An Approach to Translation and Retranslation: An Experiment in the Presentation of Assam Tribal Verse Forms

Translation accompanying documentation of ethnic and tribal literary genres was an early phenomenon in the field of Folklore studies in Assam. Praphulladatta Goswami found in Anderson’s pioneering ‘Collection’ “... translation in English, done with considerable care” (Anderson 1981: ii). Later Reverend Sidney Endle published his book *The Kacharis* in 1911, which had a section on ‘Folklore, Traditions and Superstitions’ with accompanying translations. After independence, Assamese scholars led by Praphulladatta Goswami, started documenting folk genres, both tribal and non-tribal, and often gave accompanying translations. In the case of tribal materials, the translations were mostly in Assamese, occasionally accompanied by English translations. Mohini Mohan Brahma incorporates both Assamese and English translations of Bodo oral-derived verses. Similarly, in the *Folk Songs of theMisings*, English and Assamese versions complements specimens of Mising oral-derived verse forms. Though translation was an integral part of documentation, evidence of treating translation
as a conscious endeavour in the documentation and study of tribal and ethnic oral-derived forms is conspicuous by its absence.

However, the importance accorded to translation point out to the fact that it was perceived as a major way to access tribal literary and social practices at a time when the threat of it dying away was palpably felt. Brahma felt that “many of the traditional songs of the bygone days are forgotten ... the folk songs which are still remaining on the lips of the unlettered bards will die within a few years unless some active measures are adopted to keep them alive” (Brahma 1960: 09).

The measures included documentation and translation. Thus, if translation is a major measure in preservation of folk forms for posterity, then the trustworthiness and accuracy of translations is a matter of major concern. It is here that the Native American experience can provide a working paradigm, which need not always converge, but can provide a working model even in divergences.

Rothenbergs’s idea of collaborative translation is not novel to the Assam situation. While Brahma, a Bodo folklorist and scholar, collaborated with Assamese scholars to present translated versions of the songs he had documented, Birendranath Datta, an Assamese folklorist of great prominence collaborated with a Mising scholar to present translated versions of the anthology of Mising folksongs he had edited. But it was not clear what contours this collaboration took, for unlike Rothenberg, Toelken, or Swann, the nature of this collaboration was never expounded and the methodology adopted never discussed as a serious academic and critical point of interest. More interesting would have been the
methodology adopted in translating the tribal verse forms into English. Did the English translator know the tribal language like in the case of Anderson and Endle? Were they translations from Assamese versions or collaborative effort between the translator and a collaborator who spoke both English and Assamese? Or was it the translator’s version of the collaborator’s Assamese? Thus English translation of tribal verse forms in Assam is a complex exercise that can take variegated modes. That these translations were not always accurate makes it all the more necessary to go into the dynamics of translation, and ask the question of what is it that would constitute a good translation of Assam tribal verse forms. These itself needs collaboration, for like Krupat, one has to start with the admission of having no competence of the languages involved. Collaboration is a way of approaching the tribal situation, of understanding the attitudes surrounding the songs and the context that determines them. It was obviously convenient to work from a common knowledge of Assamese, and as Rothenberg had pointed out, the collaborators’ Assamese and English had the quality and the tenor of their own language, which provided the base from which to work and rework, translate and retranslate.

Most of the present day translators and documentators in Assam are themselves tribals with the advantage of knowing both Assamese and their own language and at times also the ability to translate into English. So apparently there should not be much scope for errors and inaccuracies in both literal and literary translation into Assamese or English. This comes closest to Rothenberg’s concept of the ideal
translator having native or near-native sensitivity to both languages. However, according to Nahendra Padun, the exposure to the dominant Assamese culture and mindset and the internalisation of its acquirements by the educated tribal scholars have gradually eroded into the tribals’ own traditional and cultural repertoire. As an example, Padun pointed out to the example of modern educated Misings talking of the Sun as male and the Moon as female in conformity with the dominant discourse. This has occasionally resulted in both documentation and translation not taking into consideration culturally specific modes and codes. This happens because the collectors of songs are indifferent to latent cultural significance. Divorced from these, any documentation or its subsequent translations will be misrepresentations of the cultural background that exists around and within the gaps of the printed representations. There are unconscious appropriations of traditional forms to ways of a dominant discourse. Padun pointed out to a few examples from the anthology *Folk Songs of the Mising*, where the songs were originally collected by a Mising scholar Tarun Chandra Pamegam. The bilingual translations were a collaborative effort between the editor and Tabu Ram Taid, the associate editor who was a native speaker of the language and equally adept at both English and Assamese. Padun points out that the version of the following song from the *Ali-aye-ligang* festival, from which the translation was done, could be termed as culturally inaccurate.
Specimen I

Version I: Mising Original

Lo - lo:le - lo:le - lo:le
Dabo - lo:le - lo:le - lo:le

Ru: rubyemilo kcnin kenin keninna
Loladyenilo keton ketonna!

Sisug sugbo sugbo bodiya
Regam gambo gambo bodiya

Yo - ru:sem pamoosulanka
Omumbulla ru:sem pamosulunka.

Yo dumdumem di:igtoika
Pt: seng dumdumem di:igtoika.

Yo - orayem jo:entoika
Sali orayem jo:entoika!

Yo - kektenge berengetoika,
Omum ngolum kektenge berengetoika (Datta 1992: 34, 36).

Version II: Literal (prose) English translation

Come close when it is dark and move apart when it is light [while dancing]. Give us one [hog] that is as big as a swamp deer [as we the community are here]! Keep within bounds, my dear girls. [Dance keeping within bounds].

Play, play on the drum. Play on the drum made from stems of the tonga flower. Bring the tray. Bring out the tray for offering betelnuts. Bring these and pay respects to us young men and women, [that is the assembly that has collected in your courtyard] (ibid: 35, 37).

From the translation it is clear that the translator has dispensed off with sound segments or the meaningless vocables, which perhaps has no place in a literal translation. Padun has no problem with that, and he thinks that it is best left to the
translators to decide whether to incorporate them or not, depending on the specificities of the context. Moreover he feels that it is not always necessary. More so, if there are no precedence of such sound segments in the language to which a verse is being translated. He draws attention to the third and fourth line (in bold) which has been translated as “come close when it is dark and move apart when it is light [while dancing]”. Here the whole meaning and the context of the song have been lost. The line “come close when it is dark and move away when it is light” can be misrepresented to convey a sexual innuendo. It is often said the dances and the songs of Mising and Bodo festivals convey overt sexuality. However, Padun finds this to be a gross misrepresentation, for unlike in the Assamese Bihu, where pelvic thrusts and heaving bosoms are integral to the Bihu dances, the Mising dance consist of well regulated and rhythmic lateral and horizontal movements of the whole body without any accentuated movements of the pelvis or bosom. Moreover, what has been made the beginning of a song is basically its end. The song starts off with an invitation by the youths to the maidens to come out and join in the festivities by dancing and singing. Towards the end of the singing and dancing, the fact that such a happy state will not always exist is included in the song. Gradually the youthful dancers will grow old and approach death. Death here is denoted by shadow and is linked up to the Mising concept of Yal, which means both the spirit and the shadow. The movement from light to darkness is the progression from youth to old age. When the light is brightest, the shadow is the farthest; and as the light dims the shadow approaches
till it finally merges with the body in total darkness. This merger is the point of death, when the human body moves across to the realm of the spirits. Thus the meaning of the sentences comes across as totally different when located in its traditional physical location and cultural space. It is against this background that the whole song was reworked.

While reworking, the first point to be examined was whether there was the necessity to incorporate the meaningless sound segments. The first two sentences were the imitative and rhythmic initiation that reflected the sound of the traditional drum and was the key to the understanding of its performative nature and the sense of rhythm involved, what Rothenberg calls a standard marker to indicate an opening. Since the retranslation aimed was quasi-literary, I decided to translate them for meaning in line with Padun’s translator’s license, since its performative nature will remain clear. I also changed the subsequent Mising Yo with the English equivalent ‘hey’ for idiomatic compatibility. Along with my own reworking I incorporated my translation of Padun’s fuller working of the concluding part of the song.

**Version III: Reworked translation**

Play, play on the drums
Play on the drums made from the stems of the *tonga* flowers.

We are gathered here,
Give us a hog that is as big as a swamp deer.

Hey- keep within bounds,
Dance within bounds, dear girls.

Hey-play on the drums,
Play on the drums made from the stems of the *tonga* flowers.

Hey—bring out the tray
Bring out the tray offering betelnuts.

Hey—acknowledge us young people
Bring these and acknowledge us young people in the courtyard.

As the days go by we are growing old
We will have to sit huddled like hens that grows cold.

We will have to sit huddled like hens that grows cold
Like spirits turning their back to the world.

Unable to stand and face what lies in front of us
The courtyard will be enveloped by a gradual silence.

In moonlight it stays away from us
But as the night grows dark it closes in on us.

In the version above, along with the text, the style of the rendition, which is a vital part of the overall effect, was also tried to be translated. The intermittent 'hey' makes it clear that the performers are addressing the audience at a rhythmic interval to involve them in the whole process of performance and also keeping up the rhythm of the performance going. The 'it' of the final two lines is the 'yal', or the spirit and the shadow. The courtyard being enveloped by a gradual silence throws into relief the earlier youthful dance of the revellers in the courtyard. When asked if the song can be interpreted as one belonging to the carpe diem\(^9\) theme, Padun answered on the negative, saying that as far as Mising socio-

\(^9\) A common theme in English poetry best exemplified by the adage 'gather your rosebuds while you may'. Generally means the enjoyment of the pleasures of the time, for the opportunity might not come again. An important poem in the theme is Andrew Marvell's 'The Coy Mistress'.
cultural context is concerned, it is just an objective statement of an undeniable truth.

Padun terms expressions like the ‘it’ in the above song to be ‘idiomatic’ expressions that link up the renditions to larger cultural concepts. These idiomatic expressions are the cultural constants, the unchanging inheritance of a cultural repertoire. The next song to be reworked is a lullaby, where Padun links up expressions in the songs to larger cultural realities, and advised me to rework the song in the light of the newer understanding.

**Specimen II**

**Version I: Mising original**

\[ \text{A ajji komjinga reiya binesim} \\
\text{Ol o pitpanga jemang binesim} \\
\text{Kape mujire keire du:neike!} \\
\text{Metunge dilingeya dibiyo tu:ne} \\
\text{Ke:dangke da:puna renungo binesim} \\
\text{Jo:jokke jokpuna renungo binesim} \\
\text{Ajjis:im se:kobi mujire keire tu:neike!} \\
\text{Ajjis:no tayub mujire dolangka} \\
\text{Nokke bia na:ne bia –} \\
\text{Ajjis:im mujire keire sutu:ne!} \\
\text{Nokke doka na:ne dokka –} \\
\text{Ngindume bulumem mu.manetoka (ibid: 62, 64)!} \]

**Version II: Literal English (prose) translation**

O my little, little precious one, who has offended you? Has anybody hit you with a burning stick or with a pair of pincers? O my young pet, my flower-soft precious one, who has made you cry? Is it me, your mother, who made you cry? them, my precious, suck the nectar-like breast of your mother (ibid:63, 65).
In the literal translation above, two very important words *komjinga* and *pitpanga* (in bold) have not been accorded the importance they deserves. These words signify a child’s state of innocence, a pre-intelligent state of being, where the mind is unformed. This sense comes through because the words are linked up with the pre-creation void of the Mising creation myth, known as *Kayum. Kayum*, though empty, is in itself a presence, where the nothingness is a negative energy that exists. This state is denoted by the words ‘*komjinga*’ and ‘*pitpanga*’. Thus the sense that comes through is that though the child’s mind is unformed, yet it has registered a sense of hurt and pain. Moreover, the literal translation left out many specific details that was included in the reworking, along with the element of repetition.

**Version III: Reworked Translation**

O the little one, in the *komjinga* state,
O the precious, in the *pitpanga* state,
Why does he make himself so angry?
Why does he work himself to a rage?
Has anybody hit the child with a burning stick?
Has anybody hit the child with the pincers?
O the pet that shall grow like the *Ke dangke* hanging beautifully,
O the dear one that shall grow like the *Jo:jokke* hanging beautifully,
Who irritates the little beautiful precious?
Is it I, your mother who made you cry?
Do not cry precious, do not cry –
Is it I, your mother that hurt you?
Do not be angry dear, do not be angry –
Here, suckle the nectar-like breast of your mother.
In the above reworking the words *komjinga* and *pitpanga* was retained because of its specific cultural association, and the lack of English equivalents. *Ke:dangke* (*Rynchostylis retusa*) and *Jo:jokke* are names of orchids. It is often inevitable, but to include detailed and elaborate notes to complement translation. Padun finds poetic translations to be misleading at times and that literal translation can furnish ethnographic information. According to him, if culture does not provide the background, direct translation can be misleading. However, since literal translation doesn’t convey the poetic elements like rhythm through repetitions and significant latent references etc. poetic translation enriched with ethnographic information can enrich the understanding to oral-derived and folk verse forms.

The next and the last song to be reworked with Nahendra Padun is another lullaby where the meaning of an often used phrase has been lost and is interpreted in a light that has got nothing to do with the traditional meaning. The dove is often mentioned in Mising lullabies (song 21, page 194, Chapter IV). However, it is seen as a bird whose flesh is good to eat. It is interesting to note how this has happened. According to Padun, when the collector faced the mention of dove but lacked the traditional cultural context, the natural thing to do was to see it as something to be eaten, for dove is indeed a delicacy in Assam. However, Mising legend has it that a dove was the *neibing* or the baby sitter of the Sun’s or *Do:nyi*’s son. It once so happened that the neibing slipped and fell as the Sun momentarily moved from its trajectory. The *neibing* found her way to earth. She could never reunite with her ward, and whenever the Sun’s son cried for his
neibing, he could never get her. Hence the saying that the young ones of the dove are yet to be hatched, or are yet to learn to fly. This traditional Mising legend has been replaced with the modern element of roasting a dove. The following song was reworked with the above-mentioned legend as its background.

**Specimen - III**

**Version I: Mising Original**

*Oiyaua kappoyo pekkaue badmada*

*I:naue pi:ma:da monei,*

*Sukke po:losa balenau yemilo*

*Oiyau me ba:bipe monei* (ibid: 82).

**Version II: Literal English (prose) translation**

Don’t cry, my dear. The dove’s chicks have not yet hatched in the nests. There will be chicks later this month. When they are here, we’ll roast them and give them to our dear one to eat (ibid: 83).

**Version III: Reworked translation**

Little one don’t cry, the dove is not yet hatched,  
   The time for them to emerge has not yet come,  
Should the time for them to emerge come this month,  
   I shall bring one for my little one.

The last sentence of the song has been changed from the one given by the collector, which would read “I will roast one for my little one” to the one in bold. This has been done by keeping in mind the original legend of the dove being a neibing. Nahendra Padun assumes that by the time the collector had documented the above song, the traditional significance of the referent had been replaced with the new connotation. This present a complex problem related to meanings in oral
verse forms. However, the first three line are translation of the Mising version, done with the help of Padun, and the change effected in the last sentence does not detract from the overall original style and effect of the song, but claims the song to a more traditional thematic context. Reinforced with the knowledge of this legend, our understanding of song number 21 of chapter IV (page 194) is further enriched. The opening three sentences is not just a reference to a dove that has not taken flight. It is the neibing's, who is singing the song, reference to herself where she identifies herself with the dove. Since she is still there to take care of her ward, the child has no reason to cry. The child should cry only if she goes away.

If we look at song number 21, it is clear that there is no coherent linkages between the legend of the dove and the rest of the song. According to Padun this is an important feature of oral-derived verse forms. Different sections of a song seem to be separate and inferences have to be drawn. Often a myth and mostly nature is the peg around which the theme of a song revolves and there are no apparent linkers. The apparent lack of coherence often tempts a translator to incorporate linkers and explications in the translation itself, which makes them verbose. And this verbosity often reflects ideas and concepts imported from the translator's own realm of experience that has nothing to do with the culture from which the translation is being done.

Appropriating translation to ones own cultural space can be fine for a better and easier understanding of a different culture, but appropriating meanings and ideas to conform to ones own interpretation of what culture and meaning should be
defeats the very purpose of translation, i.e the understanding and appreciation of an unfamiliar culture. Moreover the verbosity mars the beauty of the minimal style of an oral-derived song. This is evident in the following English translation of a Bodo lullaby:

**Specimen IV**

**Version I: Bodo original**

*Daobo daobo gana robo robo*

*Harca gotho nubla doyao zobo zobo* (Brahma 1960: 07).

**Version II: English literary translation**

Oh crane, oh crane,
Your wings are tender and soft.
You take a dip in water
And vanish in fear of *harsa* boy.

Yonder the young crane
Dips in the water in fear of the *harsa* boy.
Oh my child, unless you keep quiet,
The *Harsa* will snatch you away (ibid: 138)

The desire to explicate is nowhere more evident than in the above translation, where the original two-line version has been magnified manifold. This has happened because the explication was incorporated into the song itself, and the translator felt the need to foreground the key element, fear. Thus the fearful presence of the *harsa* boy is given multiple emphasis in the fourth, sixth and the final sentences of the song and the unstated warning to a crying child is explicated in the warning to keep quiet. This obviously mars the minimal style of the original. Moreover, the above translation also misses a vital point about lullabies.
Lullabies are not much about communicating to young children than comforting them. The contents of a lullaby is the mothers’ or the babysitters’ response to the stimuli of a child’s pain and discomfort and the organisation of that response into rhythm and rhyme, which forms the key to pacify the child. They are not about explicating threats to coerce a child into silence, as the concluding sentence of the above translation would have us to believe. Thus, the above song was retranslated into the version below, which reflects the style and the structure of the original. One can well imagine the soothing and comforting effect of the incremental repetitions of the two lines of the Bodo original

**Version III: Reworked Translation**

O crane, O crane, your wings are tender.
Seeing the ‘*harsa*’ boy you dip into the water.

But more than the style it also brings to fore the basic differences in tribal and non-tribal use of and attitude towards language. Words, for a Bodo or a Mising is a tool for precise communication, the effect of which not to be diluted by overuse or deflection. The words exists against the living background of tradition, culture and the communal life, and assume their power and meaning in a subtle and latent interaction with it. Contrasted to this is the non-oral use of language, which is characterised by the need to reinforce the points made by bringing in allied references, to indulge in descriptive evocations, the belief and delight in the ornamental use of language, and the need to ground ones declaration against an overtly perceivable context. This is the difference between literatures rooted in pre-lettered origination and post-lettered evolution. In pre-lettered verbal texts,
the word as an entity was of prime importance, a living form whose effect could not be diluted by digressions. Instead we have repetitions as a reinforcement of stated points. On the other hand, in post-lettered written texts, the words are fixed entities affording the scope for returning to it and not necessarily grounded against a living context, but one that can be imported into the printed form. Thus words can be constantly referred back to its context in the printed form. Thus assumptions from written categories should not colour the understanding of the oral-derived forms.

Assumptions of one culture can colour the appreciation of another. This point can be well exemplified by song number 74 in chapter V (page 242), where a girl addresses her beloved as the flower mandarhibar, which refers to the flower of Indian coral tree (Erythrina indica). In Assamese parlance the flower indicates someone or something that is of no use, since the flower has no fragrance and is not used in auspicious Hindu rituals and ceremonies. However, the same inference is not applicable to the Bodo use of the reference, and according to Tulan Mochahary, it indicates a reference to the emotion of love and signifies coyness. Thus, while translating the song into Assamese or by an Assamese, the Assamese meaning of the term should not be predicated into the translation. Often expressions alien and improper are ascribed through translation to a particular culture. In song number 4 of chapter V (page 210), the sentence “. . . born of heroic loins” (ibid: 132) to describe Bachiram has been changed to “born of heroes . . .”. Tulan Mochahary finds the sentence alien to Bodo expressions and
pointed out that in the Bodo original (ibid: 02), it is the heroism of Bachiram’s ancestors that finds mentions and not their loins, which according to him wouldn’t sound very decent in Bodo. Since the expression is not English usage, the nearest being ‘girding ones loins’, it inevitably tends to be ascribed to the Bodo original, which would be a travesty. Hence, the transferred epithet was dispensed with. In the next reworking (song 3, page 209, Chapter V), similar imports were dispensed with to negate the verbosity in the translated version, and to communicate the terseness and energy of the original lines. The opening of the original translation spoke of saddles, stirrups and spurs, which were dispensed with and replaced with a simple stick in line with the original. Thus the sentence “Mount your horse dear Bachiram! Prod him with the stick” replaced “Oh dear Bachiram, Get on to the saddle, (with) legs in the stirrups, Put spurs to the horse” (ibid: 132). The new opening was repeated after a regular interval in line with the original to communicate both style and effect.

It was along these broad parameters that the translations of Assam tribal verse forms were approached for the purpose of this study. There were of course the occasional variations, like in treating the meaningless sound segments. In specimen-I above, the meaningless vocables were translated for meaning. Similarly in song number 11 of Chapter V (page 213), the final three lines of the song were initially translated for meaning, that read “Play the drums, blow the flutes.” However it was felt that the lines failed to reflect the nature of continuous play that accompanies the song which is basically advertising to catch the
attention of the merchants. Moreover the translation for meaning did not integrate with the song and it was not clear who were playing on the drums and blowing the flutes. Hence the original meaningless vocables were retained. Similarly in song number 25 of Chapter V (page 219), the meaningless vocables “Ajlang Bijlang . . .” were retained, because it aptly reflects the playfulness of the situation.

In the next stage, translations of Bodo oral-derived verses that had no translation into English or Assamese were taken up. The method adopted was to place the English equivalent by the side of the Bodo original and latter cohere it to make sense. Assamese was the meeting ground, and the choice of the Assamese words was often delegated to Tulan Mochahary. While choosing the English words, options were placed before him, where multiple choices were available, along with an explication of the variation in meaning and a collaborative decision was taken. One important example are the words ‘class’ and ‘creed’ from song number 41 and 42 of Chapter-V (page 225), which is a translation of the Bodo words jat and enda. Jat was initially translated into ‘caste’ as an echo of the meaning of a similar Assamese word, and enda into creed. However, caste is a non-Mongoloid Hindu concept, and Bodo society had no caste division. The word clan would also have been a misrepresentation since the Bodos have no strict clan demarcations like amongst the Misings. Hence the word ‘class’ was used to indicate social standing, which was the underlying implication behind the word jat which has found its way into Bodo usage as a result of the exposure to Hindu way of life. However, the word ‘creed’ was felt to be an apt representation for
Thus the translations took their final shape against the contextual background to the songs that were furnished by Mochahary. The method adopted is worked out in the example below.

Translation of song number 46, chapter V (page 227)

Version I: Bodo original
(English transcription by Tulan Mochahary)

Biliphang phaharao lapha saikho daoā
Hwdaori bidaori manw gabdwing?
Bini gabuarao angui bikhāia
Allouhab khallouhab manw jadwng?
Bikhani dahakhw bikhani thalaiao dwunanwi
Jujaini orgengao mwn mwn khamjananwi
Jabaidwngswi hakab ao anglai
Gwswni gabuaiao phwthwng nangthwng (Brahma 1993: 11).

Version II: Word by word translation
Evening time Nightingale the bird
Wailing sound why crying?
Birds cry my soul
Ignites burns why pains?
Soul sadness soul bottom keep
Husk fire slowly keep burning
I burn oh I my
Soul crying stop disappears.

While reworking the above word by word translation, care was taken to conform it to English that reflects the style of the original. However, as Tabu Taid had said, it is not always possible to preserve the rhyme and meter of the original. "It is a difficult task to preserve both the feeling /theme and the rhyme /meter of a song in
translation. Since we cannot deface the feeling and the theme, we have to abandon the meter of the original in favour of prose-poetry, which is an ideal alternative . . ." (Taid in Noroh 1994: 02). The song can be understood against the context of a lover's pain; however the context is not explicated within the translation itself. When experienced against the generic background of a love song, which is essential in the understanding of a folk-derived form, the poem explicates itself. In the final analysis one has to bear in mind that all the 'texts' are basically oral-derived and rooted in performative categories, where meanings were shaped by both the verbal texts and the contexts of their utterances and it is not always possible to integrate the extra-verbal elements into the printed text, to 'totally translate'.

Elements of Assam Tribal Poetics

Like in the Native American situation, the basic imperative underlying the tribal attitude to life in Assam is vastly different from the non-tribal attitude. Exemplifying the point, Nahendra Padun cites the example of one of the acclaimed Assamese novel *Miri Jiort* by Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, which is apparently based on a Mising social setting. Padun calls it a good novel, but one that does not represent Mising social mores or customs. That the characters bear Mising names is just incidental. A few songs of the novel may have elements from Mising *Oi-ni: toms*, but they ended up being more or less Assamese songs. The basic conflict around which the novel revolves cannot be a Mising social phenomenon, but is a non-tribal import. The conflict is the stereotype rich against
poor with a love triangle thrown in for good. The protagonist Jonke is a poor and destitute youth and his beloved Panei is the daughter of a rich family. But no one can be a destitute in a Mising social set up and there will always be a family to which one belongs, and someone from within one’s clan accept those whose immediate relatives passes away. As such poverty and destituteness are concepts not possible in a sense of communal living. Amongst the Misings when a brother dies, the younger brother can marry his sister-in-law to support her. Nor is Panei’s pregnancy out of wedlock such a big ‘sin’ that it caused social outrage and their ultimate liquidation. According to Padun, love childs are not only accepted by society, but the mother is also accepted in marriage by someone other than her lover. But the child will bear his father’s name and carry out all his ritualistic responsibilities in the event of his father’s death. Thus concealment and hypocrisy does not underline traditional Mising conduct. Individual conduct has to be referred back to a larger social context, for the individual is not an autonomous entity but part of the collective identity. The notion of sin and purity in absolute terms is a non-Mising concept; in Mising society instead of sin and purity, the community determines what are acceptable and non-acceptable norms of conduct and behaviour.

_The individual and the community_

Thus the concept of the individual is intrinsically related to the larger concept of the community. The abundance of love songs may seem to be a celebration of
individual emotion and sentiments, but even love has a season, a collective
dimension. Hiren Gohain points out that:

In a tribal’s entire traditional behaviour, in each of his act, there is an
element of religious sanctity Even the dance and songs of joy are not
spontaneous and haphazard They too have a season, the rituals of the
accompanying festival, the faithfully followed movements of dance. The
words of the songs and the poems of such communal events are
transfused with the sanctity of the events. Even the satirical and funny
songs of marriage are grounded in the sacred and important festival of
marriage (Gohain in Phookan1993: 12).

The Mising or-m: loms are not individual renditions, but a collective exercise with
accompanying music; similarly Bodo love songs are collective renditions and are
mostly a part of the Baisagu festival It has been pointed out that amongst the
Misings “the bands of Huchari-singing young men and women who may leave
their homes for several days at a stretch are put under the control and supervision
of officials appointed for the occasion . . . it may even appear to have no other
major aim than the regulation of sexual relations” (Goswami1988, 52). Love
songs and the accompanying dances afford the girls and boys to meet, mingle and
interact in a socially sanctioned and restrained atmosphere. Thus love songs can
be said to integrate individual emotions into a collective expression, and bring
that emotion into balance and harmony with the normative requirements of the
society.

We have the Bodo songs rationalising a youths love for a girl and his final
realisation that in a community one has to live with the acceptable and the
unacceptable (song 45, page 226-227, chapter V) or a girls request to her lover not
to set a bad social precedence by eloping (song 36, page 223, chapter V). These songs of love cannot be ascribed to any specific originator, but to the continuum of oral culture. They reflect emotions that are intrinsic to the human situation. “Whoever sings *oi-ni:tom* owns upto the language and the thoughts in it – it becomes the language of his soul. Whosoever listens to *oi-ni:tom* also adopts it as the expression of his soul” (Padun 1980 02) The pronouns like ‘you’ and ‘I’ in *oi-ni:tons* or Bodo love songs are not expressive of specific personas but are generic terms inclusive of both renderers and the listeners. Assam tribal aesthetics can be said to be based not on a stifling of subjective aspiration like love and desire, but on the sense of the tribe as an extended family whose prime concern is the integration of the individual into a harmonious and balanced whole into the community; and providing for their articulation in a normative framework.

*The spoken word*

The spoken word is the tool that mediates the individual and the community. The power and the importance of the word are implicit in the poetic practices of the Assam tribes. The word is the repository of the tribes’ history. Thus we have the Bodo songs of creation and valour and the Mising songs of migration, which preserve amongst the community history as a living form, immediate and experiential. The individual and community is integrated and harmonised with the sense of the tribes’ origin and evolution, its travails and pain. Thus, we have in song number 3 of chapter IV (page 177), Mising deities being addressed as the ‘guardian’ of ‘mother history’, who has recorded the story of creation. And
history here is the verbal edifice. This is of course a different notion of history (songs 1 and 2, pages 173-174, chapter IV and songs 3 to 6, pages 209-211, chapter V), different from the dated and chronicled history of the printed pages. The idea of an historical fact for the tribe is something one has been told by his elders and therefore not to be doubted. History here is reinforcement through the repetition of stories and events in the verbal media, an intrinsic belief in the truth of the spoken word. It is not the quest for data and facts on which to build the veracity of history.

The power of the word is also realised in the practices of the priests and the shamans.

... when with the help of a few words composed together and some prescribed rituals the aspiration of the mind is fulfilled, it can be said to be magical incantation. In such incantation the power of the words are more important than the meaning of the words; it is the belief of the shamans and the likes, that by pronouncing the words in a special way ones aim can be fulfilled (Narzi1995: 218).

The priest derives this power for his words from the visionary trance that he relapses into during the course of a ceremony. It is in such a possessed state that the Mising miri enters into a commune with the spirits and deities. The language is powerful and sacred, and the sanctity of words is not defiled by explication. Thus we have words like ‘omlai’ whose meanings are the closely guarded secret of the miri, for should they fall into the wrong hands, can cause much harm. Similarly, in the Bodo Kheran ritual, the priest establishes communication with the gods through a media, the dwdmi, around whom the whole ritual revolves. She
is seen in three distinct states during the course of the ceremony. In the first state she is induced into a state of trance by the power of the priest’s word; in the second she is found in a half conscious state; and in the final state she becomes possessed by the spirits. It is in such a state that she utters the words that gives the clue to the priest about the rituals to be performed for the good of the village or the family for which the ceremony is being conducted (Brahma1989: 56). Thus the word is a powerful tool that coheres an internal visionary experience into an external expression which forms the basis of collective good and welfare, the very core of Mising or Bodo religious experience.

Harmony and balance

The imperatives behind Assam tribal ritualistic poetry are to ameliorate social balance and equilibrium. This is evident at two levels; reintegration of the individual into the society after individual ailments and aberrations and the fostering of social and communal equilibrium through collective rituals. At the individual level ailments are caused by moral transgressions or malevolent deities abducting the soul of the offending person. The Mising Miri in his visionary state identifies the malevolent spirit and placates him through rituals and offerings to free the soul of the offending individual and return him to a state of harmony not only with his family and community, but also with the spiritual plane (songs 7 and 8, pages 180-181, chapter IV). Similarly in the Bodo Kherai ceremony the priest mediates, through the dwdnu, with the spiritual powers to return an individual to his normal state of life. The potential for moral transgression and spiritual
pollution forms the imperative behind the Bodo Garja ceremony. It is a ceremony for collective cleansing, a restorative ceremony that helps the community to re-enter into a balanced interaction after the unfettered celebrations of the preceding Baisagu festivities. Such festivities often pushes traditional social norms and mores to perhaps the edge of breaking point, like a son-in-law making fun of his mother-in-law and vice versa (songs 70 and 71, pages 241, chapter V).

The quest for balance is macroscopic in the sense that deities and holy figures from different religion other than from traditional Bodo pantheon is reached out to. This is a quest that is not only intra-communal, but also inter-communal. The festivities are themselves occasions for social interaction, where the sense of the community and the tribe is reinforced through rituals, where whole villages dances and feasts as a unit. Similarly pre-planting agricultural rituals like the Bodo Kherai ceremony for the well being of ensuing crops or the Mising incantation for rainmaking are endeavours that generates a collective commitment for the success of the crops. Farmers' working in each other's field during planting and harvesting is a common tribal practice as revealed in the following Bodo songs. The first is sung during hadari, which means collectively working in each other's fields by turn

We plough row by row  
We harrow the land into a smooth evenness  
The land will become soft and muddy  
We will plant the rice well.
The next song is sung during saori, where a farmer calls upon other farmers to help him out for a day

We harvest in a haphazard way
We keep the bundles in rows,
The old man called us for saori
And serves us with filtered rice beer.\(^{10}\)

Thus, behind the apparent ability of the words to do magic by ensuring rain or a successful harvest lies its latent functional ability to foster and forge an integrated and harmonious approach to activities of socio-economic importance

Beyond the functional elements of Assam tribal verse forms, underlying patterns and principles of poetic construction and thematic concern reflect the quest for balance and harmony and the celebration of truth. In a remarkable affinity with the Navajo ceremonial patterns, verses from Bodo rituals incorporate the sense of the four world directions that creates repetitions and pairings (song numbers 61, 76 and 78, Chapter V). In song number 61 (page 235), an anti-sunwise (south-west-north-east) circuit is followed that can be termed as the trail of exorcism. Thus, it is a movement from darkness to light and an antithesis between blessing and ailment is built up. As the song proceed along its trail, the ailments are gradually dispelled in the four world directions, so that by the time the circuit is completed, the village is rid of all its malevolent influence and is ready to undertake the subsequent blessed circuit into prosperity and abundance. Song number 78 (page 247) is interesting because it provides variation in its directional

\(^{10}\) This song, and the one preceding it, was collected during a fieldtrip to a village known as Barigaon near Dhickiajuli. The informant was a 70 years old disabled man, Sambar Boro, who is also an ojha, a traditional healer. Tulan Mochahary transcribed the songs.
movements connecting opposites. It starts of with the vertical descent from
'heaven' to the 'world below' followed by the horizontal movement from east to
west and north to south.

... Destroy the ailments of heaven in heaven and of the world below
In the world below
The ailment of the east in the east, the ailment of the west in the west,
The ailment of the south in the south, and the ailment of the north in the
north
...

Thus the motif one derives is of a vertical line and two horizontal lines, running
from east to west and north to south The cleansing and purification proceeds
along the vertical and horizontal axis and prosperity and happiness is sought to be
established for man, his crops and animals The trail of blessing and truth is the
perimeter that encloses man and his world after individual ailment and social
affliction is dispelled. Benevolence of the lord is the unfailing truth that is borne
out by nature for:

... The crow has not become white, the stork has not become black,
Stones do not float away in the sea,
The Brahmaputra has not yet gone underground
Truth still prevails O' father almighty
...

This verbal motif is replicated in the graphic motif of the altar of Bathou
constructed during the Kherai ceremony thus establishing a relationship between
the graphic, the verbal and performance. The place chosen for the altar is circular,
Figure viii
Graphic representation of the *Bathou* altar of the *Kherai* ritual

Figure taken from Brahma, K. 1992 *A Study of Socio Religious Belief, Practices, and Ceremonies of the Bodos.*
and is said to replicate the shape of the sun. In the middle of this place a *siju* plant is planted which represents the vertical axis and is representative of the deity *Bathoubwrai*, and thus the link between heaven and earth. A circular bamboo fence encloses the *siju* plant and forms the altar (see figure viii and ix). In front of the altar two tender bamboo plants are planted and connected with a thread, which forms the horizontal axis running from east to west. On the thread hangs three pieces of cotton wool, in which the mystery of God’s creation is believed to be lodged. On the side of the altar a small path fenced by bamboo sticks is a constructed running northwards which form the other horizontal axis. On the eastern side of the fence a row of tender sacred poa grass is planted which is perhaps indicative of the sacred and generative power of the rising sun and the beginning of the sunwise circuit. In the path are placed the ceremonial offerings for the eighteen deities of the Bodo pantheon. On the altar are placed an egg, symbolic of God’s creative power and a stone symbolic of his unwavering truth. It is around this altar and along a circular circuit that the possessed *dwdmi* dances in a trance accompanied by music and other dancers, and it is during the course of this dance that the malevolent influences are dispelled and order and social balance is restored (Brahma89. 12, 56-57). The relationship and linkages between the different manifestations of expressive behaviours are not always apparent and clearly perceivable. But a homology of structure exists between them and they complement each other. It is against this perspective that one has to approach oral-derived verse forms of the Assam tribes. The verbal representation is
Figure ix
Photograph of *Kherai* ceremony in progress that shows the circular altar, the *Siju* tree and the *dwdini* in a trance along with the priest.

Photograph by Dr. Anil Boro
complemented by extra-verbal elements and determines the structure of the verbal edifice and the style of rendition. Such linkages between two parts of Bodo and Mising oral-derived verse forms are not always explicit.

The minimal style, the socio-cultural metonymy and immanence

This often leads oral-derived Bodo and Mising verse forms to be interpreted according to mainstream poetic discourse by ascribing immanent references to metaphors and similes. According to Hiren Gohain, the lack of linkers and conjuncts is a part of the poetic stratagem, “...to say something in the first part and than another in the next. Usually the first part is the comparison and the second is the compared – both goes on to form a simile” (Gohain in Phookan1993: 16). Gohain also speculates that for the sake of a rhyme or in an effort to portray emotional intensity, the incoherence precedes the expression. As an example he cites the Assamese version of the following Bodo song (translated here into English)

The bitter gourd in the garden corner
Hey beloved! You
Need not worry about me (ibid: 17).

In the above example, the link between the first sentence and the subsequent two are not very clear. Gohain’s notion of a simile conforms to a subjective notion of poetry, where the poet uses figurative like similes and metaphor to convey a personal point and that poetry is basically a subjective mode of communication. His second point of sacrificing coherence for the sake of rhyme or emotive intensity conforms to the idea of poems being self dependent and autonomous
entities complete in themselves where the end product is as important as the thought in it. Both these ideas ignore the fact that oral derived verse forms like the one above are a part of a collective discourse, where subjective similes would obstruct interaction and the fact that the origins of such forms were not as individual texts but as shared acts. In traditional poetry, as Ramanujam has observed, man's activities and feelings are part of an ecosystem and exterior landscape also informs interior landscape (Ramanujam 1999: 43). The 'bitter gourd' and the 'beloved' are part of a same continuous landscape where each illuminates the other. It provides a metonymic view of man in nature. However, he goes on to say that “if one is closely associated with tribal lifecycle and folk culture, one can perhaps understand the coherence behind this apparent incoherence” (ibid. 17). Oral derived literary forms are predominantly referential and Gohain's final point can be well understood when considered alongside Kroeber's idea of "synecdochic omission" or Foley's 'metonymy' where the larger traditional and cultural structure remains immanent. What is obvious is left out, for the performer and the participants came from a shared context and brought their common knowledge into both rendition and perspicacity, which is representative of their cultural and social reality. It is this aspect that imparts the minimal style to oral renditions, which have to be apprehended in the background of a subtle interaction with its context. Song number 38 (page 223, chapter V) illustrates the shared knowledge and information that one brings into such songs.
The wild betel leaves in the garden corner.
You may be dark, but loveliness your face wears
In the maiden's looms are the reeds
If you want to set home with me
Do not cultivate such habits.
The shrub across the pond
If you want to take me, get a necklace of gold (Boro1995: 36).

One who knows the qualities of a wild betel leaves will at once understand the essence of the song's opening. It is generally dark green unlike the usual lighter shade and much sought after for its pungent state. Hence, though the youth may be dark and apparently wild, he is the maid's chosen one. The third line works at two level; it is the girl's information to the youth that the reeds are still visible in the girls' loom and thus it is not necessary for him to move around the girls at work in their looms in the pretext of seeing what they are weaving. Secondly, it also signifies that the weaving is not much advanced since the reeds are visible, and thus their love too is not much advanced to be taken for granted. The sixth line by pointing that the shrub is across the pond refers to the fact it is not easily within reach. Similarly, she too is not easily within reach and would need material gratification in the shape of the "necklace of gold". The opening line of song number 40 (page 225, chapter V) refers to the sorry state of a girl married into a poor family; she withers away like the "fallen leaves of a fig"

It is against this background that we can understand Nahendra Padun's concept of 'idiomatic expression' discussed above (page 267). Oral-derived songs depend on external referents, a story, a ceremony or simply a shared understanding of the
intricacies of nature. In Mising and Bodo verse forms it is more often than not the
shared intricacies of life, society and nature. Nature permeates the very being of
both the individual and the community. "Our folklife is deeply related to nature . . .
it gives us the clue to seasonal atmosphere, the changes, and oncoming
festivities" (Kagyung1989, 189). Thus in song number 13 from chapter IV (page
184), the Mihu starts by paying obeisance to the whole biota for the success of the
ensuing crops. It is an attitude that is marked by the recognition that all those who
inhabit the world are equal participants and hence the homage and request to the
birds and insects. In song number 64 from chapter V (page 237-238), the "river-
rivulet, trees-creepers, birds-insect" are equal participants in the joys of Baisagu.
Similarly in song number 16 from chapter IV (page 188), plants and creepers,
birds and human, rainbow and the stars are part of an unobtrusive sequence of joy
and celebration

The joys of life are the benevolence of nature, and the pains caused by its
vagaries, and none represents it better than a river. One of the most frequently
used referent in Mising verse forms is the river. The different states of life and
shades of the mind have ample referents in the varying state in the flow of a river.
This is understandable, for the "course of daily life of agricultural Assam is
intricately related to the agitated waves of Dikhou, Disang, Dihing, Bhogdoi,
Dhansiri, Luit, and Subansiri and in our social, political, economic, cultural
spheres the rivers have continued to play a big role . . ." (ibid, 185). Thus a lovers
invitation to his beloved to set up home and start a family in the banks of the
fertile Subansiri in song number 44 from chapter IV (page 201). A family on the bank of a river is an inseparable part of the landscape. Yet the river is not always the progenitor; it is also the mysterious flow to unknown destinations, the unseen and incomprehensible. Thus in song number 43, chapter IV (page 201), the minds of the youth flow along the river and the wind to the unknown and unrealised joys of love in its first flush. The nuances of love’s varied emotion are intricately linked up with nature in Bodo and Mising love songs, and they exemplify best ‘synecdochic omission’, where the shared knowledge of nature remains immanent. A series of references instantly gather in the mind of the audience. These omissions, the apparent lack of linkers and conjuncts is linked up with another very important aspect of oral-derived poetics; variations in length and different versions of the songs depending on certain extra-textual factors.

**Versions and variations**

According to Padun the theme is fixed and is from a larger traditional cultural repository. However, there may be variations in renditions depending on factors like the personality of the singer, the nature of his audience, the length of time available, the specificities of the occasion, and the vocabulary of the singer, for the words are the one the particular singer has acquired and mastered and are available to him at the moment of performance. Thus song numbers 41 and 42 from chapter V (page 225) are versions on the theme of a girls satire on a man who had rejected her and song numbers 58 and 59 (page 223, chapter V) are versions on the theme of consolation and advice to a bride on the verge of leaving
her parental home. To quote Padun, "theme is same, language is different" (in an interview). The traditional element is manifest in the theme, and if it is the conservative factor, than the artistic and creative nuances of the performer is the dynamic factor. The theme is not a fossilised and immutable force from the past, but culture specific perimeters within which the performers have to innovate and improvise. Padun goes on to say that the theme provides for "junctures and fractures", which gives the scope to shorten or lengthen the rendition depending on the extra textual context. This can be exemplified with the help of song number 44 (page 226, chapter V) where by 'synecdochic omission' the following version can be arrived at without alteration in meaning or theme:

Like the Bengchi fish of the flooded lake,
You are beyond my means.

A Bodo will immediately know the significance of the Bengchi fish in a flooded lake. It is rare, for the fishes would have left the bounds of the lake taking advantage of the flood, and hence would be difficult to acquire and expensive. Similarly, song numbers 65 and 66 of chapter V (page 238-239) are versions of markedly different lengths on the theme of Baisagu celebrations. It is the 'junctures' and 'fractures' that provide the scope to introduce elements of modernity with changing times. Thus within the larger thematic ambit of 'hope and despair, union and separation, laughter and tears' of the Mising oi-ni:toms, modern intrusions like aeroplanes or ships have been accommodated. The creation and recreation is a continuous process and shows how tradition and creativity interacts. In the following Bodo Baisagu song, the interaction of
tradition and contemporary social reality interfuse into a collective expression laced with a strong element of ethnic assertion, and nationalistic pride.

Here it comes! Here it comes!
Come companions!
From the western sky comes spontaneous joy
The storm Bardwi in the guise of a girl
Come companions!

Oh companions!
The storm Bardwi comes swaying rhythmically
In the wake of her dancing
Comes Baisagu!

Oh brothers!
Beat on your long drums
Bringdab bringdab!
Oh brothers!
Blow into your flutes
Thorrid thorrid!
We too will dance spontaneously.
In this season of Baisagu
We loose all restraint.

Do not worry sisters,
Do not worry!
We are not those who know not to play our instruments
The symbols of our race.
We will play, sisters from Farbatiwa
Fair and beautiful
We too are not scared of spinning and weaving,
We too shall not forget the dance and the songs,
We too shall not forget the symbols of our race,
We too shall not transgress the rules of our people
We will not give up on the seasonal joys of Baisagu, brothers!
Till the time we live.
We will not give up,
Oh brothers from Tarbatjwa
Handsome and strong.

Come companions!
Come friends!
In this season of Baisagu
Let us, the boys and girls dance freely.
Let us welcome the new year Baisagu.

Forget the past year
Think of the new year
Give up all animosities
We should walk the path to prosperity
We should walk the path to prosperity
Oh boys and girls! 11

In the above song, the idea of traditional musical instruments, dance and songs, and weaving and spinning as symbols of racial identity and assertion is introduced within the larger framework of a Baisagu song. This is an element not noticed in the earlier Bodo songs of festivities in chapter V collected from different anthologies, and is clearly a contemporary incorporation. However, the song is consistent to traditional thematic concerns of ushering in a prosperous new year through dance and gaiety and stylistic features like repetition and reinforcement. Repetition, as revealed by the above song, is one of the most distinctive features of Bodo and Mising oral-derived verse forms. It has to be referred back to the fact

11 Tulan Mochahary, according to whom this is a popular contemporary Baisagu song, provided the Bodo original of this song, which was later translated with his help.
that it is rooted in a collective and participative discourse, and is basically a method to involve the participants and onlookers in the performance. Thus, repetitions are integral to the songs of festivities like *Ali-aye-ligang, Po:rag* (Songs 14 to 16, pages 185-188, chapter IV) and *Baisagu* (Song 64, 66 etc., chapter V). The first sentence generally signifies the cue in a performative milieu and the subsequent repetitions the choral refrain of increasing participatory involvement. In song number 66 of chapter V (page 238-239), the repetitions after periodic intervals not only signify the point where the chorus repeats the cue, but also marks a break, after which the lead singers move over to another point. It is the break to improvise and innovate and often there is no apparent causal passage from one part of the song to the other. The causality lies in the shared and collective knowledge of the festival, the season, the rituals that go on to create the song and the music. It is this shared context that the performers and the audience bring into their performance. One may not, as a non-tribal, be always privy to this shared context.

Repetition also reinforces the verbal text. Unlike lettered textual forms, which affords the convenience to highlight and direct attention to points of importance by methods other than repetition, repetition is an important poetic element to direct attention to what is being sung or said. Thus in the example above, the repetitive fifth stanza highlights the nationalistic fervour of the singers. The incremental repetitions in lullabies are soothing to the senses and accompanied by the rhythmic intonation of the singing voice, accomplishes its functional magic of
returning a child to equipoise. Moreover, if it is believed that correctly uttered words have the power to heal, integrate and assure prosperity, than the repetitive incantations in ritualistic verses are of prime ceremonial importance in order to fulfill their aim.