brother deceiving his foolish elder brother is the theme of the trickster tale entitled “Ajala and Tenton”.

There are parallels of these narratives among the ethnic communities of the region and the State. The motif of robbing the ploughman is found in the Mising Trickster tale. Besides the ethnic communities of Assam like the Bodos, Karbis, Misingbs, the ethnic communities of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have their trickster figures akin to the Assamese trickster figure. In tales like this, the foolish elder brother comes to his senses under the influence of his neighbours and shows maturity and outwits his clever younger brother. The tale has an exact parallel, as Goswami explained, among the Meches [Bodos] of western Assam and the Meiteis of Manipur. Even the Chinese have a trickster tale with the same motif. But in the Chinese version the elder brother is cleverer than the younger brother.

The trickster tale is very popular amongst both the literate and non-literate society. The clever tricks of the hero provide entertainment to the listeners.

Trickster heroes like the Brahmin’s servant are well known for their witty tricks and tirades against high caste people. In Assamese society, casteism was never as prominent and cruel as in the rest of India. But this did not mean that casteism did not exist at all in this part of India. A review of available literature in the early twentieth and late nineteenth century reveals this. It is probably for this reason that the so-called tribal and low caste people cut jokes at the expense of the high caste people, if not in real life, in popular folktales which have the function of “role reversal” as well as “escape mechanism”.

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Notes on Assamese Place-Lore

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During the last decades a new concept, “place-lore” (Est. kohapärimus), has been added to Estonian folkloristics to denote local legends (muistend), beliefs and descriptions of customs that are connected with places, and oral histories, memories and other genres concerning places and toponymes (Remmel 2001, 21). Place-lore is not a distinctive folklore genre; it is not an analytical concept but a synthetic device to study various genres in their connection with environment. According to Mall Hiiemäe, place-lore focuses on natural and cultural surroundings, such as hills, valleys, forests, wetlands, lakes, rivers, fields, stones, old trees, graveyards, chapels, churches and other objects. The very existence of these places in the neighbourhood supports the tradition memory of the local people (Hiiemäe 2007, 364, 370), who share their narratives, beliefs and customs with the younger generations, newcomers and visitors.

Research in place-lore is among the emerging trends in contemporary international folkloristics. Cristina Bacchilega’s inspiring monograph is dedicated to the production of legendary Hawai‘i in the tourist industry and connections between local narratives and the environment (2007). She makes a clear distinction between geographical locations in the landscape and places. The beauty of the landscape can be admired by outsiders, who know nothing about the places as “emotionally, narratively, and historically layered experience” (Bacchilega 2007, 35). Place is a location that evokes feelings and memories and is bound to
local knowledge systems. Place-lore is a shared folkloric tradition that needs a long time to emerge and develop. It is always connected with the heritage of previous generations. Generally a rich and lively place-lore characterizes the narrative traditions of those regions where people have settled for centuries.

Proceeding from these preliminary notes on place-lore as the micro-cosmos of storytellers, let us study a few examples from Assam. I visited this state for the first time in 2000 and have been back twice since this first memorable trip. There was something enchanting about North Eastern India with its diversity of languages, ethnic cultures and religious traditions, as well as the richness of nature, nurtured by the majestic Brahmaputra River. The region was once known as Kamarupa, referring to the Hindu god of love and to the Tantric traditions, deeply rooted in the region. As I have visited some places in Assam several times and been guided by different people, the place-lore of the region has been opening up for me in its richness and variety. During my last trip to Guwahati in January 2008, I collected the following story among my field notes, kindly written down for me by Raktima Hujuri, a doctoral student of folkloristics at Guwahati University:

Kamdeva, god of love, who was burnt by Lord Shiva, got back his previous form in this place – kam means love, rup, beauty.

Kamdeva was a beautiful god like Cupid. Once Lord Shiva was practising Samadhi and was too engrossed. So, everybody was worried. Who and how would the universe run if Lord Shiva does not arise from his meditation? So Rati and her husband were sent (both were good dancers) to break this meditation. Shiva got so enraged that his third eye (on his forehead) opened and fire was coming out from his eye. It is believed that his third eye opens only when he is enraged, then annihilation will follow. Rati, Kamdev’s wife, went mad out of sorrow and requested that Lord Shiva bring her husband back. Then his heart melted seeing the wailing and he said, “There is only one way. There is a place in the east of India where he can get back his form and beauty.” So, she came here along with the ashes, which in turn transformed into Kamdev.

It is a good example of place-lore that links Assam with a mythical past and expounds its ancient name. There is a strong connection between place names and oral tradition about these locations. In contrast to unknown toponyms on geographical maps, place names can evoke narratives, memories and histories. In January 2000 in Kolkata, I made a telephone call to folklore Professor Soumen Sen and told him about my plan to visit Guwahati in Assam. When I mentioned this place-name, Soumen responded by telling a story. As a folklorist I knew that jokes, rumours, beliefs, personal narratives and urban legends often form parts of telephone conversations, but witnessing a performance of a myth by phone was surprising. I was stunned by the magic of these moments, as the ancient myth of Shiva and his wife Sati was transmitted to me via the telephone lines. Of course, I could not record this version, but based on my notes and memory, this is what I heard:

When Brahma and Vishnu were creating the world, Shiva was deep in meditation and stayed away from creation. In order to awake Shiva, Brahma asked his son Daksha to give his beautiful daughter Sati to Shiva as his wife. Shiva and Sati lived happily together on Kailasa Mountain; years passed and Daksha decided to arrange a huge sacrificial ritual. Everybody was invited, except Shiva who was an ascetic and ignored the company of others. Sati went there. During this gathering Daksha started to talk badly about Shiva. This insulted Sati who burned herself in front of the deities. Then Shiva woke up from his meditation, rushed there and took the body of his dead wife. Enraged, he started a cosmic dance, putting the whole world in danger. The gods asked Vishnu to do something in order to stop Shiva’s dance. Vishnu took his weapon sudarshana cakra and...
cut Sati’s body into pieces that fell all over India. All the spots became sacred places, where the goddess is worshipped. Sati’s private parts (yoni) fell to Nilachal hill near Guwahati, where the famous Kamakhya temple is located.

It took only a few days for me to reach Guwahati. Guided by eminent folklorist Kishore Bhattacharjee, I went to Nilachal hill to witness the place, which has been the travel destination for thousands of pilgrims. Myths are narratives with great power to set up rituals, make people act according to ancient models (like the self-immolation of widows in order to follow Sati’s divine precedent) or take travellers to roads to visit places touched by the sacred aura of the sacred genre of myth. The vaults and walls of the Kamakhya temple shelter one of the most important peetha – cult places of the feminine divine power shakti. The Myth about Shiva’s devoted wife Sati, who was cut into pieces that fell all over India, gives sacredness to the whole subcontinent as the story identifies earth with the body of the goddess, who is worshipped as a living deity (Kinsley 1987, 187). Place-lore can thus be deeply religious and mystical, like the experience of worshipping the goddess to the accompaniment of sacred mantras, chanted by Brahmmins in a dark chamber, close to the bosom of earth, where oil lamps cast shadows on the ancient sculptures and on the faces of devout pilgrims, who have come from far away to meet the goddess.

Birendranath Datta has shown that the goddess Kamakhya was associated with the Hindu deities Shiva and Sati during the historical period when the Assamese religion and customs were blended with Brahmanic tradition, dominated by pan-Indian gods and texts in Sanskrit (1998). But Nilachal hill and its close vicinity has many other stories to offer, all connected with local history, going back to mythical times. Narakasura was a great king of Kamarupa, whose life has been discussed in several classical texts, such as Vishnu Purana, Mahabharata and Kalika Purana (Bhattacharjee 2006, 24-25). In January 2003 we visited some villages in the region of Nameri national park and conducted interviews with local people. Farmer Benudhar Das from Potasali village told us several stories about Narakasura’s close connection with the region. A king dreamed of marrying the goddess Kamakhya, who said that she would agree only if Narakasura would build a stone staircase to the top of Nilachal hill in one night. Kamakhya thought that this task would be impossible to accomplish but she was mistaken. Narakasura was very close to finishing the work and Kamakhya, who wanted to avoid the marriage, got frightened. She transformed herself into a chicken and made the sound of a cockcrow. This meant that the night was over and that Narakasura had failed to finish the work. But the stone staircase is still there on the Nilachal hill as a proof of Narakasura’s power and reminder of the ancient myth. Benudhar Das also told us other narratives about local rulers, such as Banaraja or Banasura, the king of Sonitpur. Krishna’s grandson Aniruddha wanted to marry Banaraja’s daughter, but the king had refused. As the wedding was arranged secretly, Banaraja arrested Aniruddha and kept him in the prison at Potasali – the home village of our storyteller. Krishna wanted to set his grandson free and started a war against Banaraja, defeating him. Events of this mythical war explain many place names in the region. For example, Sonitpur is nowadays called Tejpur, meaning the city of blood (Valk 2006, 142-143). Places thus become charged with narratives and mythical meanings that are passed on from one generation to the next. Kishore Bhattacharjee has shown that the link that has been made between the local kings and the kin of asuras – great demonic adversaries of the gods in Hindu mythology – also has a social and political implication. Through such identifications the local political, cultural and religious institutions were incorporated into the pan-Indian Brahmanic tradition (Bhattacharjee 2006).
Fieldwork in the Nameri region also opened up Assamese place-lore on a smaller scale – narratives about places and events that are known only to a few people and will probably fall into oblivion without becoming a part of the mythical history. We met Gojen Naroh – a man from Mising tribe who had been working in the nature preserve for eighteen years. He told us about Bogijuli camp in the jungle where strange things happen. Sometimes the crying of a woman is heard but nobody is seen. Gojen Naroh had never heard the wailing sound but he had heard strange noises in the buildings, like a dragging chair, somebody pulling the carpet or banging a door. Sometimes bamboo had been cut in the bamboo grove next to the forest. When men in the camp had gone to witness what was happening, nobody was seen. Thus, it was believed that the camp was haunted. Gojen Naroh suspected that probably somebody had committed suicide there or wild animals had killed somebody. Such narratives about supernatural encounters have been identified as legends in international folkloristics (see Valk 2007). In contrast to myths – grand narratives that function on the public scale – legends often remain hidden as local narratives, spread among small groups only. Also, many beliefs circulate in tradition as pre-narrative motifs, never used to build up finished and polished narrative plots like those in migratory legends. But also the beliefs, fears and expectations of people whose lives are linked with certain localities, form an important part of place-lore. Sharing it with others means opening up the hidden knowledge that has been accumulated by generations. As a traveller in Assam, I have often felt that certain places have become meaningful to me thanks to the people who share with me their personal memories and tell stories that they have heard from others.

Place-lore is a synthetic concept, connecting several genres, such as myths, legends and beliefs, and enabling folklorists to analyse the connection between oral tradition and environment. Place-lore appears on different scales of narration, from the sharing of intimate knowledge among small groups, to the public representation of myths in books, mass media, film and theatre. The micro-level of Assamese place-lore can be studied firstly in local stories, such as the narratives of the haunted Bogijuli camp; secondly, other stories, such as the myths about Narakasura, are widely known and narrated on the regional level; and thirdly, there are examples of Assamese place-lore that belong to the pan-Indian heritage, such as the myth about Shiva and Sati. Connecting narratives with real locations is much more than a storytelling strategy to confirm the truth of the story and provide material evidence of the narrated events. Folklore animates the environment of traditional communities and creates a sense of belonging to certain places. Generally, one’s home and its close surroundings become charged with memories – either personal or collective memories of shared folklore traditions. Just as the ability to create and share folklore is a distinctive quality of folk communities, the existence of place-lore is a special quality of environment, inhabited by people. Without place-lore man would be surrounded by an empty physical space of alien natural surroundings; place-lore links generations and provides them with a shared identity – the narratives of belonging.

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Endnote
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