotism through this metaphorical expression is significant.<sup>29</sup>

### Ethnolinguistic analysis

This study finds that the proverbs are mostly indexical to the historical events of the Ahom reign. They serve as a reminder of the administrative behaviours of the Ahom court. Later situating the events into the daily activities, the orally transmitted stories became a form of the inseparable culture of the Assamese literature and language.

<sup>29</sup> B. Shastri, 'Nationalism and patriotism in Assamese literature', *Indian Literature* 20:3 (1977), pp. 42–53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24157486>.

**Table 4:** Gargaon as a metaphor

No.	Expressions	Literal meaning (LM)	Tai words
1	<i>gargaiyan hati tikaeu nokore kati</i>	elephant of Gargaon never looks back	No Tai Ahom word as such
2	<i>gargoian katarir dabeu kate</i>	Gargaon's knife can cut through the reverse side too	
3	<i>iyate marilu tipa gargaon palegoi hipa</i>	The root is found in far Gargaon by just pressing here	
4	<i>gargaonr pisol bat, loraku nisini, burhaku nisini, hatepoti lakhuti pat</i>	Slippery road of Gargaon, young and adult all need help in every step	
5	<i>betie bhangile kotora, gargaon palehi batora, ghoinie bhangile kanhi thole misikai hanhi</i>	The news is sent to Gargaon when a female helper breaks <i>kotora</i> (a kind of bowl) but wife breaks <i>kanhi</i> (dish) but it is kept in secret by a smile	
6	<i>gargaonr mitiror bhau, mukhe bule thak thak, bhorire hesuke nau</i>	Mitir (relatives from wife giving) says to stay just for showing generosity but intentionally they want them to leave	

Note: The table shows six proverbial expressions centred on Gargaon, capital of the Tai kingdom.

Although some of the abovementioned proverbs are becoming obsolete or irrelevant in the present-day context, this study needed to revisit the historical literature to find out the source of their meanings.<sup>30</sup>

Mac Coinnigh's linguistic analysis on paremiology identifies five significant aspects of proverbs.<sup>31</sup> Those aspects are primarily based on structure and style, sentence type and function, emphatic word order, topicalisation, and anti-proverbs. An ethnolinguistic analysis of the Tai Ahom proverbs shows that the proverbs follow the Assamese sentence structure, having both rhyme and rhythm (e.g. Table 3, no. 1; Table 4, no. 1). The repetition of words and phrases in some proverbs as in *edin* (Table 1, no. 4) can be seen in the Tai Ahom proverbs. The code-mixing of primarily the noun and noun phrases (Table 1: *chaklong*, *pokhorutong*, etc.) in the proverbs foregrounds that the presence of the Tai Ahom language is exhibited only in the culturally driven things, actions, events, etc.

In the course of the analysis, the basic meaning of the proverbs was revealed and systematised. The analysis of the phraseological meanings, lexical components, and syntactic structures made it possible to identify the role of linguistic means in locating the cultural identity of the Tai Ahom people. The lexical borrowings of the language retain the essence of the Tai Ahom culture and a glorious past. This structural and semantic analysis of proverbs with the concept of 'shared wisdom', 'glory', and 'pride' reflects the cultural identity of the Tai Ahom people, but does not define the expertise of speakers of the Tai Ahom language. Hence, there is no mark of Tai Ahom grammatical features in the proverbs. Indeed, the proverbs are the bearer of different metaphorical meanings which are

<sup>30</sup> K. Sen Deka, 'Buranji: historical literature of Assam', *Journal of Open Learning and Research Communication* 2:1 (2016), pp. 15–35.

<sup>31</sup> M. Mac Coinnigh, 'Structural aspects of proverbs', in *Introductions of Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, (eds) A. Borowska, D. Matovac and A. Raji-Oyelade (Berlin, 2015), pp. 112–130. <https://doi.org/10.2478/9783110410167.5>.

intrinsically related to the human instinct, as in how the people express or internalise abstract understanding (such as life, love, hate, joy, etc.) through these proverbs (or in the ballad, elegy, folk song, prayer). It is very sad to the community when there is nothing alive of the language to communicate except some terminologies in the realm of projecting a different identity. On the other hand, it is also recognised that a person can have more than one cultural identity.<sup>32</sup> From this study, it is understood that the Ahoms hold a dual identity: they are Ahoms and, at the same time, they are Assamese.

## Conclusion

It is not possible to describe Assamese society in isolation as it is an amalgamation of many ethnicities and languages. 'Assamese' is there only when there are other cultures and languages, hence the Assamese identity is not a single identity. As Agar points out, there is no sense of X culture without saying the culture of X for Y.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the Tai Ahom has a unique place in the formation of greater Assamese identity. This understanding of the languacultural identity of the Tai Ahom does not lead to a linguistic secessionism; rather, it realises the tidy unity. Assamese or *akhomiya* is an inclusive term. Ethnicity, as the primordialist believes, is not only a biologically given or natural phenomenon of acquiring all the cultural attributes (such as language, dress, foods, festivals, etc.), but it can be seen as a socially constructed and conceptualised phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> In future research, apart from the proverbs or wise sayings, observing and investigating other cultural works of oral literature would help to understand its capacity to represent national identity.

**Conflicts of interest.** None.

<sup>32</sup> Anne Campbell, 'Cultural identity as a social construct', *Intercultural Education* 11:1 (2000), pp. 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980050005370>.

<sup>33</sup> M. H. Agar, *Culture: How to Make it Work in a World of Hybrids* (New York, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> T. H. Eriksen, 'The epistemological status of the concept of ethnicity', *Anthropological Notebooks* 25:1 (2019), pp. 27–36.

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