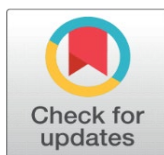
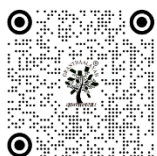


# RITUAL AS PERFORMANCE: A PERFORMATIVE STUDY OF UMPHA PUJA AMONG THE MOHAN-DEODHAI-BAILUNG COMMUNITIES OF ASSAM

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Received 15 March 2026

Accepted 17 May 2026

Published 27 May 2026

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i12s.2026.8156](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i12s.2026.8156)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

This article studies Umpha Puja (offering/worship to heavenly and natural deities for collective welfare) among the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities of Assam as a ritual performance. It asks how a sacred ceremony creates meaning through space, body, voice, objects, offerings, and collective participation. The study follows a qualitative performance analysis method and uses field observation, oral information, ritual photographs, Tai-Ahom cultural sources and selected public online documentation as supplementary material. The theoretical frame draws mainly on Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, Catherine Bell, Roy A. Rappaport, and Jan Assmann. The paper argues that Umpha Puja is a living form of restored ritual behaviour. Its three shal (ritual altar/space) - Bordeo Shal (main/higher divine altar), Hindu Shal (altar for local and Hindu-related deities) and Habideo Shal (altar for boundary, forest and protective powers) - create a visible ritual map where heaven, society, and nature are placed in relation. The Mulung (ritual priest-specialist) and Deori (shrine functionary/ritual assistant) do not merely conduct the ritual; they perform sacred memory through chant, gesture, discipline, and interpretation. The article concludes that Umpha Puja preserves Tai-Ahom cultural memory while also renewing community ties in the present.

**Keywords:** Umpha Puja, Ritual Performance, Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung, Tai-Ahom, Shal, Mulung, Cultural Memory, Assam

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The festivals and rituals of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities are important parts of the cultural history of Assam. These communities are linked with the older Tai-Ahom religious tradition and with a priestly body of knowledge that preserves sacred chants, ritual procedures, calendrical observances and ancestral memory. In community understanding, the Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung are not only social groups. They are also remembered as bearers of ritual knowledge.

Among their ritual traditions, Umpha Puja, also written as Ompha Puja in some sources, occupies a special place. It is associated with Lengdon or Nyu (King of Heaven/ancestral divine figure), with offerings to natural and heavenly deities, and with collective welfare. Padmewar Gogoi (1976) explains Umpha through the idea of offering to Pha or Fra

(deity/divine power). SocialVillage, a public online cultural resource, also describes the ritual as connected with the prosperity of the king, kingdom, and subjects, and names Lengdon or Nyu as the main deity of worship (Archangelmanab, 2020). This online source is used in this paper only as supplementary public documentation, not as a substitute for fieldwork or scholarly sources.

The present article studies Umpha Puja not only as a religious ceremony but also as a ritual performance. Here, performance does not mean entertainment. It means a prepared, repeated and meaningful action done before and with a community. A ritual becomes performative when space, body, voice, objects, memory, and participation work together. Umpha Puja contains all these features: a recognised ritual structure, priestly performers, sacred objects, offerings, chants, animal and bird sacrifice in some contexts, community participation and a clearly arranged sacred space.

The central question of this article is: how does Umpha Puja function as a ritual performance among the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities of Assam? To answer this question, the paper studies the three shal (ritual altar/space), the role of Mulung and Deori, the use of offerings and objects, the function of mantra, and the collective memory produced through the ritual. The aim is not to reduce Umpha Puja to theatre. The aim is to show how sacred action itself has a performative structure.

## 1.1. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The Tai-Ahom people entered Assam under the leadership of Chaolung Sukapha in the thirteenth century. Along with political organisation, they brought language, religious imagination, ritual calendars, and priestly specialists. The Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities are closely connected with this inherited religious and ritual knowledge. Their rituals, therefore, preserve an important part of Tai-Ahom memory in Assam.

A major origin narrative of Umpha Puja connects Lengdon/Nyu with Khunlung and Khunlai (ancestral figures), who are said to have come from Myufi (heavenly realm) to Myungri-Myungram (remembered ancestral world/region) after consultation with Laukhri and Jasingpha (goddess of wisdom/knowledge) (Archangelmanab, 2020). In such narratives, the ritual is not only an act of worship. It is also a way of remembering the sacred beginning of the community.

In the present community setting, Umpha Puja is usually discussed through three ritual spaces. Bordeo Shal (main/higher divine altar) is connected with the higher Tai-Ahom divine order. Hindu Shal (altar for local and Hindu-related deities) brings local and Hindu-related sacred figures into the ritual. Habideo Shal (altar for boundary, forest and protective powers) includes deities of the forest, hills, fields, boundaries, and protection. This threefold structure gives the ritual a visible order and makes it suitable for performance analysis.

## 1.2. CONCEPTUAL FRAME

This paper uses performance studies and ritual studies as its analytical frame. Richard Schechner's idea of restored behaviour is useful because ritual action is learned, repeated and recognised by a community. Schechner describes performance as "twice-behaved behavior" (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). Umpha Puja follows this logic because it is performed in the present but draws authority from inherited forms.

Roy A. Rappaport's definition of ritual is also relevant. He defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport, 1999, p. 24). This helps us understand why the Mulung and Deori do not simply invent the ritual. They follow a sequence that belongs to tradition, even when the present performance responds to a particular local situation.

Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* help explain how Umpha Puja transforms ordinary space into sacred space. Turner describes liminal persons as "betwixt and between" fixed social positions (Turner, 1969, p. 95). In a ritual like Umpha Puja, participants temporarily enter a threshold condition where the everyday world is reorganised through sacred attention. Catherine Bell's idea of ritualization helps explain how ordinary objects become special when they are set apart, arranged and handled in a ritual way (Bell, 1992). Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory is useful because the ritual stores memory in repeated action, sacred names, spatial order, and embodied performance (Assmann, 2011).

These concepts are used only as analytical tools. The primary meaning of Umpha Puja comes from the community, its ritual specialists, and its inherited Tai-Ahom knowledge.

### 1.3. KEY TAI-AHOM TERMS USED IN THIS ARTICLE

The following working meanings are used in the article. Local pronunciation and spelling may vary. Meanings are given in parentheses at first use to help readers who are not familiar with Tai-Ahom ritual vocabulary.

Term	Working meaning used in this article
<i>Umpha Puja</i>	offering/worship to heavenly and natural deities for collective welfare
Lengdon/Nyu	King of Heaven; ancestral divine figure
Pha/Fra	deity or divine power
Shal	ritual altar/space
Bordeo Shal	main/higher divine altar
Hindu Shal	altar for local and Hindu-related deities
Habideo Shal	altar for boundary, forest and protective powers
Mulung	ritual priest-specialist
Deori	shrine functionary or ritual assistant
Deoghar/Hefi	octagonal central altar
Nam-Ja-Riu-Ja-Rai	holy water
Doy-Ma-Lung-Fura	Nature god
Jasingpha	goddess of wisdom/knowledge
Khaokham	water god
Langdin/Ai Lengdin	earth/earth deity
Langkuri	mountain god
Lai-Lung-Khan	jungle or forest god
Ganana	ritual divination/calculation

## 2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative performance analysis method. The purpose is not to measure Umpha Puja through numbers. The purpose is to understand how ritual meaning is created through space, body, voice, objects and participation. The study is based on doctoral fieldwork on the festivals and rituals of the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities, supported by textual sources on Tai-Ahom history, religion, and culture.

The primary materials include field observation, oral information, ritual description, photographs, and notes on the arrangement of offerings and ritual spaces. The secondary materials include Tai-Ahom historical and cultural works, performance theory, ritual theory and one selected public online article. The online article is used carefully to identify circulating terms and public descriptions of the ritual, such as Lengdon/Nyu, Myufi, Myungri-Myungram, Deoghar/Hefi, Nam-Ja-Riu-Ja-Rai, and Doy-Ma-Lung-Fura (Archangelmanab, 2020).

The mantra examples included in this paper are taken from the Tai-Ahom ritual passage presented in the thesis chapter on Umpha Puja, which cites Barua's Ahom-Buranji (Barua, 1985, p. 14). The English translations given in this article are made by the authors from the Assamese meaning supplied in the thesis source. The translations are, therefore, interpretive and are meant for academic explanation, not for ritual use.

The analysis follows five steps: first, it locates Umpha Puja within Tai-Ahom ritual memory; second, it reads the three shal as a performance field; third, it studies the Mulung, Deori, offerings, and objects as components of ritual performance; fourth, it discusses mantra and ritual speech; and fifth, it interprets the ritual through restored behaviour, ritualization, liminality, communitas, and cultural memory.

**Table 1**

Table 1 Analytical Frame Used for the Performance Study of Umpha Puja	
Analytical focus	Purpose in the study
Sacred space	To understand the three shal as a ritual performance field.
Ritual performers	To study the Mulung and Deori as performers, organisers and memory bearers.

Objects and offerings	To analyse how ordinary materials become sacred signs.
Mantra, sound and body	To examine chant, gesture, posture and movement as ritual action.
Community participation	To understand liminality, communitas, and cultural memory.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that Umpha Puja works as a complex ritual performance. Its meaning is produced through the combined action of space, performers, objects, sound, sacrifice, community presence, and memory. The following discussion avoids unnecessary repetition and treats each element as part of one ritual event.

#### 3.1. HISTORICAL AND RITUAL SETTING OF UMPHA PUJA

Umpha Puja is connected with the older Ahom religious order and with the worship of Lengdon/Nyu and other deities. It is remembered as a royal ritual, but in the present, it also works as a community ritual. This movement from a royal background to community practice is important. It shows that ritual forms can survive political change when they are preserved through community memory and repeated action.

The word Umpha is linked with offering to Pha/Fra (deity/divine power). Gogoi (1976) explains the ritual through this idea of offering to the heavenly gods. The SocialVillage article adds that the ritual was earlier associated with the welfare of the king, the kingdom and the subjects, and that it was performed by Deodhai and Bailung priests during the spring season (Archangelmanab, 2020). These details support the view that Umpha Puja is both a sacred act and a social act.

The ritual should not be read only as a survival of the past. It is an active cultural event. Through it, the community remembers the Ahom past, affirms priestly knowledge and brings different layers of belief into one sacred field. The past is preserved not only in books but also through chanting, offering, bodily action, and collective presence.

#### 3.2. SACRED SPACE: THE THREE SHAL AS A PERFORMANCE FIELD

The most visible performance structure of Umpha Puja is the arrangement of three shal: Bordeo Shal, Hindu Shal, and Habideo Shal. These are not only practical places for worship. They are symbolic zones. Together they create the sacred geography of the ritual.

The Bordeo Shal is connected with the higher Tai-Ahom divine world. It includes deities such as Khaokham (water god), Langdin or Ai Lengdin (earth/earth deity), Pha Nu Ru Lengdon (King of Heaven), Jasingpha (goddess of wisdom/knowledge), Cheng-Mun-Cheng-Ban (Sun and Moon), and other sacred powers (Archangelmanab, 2020; Baruah, 2010). The Hindu Shal includes deities connected with local and Hindu-related belief systems. The Habideo Shal includes powers of hills, forests, fields, boundaries, and protection, including Langkuri (mountain god), Lai-Lung-Khan (jungle/forest god), and Doy-Ma-Lung-Fura (Nature god) in public descriptions (Archangelmanab, 2020).

This threefold arrangement is a ritual map. Bordeo Shal represents heaven and Tai-Ahom divine authority. Hindu Shal represents social inclusion and local religious contact. Habideo Shal represents nature, boundaries, and protection. The ritual becomes meaningful because it places all three zones within one visible order.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Sacred Offering Area and Shal Arrangement During Umpha Puja. Source: Field Documentation Supplied by the Authors.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Sacrificial Offerings and Ritual Materials Arranged in the Sacred Space of Umpha Puja.

Source: Field Documentation Supplied by the Authors.

**Table 2**

**Table 2: Three Ritual Spaces of Umpha Puja and Their Performance Meaning**

Ritual space	Main symbolic field	Performance meaning
Bordeo Shal	Tai-Ahom heavenly/divine order	Links the ritual to Lengdon/Nyu and the higher sacred world.
Hindu Shal	Local and Hindu-related social deities	Shows social inclusion, adjustment and contact with wider Assamese religious life.
Habideo Shal	Boundary, forest and protective powers	Places nature, boundaries, and protection within the ritual field.

In performance terms, the shal arrangement works like a sacred stage. The word stage is used here analytically, not theatrically. The participants can see where offerings are placed, how deities are addressed, and how the ritual universe is organised. This visual order is one reason why Umpha Puja is important for visual and performing arts research.

### 3.3. MULUNG, DEORI AND THE BODY OF RITUAL AUTHORITY

The Mulung and Deori are central to Umpha Puja. They are not performers in the entertainment sense, but they perform ritual knowledge through body, voice, discipline, and sequence. The Mulung knows the order of invocation, the placement of offerings, and the ritual relation between human beings and deities. The Deori helps maintain the sacred action and supports the ritual movement from preparation to performance. Kumari (2026)

Their performance begins before the public ritual moment. Materials must be collected, offerings prepared, ritual spaces arranged, and personal discipline maintained. This hidden preparation is as important as the visible ceremony. Goffman's distinction between public presentation and the preparation behind it is useful here, though the ritual context is sacred rather than theatrical (Goffman, 1959).

The Mulung's voice is one of the central instruments of the ritual. Through chant and invocation, speech becomes action. The words do not merely describe the ritual; they call, offer, bless and protect. The body is equally important. The way the ritual specialist sits, moves, handles objects, and directs attention gives the ritual its visible seriousness.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Ritual Specialist Holding a Chicken Leg Used for Ganana (Ritual Divination/Calculation).

**Source:** Field Documentation Supplied by the Authors.

The act of ganana (ritual divination/calculation) shows how the ritual specialist interprets signs within the sacred frame. The object in hand is not treated as an ordinary object. It becomes a sign to be read through inherited knowledge. In this way, ritual authority is produced through body, object, and interpretation together.

### 3.4. OFFERINGS, OBJECTS AND VISUAL SIGNS

Umpha Puja uses many objects: banana leaves, rice, eggs, betel nut, earthen lamps, ginger, salt, oil, liquor, bamboo, cloth, food items, sacrificial birds or animals, and other ritual materials. These objects are not decorative additions. They are signs within a sacred system.

A banana leaf becomes a sacred surface when it is placed within the ritual order. Rice becomes a sign of life and fertility. Earthen lamps mark presence and attention. Betel nut and leaf suggest respect, exchange and invitation. Bamboo and banana structures create temporary sacred architecture. The SocialVillage description mentions Deoghar/Hefi (octagonal central altar), Nam-Ja-Riu-Ja-Rai (holy water), and 25 earthen lamps placed on banana-tree posts in the name of Doy-Ma-Lung-Fura (Nature god) (Archangelmanab, 2020).

Bell’s idea of ritualization helps explain this transformation. Ordinary objects become sacred because they are selected, placed, handled, and addressed in a special way (Bell, 1992). The same materials outside the ritual do not carry the same force. In Umpha Puja, the order of placement, the direction of action, the number of objects, and the chant associated with them make the materials meaningful.

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Processional Movement of Offerings and Ritual Objects During Umpha Puja.

**Source:** Field Documentation Supplied by the Authors.

The movement of offerings also gives the ritual a processional rhythm. The objects travel from ordinary handling to sacred placement. This movement allows the community to see the transformation of material things into ritual signs. Such visual transformation is one of the strongest performative features of Umpha Puja.

### 3.5. MANTRA, VOICE AND RITUAL SPEECH

Mantra and ritual speech are central to Umpha Puja. Sound marks the shift from ordinary time to sacred time. Participants may not understand every sacred word, but the voice of the ritual specialist creates authority and seriousness. In this sense, sound is not an addition to the ritual. It is part of the ritual action itself.

The following examples are included to show how Tai-Ahom ritual speech carries mythic memory and instruction. The Tai-Ahom lines are reproduced from the Assamese-script rendering of the mantra passage presented in the thesis chapter on Umpha Puja, citing Barua’s Ahom-Buranji (Barua, 1985, p. 14). The English translations are made by the authors from the Assamese meaning supplied in that source. These are explanatory translations for academic use.

**Table 3**

Table 3 Examples of Mantra/Ritual Speech and English Translations Made by the Authors.		
Mantra excerpt / ritual line	English translation by the authors	Source note
<i>Chang Tak Ru Pi Khek To Chang. Na Fa Khek To Hu To Khai.</i>	At the first ritual promise, worship us with an elephant; at the second, offer a cow and a buffalo.	Tai-Ahom ritual passage as cited in the thesis from Barua (1985, p. 14).
<i>Khup Mo Na Din Ha Mu- Mung ... Ngi Fa-Fa Nu Ru ...</i>	When the month of Dinha/Chaitra comes, the earth becomes filled with flowers, and Lengdon comes to the earth with the deities. Then choose a day and worship Lengdon so that the land remains safe.	Tai-Ahom ritual passage as cited in the thesis from Barua (1985, p. 14).

These lines show that the ritual speech is not only devotional. It also gives instruction, recalls divine origin and connects worship with the safety of the land. The mantra therefore works as performative speech. It does something when it is uttered in the right ritual context. It calls the sacred past into the present and guides the community toward collective welfare.

Rappaport's definition of ritual as formal acts and utterances helps explain this role of mantra (Rappaport, 1999). In Umpha Puja, utterance and action cannot be separated. The offering gains ritual force through speech, and the speech gains force through offering, body and space.

### **3.6. LIMINALITY, COMMUNITAS AND CULTURAL MEMORY**

Umpha Puja creates a liminal condition. During the ritual, an ordinary place becomes a sacred field. The three shal, offerings, chants, movement and community attention create a threshold between the human world and the divine world. Turner's concept of liminality helps explain this temporary transformation (Turner, 1969).

The ritual also produces *communitas*. People gather not merely as separate individuals but as members of one ritual community. The shared focus on deities, blessings, safety, and collective welfare produces a feeling of togetherness. This is especially important for the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities because the ritual renews group memory and social responsibility.

Assmann's idea of cultural memory is helpful here. Cultural memory is stored not only in written texts but also in symbols, rituals, places, and repeated practices (Assmann, 2011). Umpha Puja stores memory in the names of deities, the shal arrangement, the role of Mulung and Deori, the use of sacred objects, and the sound of mantra. Through the ritual, the community does not simply remember the past; it performs the past in the present.

This point also makes Umpha Puja important for performance studies. It expands the idea of performance beyond theatre. The ritual has sacred space without being a theatre stage, performers without being actors, objects without being props, and viewers who are also believers and participants. This makes it a valuable subject for a journal of visual and performing arts.

### **3.7. CONTEMPORARY MEANING AND PRESERVATION**

In the contemporary period, Umpha Puja has an added function. It acts as a living archive of Tai-Ahom ritual knowledge. Modern education, migration, changing occupations, religious change and the decline of older language practices have affected many community traditions. In such a situation, the ritual preserves knowledge that cannot be fully stored in written form.

A written archive preserves documents. A ritual archive preserves action. Umpha Puja preserves how to arrange space, how to call deities, how to use objects, how to prepare offerings, and how to place the community before the sacred. This knowledge must be seen, heard and learned through performance.

At the same time, documentation must be ethical. Field photographs, audio-visual recordings, and academic writing may help preserve the ritual, but sacred or restricted details should be shared only with community consent. The goal of research should not be to expose the ritual for curiosity. It should be to understand and respect its cultural meaning.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study has examined Umpha Puja among the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung communities of Assam as a ritual performance. The analysis shows that Umpha Puja is not only a religious ceremony. It is a structured sacred event where space, priestly action, offerings, mantra, body discipline, and community participation create meaning together.

The three shal form the main visual and symbolic structure of the ritual. Bordeo Shal connects the ritual with the higher Tai-Ahom divine order. Hindu Shal connects it with wider local and social religious inclusion. Habideo Shal connects it with boundary, forest and protective powers. Together, these spaces create a ritual map of heaven, society, and nature.

The Mulung and Deori function as ritual performers and knowledge bearers. Their voice, body, preparation, and authority give the ritual its form. Offerings and objects work as visual signs. They become meaningful through ritualization, placement, chant, and sacred handling. The mantra examples show that ritual speech preserves instruction, mythic memory and collective hope.

The article concludes that Umpha Puja is a living example of ritual as performance. It preserves Tai-Ahom cultural memory, renews community bonds, and offers a strong subject for research in visual and performing arts. Future

research may document local variations of Umpha Puja, compare it with other Tai-Ahom rituals, and study the role of visual documentation in preserving ritual knowledge.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No external funding was received for this study. The authors acknowledge the Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung community members, ritual specialists and informants who helped develop a field understanding of Umpha Puja. The authors also acknowledge the doctoral research context from which the field-based material of this article was developed. The photographs reproduced in this article are from field documentation supplied by the authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The field notes, oral information and photographic materials used for this article are part of the first author's doctoral research documentation. They are not publicly deposited because they include community-based ritual material and identifiable ritual contexts. Relevant details may be made available from the corresponding author for academic verification, subject to community consent and ethical restrictions.

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