

Kamakhya and the Shamanic Eye: Sacred Sculptures, Trance, and Healing in Assamese and Global Tradition

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Abstract :

The Kamakhya temple, situated on Nilachal Hill in Assam, represents a confluence of Shaktism, Tantra, and certain elements that show similarities to Shamanism. In my studies, I found Kamakhya to be a sacred space where rituals of fertility, trance, and healing intersect with rich sculptural symbolism. This paper seeks to explore how the sacred sculptures of Kamakhya embody spiritual power, how trance rituals act as a medium of communication with the divine, and how these practices resonate with global shamanic traditions of healing and transcendence. By comparing Assamese traditions with worldwide shamanic practices, this study aims to shed light on the universal role of sacred art and ritual in human well-being.

Keywords :

Kamakhya, Shamanism, Sacred, Tantric, Healing, Tradition, Well-being, Global Shamanic

Introduction :

Religion and culture have always been closely tied to human attempts to understand life, death, health, and the mysteries of the universe. Across civilizations, people have turned to sacred rituals, symbolic art, and trance experiences to connect with the unseen. Among these traditions, shamanism stands out as one of the earliest and most widespread systems of spiritual practice. It is not bound by one region or faith but is found in tribal and indigenous communities across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

In India, the Kamakhya temple of Assam provides a unique case where ancient shamanic elements, Tantric rituals, and Shaktism come together. Kamakhya is not only a major Hindu Shakti Peetha but also a site where worship practices reflect strong parallels with global shamanism. Rituals of trance, sacrifice, drumming, intoxication, and healing are all part of Kamakhya's living heritage.

This seminar paper explores three broad dimensions of Kamakhya's tradition:

1. Its sacred sculptures and symbolic art
2. The role of trance and healing
3. The comparative framework between global shamanic traditions and Kamakhya worship

By studying these aspects, we can understand Kamakhya not only as a religious shrine but also as a cultural bridge connecting ancient tribal beliefs, Tantric philosophy, and the universal human quest for healing and balance.

Review of Literature :

Scholarly interest in Kamakhya temple and its practices has emerged from diverse perspectives—history, folklore, anthropology, and religious studies. Early works such as P.C. Choudhary's *History of the Civilization of the People of Assam* (1966) contextualize Kamakhya within the broader cultural evolution of Kamarupa, highlighting its civilizational depth. K.L. Baruah's *Early History of Kamarupa* (1966) also emphasizes Kamakhya as a central symbol of political and religious identity in Assam.

D.P. Chattopadhyay's *Lokayata* (1973) situates Tantric traditions in philosophical discourse, while B. Kakati's *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* (1981) provides detailed insights into the goddess cult and its rituals. Ganga Sarma's *Mother Goddess Kamakhya* further elaborates on the symbolism of fertility and divine femininity in the temple tradition.

Anthropological perspectives such as William Crooke's *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (1978) and A.D.W. Malefijt's *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926) shed light on the magical, ritualistic, and healing dimensions of Indian folk practices, which resonate with Kamakhya's living heritage. Similarly, H. Webster's *Primitive Secret Societies* (1932) and E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1958) provide a comparative framework to understand Kamakhya's trance and ritual traditions in the context of global shamanism.

Art historical studies, including I.C. Choudhary's unpublished thesis *A Study of Sculpture in the Assam State Museum with Special Reference to its Style and Techniques* (2003), underscore the aesthetic and symbolic importance of sculptural traditions linked with Kamakhya.

Contemporary reflections such as Meenakshi Devi's *Kamakhya Dhamor Utsav Anusthan* (2016) highlight the continuity of festival culture and living rituals, showing how ancient practices remain central to the modern identity of Kamakhya.

Together, these works demonstrate that Kamakhya is not only a religious shrine but also a site where history, philosophy, art, folklore, and anthropology intersect. However, while existing literature explores aspects of Tantra, folklore, and architecture, very few studies directly compare Kamakhya's practices with global shamanic traditions. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

Sacred Sculptures of Kamakhya :

Art and architecture at Kamakhya are not mere decorations; they embody deep spiritual meaning. The temple, located on Nilachal Hill in Guwahati, is famous for its stone carvings and sculptural programs, which reflect both Hindu and tribal influences.

The central object of worship at Kamakhya is not an idol but the yoni (female generative organ), represented in a stone cleft naturally fed by a subterranean spring. This unique form of worship recalls fertility cults and earth-centered traditions common in indigenous shamanism.

The temple walls and precincts are decorated with mythological motifs, floral patterns, animal figures, and divine images. These sculptures serve as a visual theology, conveying complex ideas of creation, destruction, and regeneration. For example:

Matrika panels: Images of mother goddesses suggest the nurturing and protective aspects of divine power.

Erotic sculptures: These symbolize fertility, creation, and the integration of desire into spiritual life, similar to fertility rituals in shamanic cultures worldwide.

Animal depictions: Lions, elephants, and birds carved into the temple structures represent strength, wisdom, and divine messengers.

Such symbolism is consistent with the shamanic worldview, where nature, animals, and fertility are seen as sacred energies. Just as shamans carve totems or paint ritual images, the artisans of Kamakhya carved stone to express spiritual truths.

Thus, the sculptures of Kamakhya are not passive art forms but active mediators—visual tools that guide devotees toward trance, imagination, and deeper communion with the goddess.

Trance and Healing Traditions :

Each mantra is accompanied by various rituals. There are distinct days, bars, and stars for the application of mantras. Not all mantras can be applied by all people. Some spells can only be used by tribal people; some are for women or virgins; some require idols to be established before their performance. Many mantras require water in sadhana. Certain diseases are believed to be cured by dehydration or water-cutting.

Other mantras use blood, teeth, nails, feathers, and parts of animals such as crows, cocks, donkeys, black cats, seals, turtles, snakes, and fish. In some rituals, even the blood of one's own body is offered.

When diseases could not be cured, people accepted supernatural explanations, which became ritual traditions. Some mantras were specifically for snakebites, ghost possession, diseases, subjugation, or seduction. For example:

If someone was bitten by a snake, he was brought to the witch doctor, who was believed to absorb the pain through his magic powers.

When someone was possessed by a ghost, tantric rituals were performed to expel the spirit.

At Kamakhya, enchanted amulets are also used for healing diseases, and there are special ways to relieve pain in the legs and back.

Oral traditions record figures such as Ramakanta Sharma, a resident of Kamakhya Dham, who was said to have performed funeral rites and even brought the deceased back to life briefly to express last wishes. Similarly, Ambika Prasad Sharma was believed to cure snakebites through mantras.

Temple Priests and Functionaries :

The functioning of Kamakhya involves different classes of ritual specialists, each with a defined role:

Brahmins – Only those with the title of Borpujari can worship the goddess Kamakhya. Other Brahmins perform daily worship at the surrounding Dasamahavidya shrines. They also guide devotees in ritual purification at Subhanggya Kunda.

Athaparis – Assistants who perform various temple duties.

Malis – Supply flowers, garlands, and leaves for rituals.

Goyans – Singers and dancers who perform devotional songs.

Duwaris – Gatekeepers responsible for opening and closing the temple gates.

Balikata – Perform sacrificial rituals connected to daily worship.

Barbars – Assist in festivals and ceremonies.

Tamulis – Provide sandalwood and prepare offerings for evening arati and Maha Bhog.

Dhol-Khol players – Musicians who create rhythmic soundscapes during worship.

Dhubas – Known for devotional songs sung on the temple banks.

Bharalis – Caretakers of paddy fields, ensuring offerings for the goddess.

Goldsmiths – Prepare ornaments for the goddess.

Dreams and Beliefs :

Dreams play an important role in shamanic traditions, and at Kamakhya, dream interpretation is also considered powerful. For example:

Dreaming of tooth loss is considered harmful.

Crying in dreams is believed to bring joy in reality, while laughing in dreams may bring sorrow.

Seeing snakes in dreams is auspicious.

Seeing red flowers or butter on the body is considered a sign of death.

Local customs also connect dreams and taboos with everyday life—for example, widows are discouraged from cutting their hair, and certain days are reserved for reciting Lakshmi Panchali to invite prosperity.

Trance and Healing in Practice :

At the heart of Kamakhya's rituals is trance, achieved through:

Continuous chanting of mantras

Drumming and ringing of bells

Offerings of liquor and herbs

Healing remains a central purpose, addressing both physical and psychological suffering. The Ambubachi Mela demonstrates how the temple becomes a site of collective renewal, where devotees believe both earth and humanity are spiritually refreshed.

Global Shamanic Parallel

Global shamanism shares several features with Kamakhya:

Trance and altered states of consciousness

Rhythmic sound and music

Sacrificial rituals

Oracular prophecy

Healing and fertility rites

Collective participation

These parallels can be seen in Siberian shamans, Native American medicine men, African sangomas, and Mongolian shamans. The similarity suggests that human spiritual needs express themselves in common ways across cultures.

Shamanic Worship and Kamakhya: A Comparative Study

Kamakhya's rituals echo shamanism through:

1. Women acting as oracles
2. Chanting and sacrifice
3. Drumming and rhythm
4. Intoxication and ritual offerings
5. Priests as mediators
6. Esoteric Tantric practices
7. Healing and fertility rituals

Thus, Kamakhya represents a fusion of tribal practices, Vedic hymns, Tantric philosophy, and shamanic traditions.

Kamakhya as a Living Heritage :

Kamakhya is not a monument of the past but a living tradition. The Ambubachi Mela and daily rituals demonstrate how ancient practices survive, adapt, and thrive. The temple stands as a dialogue between past and present, tribal and classical, local and global.

Conclusion :

Kamakhya is more than a temple. It is a sacred space where shamanism, Tantra, and Shaktism converge. Its sculptures embody fertility and cosmic energy, its rituals channel trance and healing, and its festivals preserve living heritage.

Placed in a global perspective, Kamakhya reveals the universality of human spirituality—the quest for healing, balance, and divine connection. By comparing it with shamanic worship worldwide, we see that spirituality speaks a common language of chant, rhythm, sacrifice, and devotion.

Thus, Kamakhya stands not only as a Hindu Shakti Peetha but also as a global shamanic center, where the goddess continues to bless humanity through trance, prophecy, sacrifice, and healing.

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