

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON FOLK-BELIEF AMONG DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS GROUPS WITHIN BODO SOCIETY

Mr. Sailendra Boro- Research Scholar, Centre for Language Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya; Asst. Professor, Deptt. of Bodo, Tangla College, Tangla

Dr. Ranjita Boro- Assistant Professor, Centre for Language Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

Abstract

The Bodo community, indigenous to the Brahmaputra Valley and belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, has a documented presence since the second millennium B.C. Their cultural heritage includes distinct linguistic, agrarian, ritualistic, and socio-political traditions. This study utilizes field surveys, interviews, observations, and participations in community events to gather both primary from Udalguri district and secondary data collected from journals, books and dissertations. Modernization, Western education, and technological advancements are contributing to a decline in traditional Bodo folk beliefs, rituals, and animistic practices. Higher education, in particular, encourages a more scientific worldview, leading younger generations to question and abandon traditional superstitions and dogmas. The rise of the Brahma religion in the early 20th century, led by reformers like Kalicharan Brahma, promoted monotheism and simplified rituals, impacting festivals such as *Bathou Puja* by emphasizing spiritual symbolism. External factors like inter-religious marriages and the government marriage registration system are also indirectly affecting traditional marriage and religious practices. Despite these significant evolutions and adaptations, Bodo festivals remain crucial for preserving Bodo identity and resilience for which student union, cultural activists have been actively involved.

Keywords: Bodo, Fol-belief, Indigenous, Tibeto-Burman, Udalguri, Modernization, *Bathou Puja*

1. Introduction

The Bodo people form the largest primitive tribe of the present demography of Assam. Though they are spread out into different parts of this region, as well as into neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal, the majority are found in Assam. In Assam, Brahmaputra valley, this tribe is concentrated in the present districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Tamulpur, Udalguri, Dhubri, Goalpara, Darrang, Nogaon and Morigaon, and despite scattered; the Bodos maintain a separate identity from others by virtue of their distinct language and culture. Historically, there are numerically small tribes in Assam having their own distinct culture and religion. It is believed that the Tribals are the first natives of the region. Admittedly, this shared homeland has shrunk substantially in the distorted process of the socio-economic transformation of Assam during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The Bodo tribe belongs to the Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid tribes of North East India. Linguistically, the Garos, the Rabhas', the Tiwa's, the Dimasas, the Hajongs, the Sonowals, the Deoris and many other cognate tribes are part of this Bodo race. The Bodos are believed to be the earliest settlers of Assam, though the date of migration from their original abode, namely. North western China, to this part of present India, is debated. However, scholars agree that the Bodo people settled in this region much before the Aryans.

The supernatural and spirit world is integral to Northeast Indian tribal society, co-existing with social life and lacking the Western concept of nature-culture duality. It's a source of exchange, fear, reverence, and understanding, sought for answers and solutions for harmonious existence. The natural surroundings are the tribes' source of livelihood, leading them to worship or acknowledge spirits present within these environments. This highlights a deep connection between their beliefs and their physical world. As the younger generation became detached from their traditional culture, their belief in the supernatural decreased. This process inadvertently led to a detachment from nature itself, signifying a loss of traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual connection.

2. Problem Statement

The Bodo community in Assam is experiencing a decline in traditional folk beliefs, rituals, and animistic practices due to the increasing influence of modernization, Western education, and technological advancements. This shift is leading the younger generation to question and abandon traditional superstitions and dogmas, particularly as higher education fosters a more logical and scientific worldview.

Modern farming methods, including the use of tractors, power tillers, and hybrid seeds, are replacing traditional Bodo agricultural practices like wooden ploughs and homemade fertilizers. This transition, coupled with a move from a rural agricultural economy to an urban consumerist mindset, is diminishing the community's reliance on nature-centric beliefs.

The adoption of new faiths, such as the monotheistic Brahma religion and Christianity, is also contributing to the abandonment of old rituals and animistic beliefs (*Bathouism*) within the Bodo community. These new religious affiliations encourage a departure from traditional practices.

3. Significance of the Study

Preserving the folk beliefs of the Bodo community is crucial for maintaining their distinct cultural identity, social cohesion, and ecological harmony in the face of globalization and acculturation. As a prominent indigenous group in Assam, Bodos rely on *Bathouism*, oral traditions, and nature worship to sustain their unique identity and social stability. These beliefs, particularly the worship of *Bwrai Bathou* and the symbolic use of the Sijou plant, distinguish them from mainstream cultures.

Oral traditions, including folktales, myths, and legends, serve as a vital defence against cultural heritage erosion, especially among younger generations influenced by modernization. Folk beliefs act as 'unwritten social laws' that guide community behavior, ensuring peace and discipline in rural life. Rituals like *Kherai Puja* and the *Bagurumba* dance foster a strong sense of belonging and unity within the community.

Bodo folk belief is deeply intertwined with nature worship, promoting a harmonious relationship with the environment. Many beliefs are linked to agricultural practices, such as rituals performed for a good harvest, reflecting a sustainable lifestyle dependent on Mother Earth. Additionally, folk performing arts are used to express social concerns and support the Bodo movement for political rights.

The adoption of other religions, such as Hinduism and Christianity, has led to the dilution of some traditional practices. Younger generations often show less interest in traditional knowledge, highlighting the urgent need to document and promote these practices through modern mediums like digital archives. The study aims to engage the youth in understanding the relevance and benefits of a life connected to nature and traditional knowledge systems.

4. Study Objectives

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives-

- i) To Study Folk-Belief Among different Religious Groups within Bodo Society.
- ii) To reflect on importance of preserving the Bodos traditional belief and way of life.

5. Hypothesis

- The Bodo traditional belief system is both religious and non-religious.
- There are Customary laws and folk beliefs of Bodos.
- The modern society has advantages in adopting and relying in traditional folk belief
- Provided proper guidance and mobilization given, the younger generation can be instrumental in preservation of the traditional Bodo folk belief.

6. Research Methodology

This study is field-oriented, utilizing field surveys, face-to-face interviews, observations, and participations during religious and social events. Data collection will involve both primary data from active informants and secondary data from passive bearers and published materials. Questionnaires, including open-ended and closed-ended questions, were used, and the Likert Scale methodology was

employed to gather respondent views. The researcher, being a native of the Bodo society and actively involved in its social and religious events, has leveraged this insider perspective to gather comprehensive knowledge. The study aims to provide solutions and recommend ways to preserve the traditional belief system for contemporary Bodo society.

The researcher has survey in Udalguri district of BTC, Assam. Udalguri district has two Sub-divisions, namely Udalguri Sub-division and Bhergaon Sub-division.

Name of Sub-Division	Name of Villages (both Bathou dominated as well as other religion villages)	Method of survey
Bhergaon	Bastabari, Nizsekhar, Baligaon, Nagasuba, Darogasuba, Khasiasuba, Khagrabari, Atelia, Chabukdhora, Totlapara, Simliguri, Amguri, Murmela, Gheunala.	Questionnaires, Observation, Interviews, Participation in events
Udalguri	Jamphrabari, Behergami, Lising, Amjuli, Khasibari, Khantalguri, Ambagaon, Sapkhaiti, Aithenjar, Gerua, Khusrabari, Naoherua, Mohanpur, Dwifang.	Questionnaires, Observation, Interviews, Participation in events
The main informants/ respondents of the survey were Bathou religious priests, village headmen, president/secretary of the village, elderly people, educated youth, leaders of other religions such as Bramas, Christians, etc.		

7. Review of Literature

An Introduction to **Folklore and Folklife**, edited by Richard M. Dorson was published by The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London in the year 1982 (paperback edition). This is the most important books of the folklore study. This book consists of articles written on different writers, various folklore and folklife heritage of all over the world.

Madhu Ram Boro's book **"Boro Loko-Sahitya (geet-pot)"**, published in 1995 by Priyadini Brahma, Hajo, provides a comprehensive discussion of Bodo folk songs. The book categorizes Bodo folk songs into various sub-branches, including *Hador Onphaori Methai*, *Zwhwlaoari Methai*, *Abadari Methai*, *Gotho Burkhainai Methai*, *Gwsw thwlainaini Methai*, *Maonai Dangnaini Methai*, *Haba Methai*, *Jongkhainai Methai*, *Bwisagu Methai*, *Laokhar Methai/Gelenaini Methai*, *Bwidasi Methai*, and *Dhwrwmari Methai*.

Madhu Ram Boro's other work, **"Boro Loko-Sahitya (phokora-jojona, sathor, jana biswas)"**, complements the song collection by discussing Bodo folk songs, *Bwidasi* songs, charms, proverbs, riddles, and folk beliefs. Both books are considered highly valuable for research in this field.

Mohini Mohan Brahma's **'Boroni Khuga Methai'** was published in 2011 by N.L.Publication. This valuable book compiles Bodo folk songs in three languages: English, Bodo, and Assamese. The author organized the songs based on various themes, including season, nature, religion, marriage, and didactic principles. Brahma undertook the effort to collect Bodo folk songs primarily from the western lower Assam region, where the Bodo community is dispersed.

'Boro Harimuni Mohar Mushree' by Birendra Giri Basumatary, published in 2009 by N.L. Publication, primarily explores Bodo folk literature. The book, however, extends its focus to provide a comprehensive discussion on Bodo culture, historical context, folklore, religious aspects, and traditional customs and practices. It is highlighted as a valuable resource for in-depth study of these subjects.

'Boro Kacharini Samaj arw Harimu' by Bhaben Narzi was published in 2014 by Chirang Publication Board. It serves as a valuable resource detailing Bodo culture, religion, folklore, sociology, and anthropology. The book discusses the origin of Mongoloid or Kiratas in India. It is based on fieldwork, exploring myths, the origins of the Bodo-Kachari people, creation stories, and various legends.

Kameswar Brahma's **'A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos'** was published in 2015 by Asian Offset Printers, Delhi. The book primarily discusses the social

customs, beliefs, and practices of the Bodo people. A significant point noted about the book is its lack of detailed descriptions regarding Bodo folk literature.

Even though some studies have been conducted in this aspect, there are unexplored villages, societies who abide by traditional Bodo folk belief system, rely on local ojhas (kobiras) for treatment of many illnesses. They remain close to nature, belief in traditional knowledge and simple way of life, trying to avoid the manufactured food items, allopathic medicines, and like to be away from influence of new and outside religion. In the light of this adherence to Bodo folk belief and traditional way of life still maintaining the people's health and belief system, this study will focus on advantages of holding on to the old tribal life style.

8. Findings and Discussions

There are hundreds of beliefs which are early man had and the tribal society still strongly follows some beliefs as highlighted below, with experience of lesser practices and beliefs from modern educated youngsters from *Bathou* society, religious groups such as Brahma and Christianity.

(A) ANIMAL, BIRDS AND BELIEF

Cattle in Bodo Beliefs

Among the Bodo people, domestic animals, especially the bull and cow, hold significant religious importance. The bull is revered as Lord Shiva's carrier, while the cow is linked to Lord Krishna and Goddess Laxmi, symbolizing wealth and prosperity. Cow dung is considered sacred and is essential for all household ceremonies, used for cleaning homes before propitiating deities. Consuming beef is traditionally considered a sin, though Bodos who have converted to Christianity do partake in it. Buffalo sacrifice is still practiced, with the sacrificed meat consumed as 'prasad'.

Goats and Their Sacrificial Role

Similar to buffaloes, goats are sacrificed to deities, and their meat is eaten. Some goats are also set free in the name of gods and goddesses, known as 'Bhevera Burma', indicating their sacred status.

The Influence of Cats and Dogs

Cats, particularly black cats, have a strong superstitious influence; they are believed to be transformed witches and seeing one cross one's path before a journey is considered an inauspicious omen, prompting a restart of the journey after invoking a deity. A cat drinking water in a house signals an impending visit from guests. Dogs, conversely, are generally not respected or kept as pets due to beliefs that they are unclean and bring bad omens. A dog digging in the courtyard or a chorus of barking dogs are interpreted as presages of death or calamity. However, a female dog independently adopting a household is seen as a sign of imminent prosperity.

Elephants as Symbols of Luck

Elephants are highly revered and seen as manifestations of Lord Ganesha, symbolizing luck and prosperity. Encountering an elephant while embarking on new ventures, such as seeking a job or engaging in money-related work, is considered a guarantee of success and fruitfulness.

Birds as Good and Bad Omens

Among the Bodo people, birds like crows, vultures, and owls are often associated with good or bad omens. Crows and vultures entering a courtyard or sitting on a roof are generally considered bad omens, though a vulture dropping excretion in a compound is auspicious, signalling good fortune. An owl's cry at night is inauspicious. While owls are seen as carriers of Goddess Laxmi and accorded some respect, other birds are not. A crow crying from a tree in the compound foretells a family calamity.

Fowls and Specific Animal Signs

Fighting fowls in a house indicates guests will visit. A cock crowing in the evening is a particularly bad omen, leading to its immediate killing and consumption by the family. Red and black cocks and chickens are specifically used for deity propitiation and sacrifice. Female chickens are sometimes freed after religious ceremonies, and killing them is considered a sin. Other beliefs include the cry of a *khalilab* bird over a courtyard also signifying guests, bees building hives in a house bringing wealth, and a butterfly landing on an unmarried person predicting immediate marriage.

The study found that mostly the middle-aged and elderly people in *Bathou* society strongly believe and practice such traditions, and lesser practices among the Brahma samaj of Bodos. The educated modern society and those who reside in towns and cities normally do not regard these beliefs and practices as compulsory, but they are somehow connected to their native villages, where they visit occasionally during festivals and pujas. There is no sacrifice of animals among the Brahmas as well as Bodo Christian societies. Instead, Bodo Christian people donate or offer the cattle, agriculture produce or its value in monetary term for the development of the Church '*Mandali*' or the village. Also, the Christians do not consider lucky or unlucky based on appearance of crows, cats and other animals, but regard them as beautiful creatures of God.

(B) BELIEF IN HUMAN LIFE CYCLE

Throughout pregnancy until delivery, a woman may carry a knife ('daba') to ward off evil spirits. Forests are also avoided, as they are considered dwellings for evil spirits that could harm the child. A pregnant woman and her husband are forbidden from killing any living creatures, particularly ducks, fowls, and pigeons. It is believed that harming animals during this period would lead to the death of their own child in the womb. Killing a snake is thought to result in a child born with similar abnormalities. If a pregnant woman is denied a food she desires, popular belief states that her child will suffer from constant salivation. Additionally, pregnant women are not allowed to go outside and look at the sun during a solar eclipse, as it is believed this could lead to the baby being born abnormal.

There are a number of beliefs followed by the Bodo people in relation to birth, puberty, marriage, death etc. which are still followed.

Birth

Superstitions suggest that babies born in the month of *Bhadra* or on a Saturday or Tuesday are associated with bad character or inauspiciousness, with their gaze or words believed to bring misfortune. To protect newborns from evil spirits, mothers often carry a knife, as iron is thought to scare away these entities. Additionally, a black spot is placed on a baby's forehead to guard against the '*evil eye*'. A specific ritual involves applying a paste made from mud, taken from where the mother urinated, onto the baby's forehead. This is believed to deter evil spirits, as urine is thought to be effective in their destruction.

Marriage

Among the Bodos, marriage is a vital institution with many traditional customs governing bride selection. Certain behaviors exhibited by a potential bride are considered auspicious. For instance, if a bride is seen drying or husking paddy, it is believed she will bring fortune to her new family. If she is observed cleaning the courtyard, sweeping, or combing her hair, it suggests she will have a long life. Furthermore, if the bride enters the main house putting her left foot first, it signifies she will be good-natured and loyal to her family members.

Conversely, there are several bad omens associated with the bride selection process. Seeing a mongoose cross the road from right to left, a snake crossing from left to right, or encountering a dead body on the way are all considered bad signs. The sound of thunder during selection is believed to indicate an unfavourable outcome for the mission. Also, if a member of the selection party sees someone cutting bamboo or working with a spade, it is feared that either the husband or wife may die shortly after the marriage ceremony. The months of *Saitra* and *Pous* are considered highly inauspicious for marriage among the Bodos. Marriages held during these months are believed to bring misfortune to the married couple. Additionally, widows and barren women are not permitted to take a leading role in marriage ceremonies, as they are seen as unfortunate beings.

Death

The Bodo people believe that individuals who die by hanging, poisoning, or any form of suicide are unable to reach heaven after death. For those who die from snakebite, it is believed that the soul remains within the body. Consequently, the body is neither burned nor buried but floated on a river. The soul of a deceased person is thought to remain in its body and home until the family performs the traditional '*saradu*' ceremony. A popular Bodo belief suggests that if one barks at an emerging boil on the day a person dies, while uttering the name of the deceased, it will prevent the boil from growing.

There are some similarities in belief among *Bathouism* and *Christianity* pertaining to pregnant women or her husband not advisable to harm and kill animals, go to haunted jungle or haunted places as such act might affect the baby in mothers' womb. Also, Christians and Brahma Bodo societies belief that if a pregnant woman is denied a food she desires, popular belief states that her child will suffer from constant salivation; pregnant women are not allowed to go outside and look at the sun during a solar eclipse, as it is believed this could lead to the baby being born abnormal. There is no tradition of pregnant women carrying knife among Christians.

Among Bodo Christians, the specific 'day of birth' of a child is not believed to determine or be associated with bad character or inauspiciousness. Bodo Christians do not believe that a child's birth date connects them to misfortune through their gaze or words. For Christians, the Church does not have any prohibition regarding month selection for marriage, but during the '40 days' prior to 'Good Friday' no marriage blessings is allowed. Also, the Bodo Christians believe that individuals who die by hanging, poisoning, or any form of suicide are unable to reach heaven after death, neither they go to hell, but the soul remains in mountains, jungles and haunted places. '**Saradu**' or prayer service is held for the departed soul. Christian doctrine also says that all the dead bodies will rise again on the last judgement day. The Christians do not believe in reborn of the departed souls in some form of animals.

(C) BELIEF IN SPIRITS

The Bodos believe spirits cast no shadow and have no feet. *Fagons*, a type of ghost, often reside in bamboo clumps, shaking them to scare passersby. These spirits can also assume human forms, appearing as family friends to accompany and frighten travelers. Interestingly, spirits that abduct women eventually return them.

Interactions with Supernatural Entities

Male and female 'pari' spirits are believed to visit humans and make illicit proposals. Acceptance of such proposals is thought to lead to madness, wasting away, and ultimately death. The Bodos also believe spirits have families like humans, though only 'pari' spirits are thought to kill, unlike '*fagons*' and '*biras*'.

Warding off Evil Spirits

Bodo customs include caution when opening doors at night; a visitor must call out three times, as evil spirits only call once or twice. Spirits are believed to fear mustard seeds, chilies, and lemons, with mustard grains being the most effective deterrent. Iron weapons, fire, and even human urine are also considered effective in repelling spirits, especially *fagons*.

(D) BELIEF IN BODY PARTS

Trembling in specific body parts, such as the right eye for males and left eye for females, is considered a good omen. It is believed that a man who beats an elder will experience shaky hands. Among the Bodo people, continuous lying is thought to cause a man's legs to shorten. An itching palm is believed to be a sign that money will come to the person. The Bodo people have a tradition of throwing a child's first lost tooth onto the roof of the house, believing it will lead to the growth of new, strong teeth.

(E) BELIEF IN TABOOS

Daily Life Taboos

The Bodos observe several taboos in their daily lives to avoid misfortune. Sleeping during dusk is considered inauspicious, and they avoid sleeping with their heads pointing north or west, as this is reserved for the deceased. Women should not comb their hair during thunder. Making sounds with lips at night is avoided, as it is believed to attract spirits. They also believe one should not call out to a person from behind when they are on their way somewhere. Keeping wet clothes out at night is also considered bad practice.

Specific Day and Naming Taboos

Certain days are considered inauspicious for specific activities. Bodos avoid shaving, hairdressing, and cutting nails on their birthdays, Tuesdays, and Saturdays, believing these actions decrease one's

lifespan. To avoid unwanted incidents, they use symbolic names for certain animals and objects after dark; for example, a snake is called '*gulao*', an elephant '*Ganesh baba*', and a tiger '*Bon raja*'.

Taboos Related to Giving and Protection

After dark, Bodos do not give chili, turmeric, money, eggs, or rice to others to take home, fearing that doing so would cause the goddess Laxmi to leave their household. To protect delicious foods like meat, special curry, or cake from evil spirits, they attach a piece of chili or burning charcoal to them when transporting them.

(F) BELIEF AND TREE

Sacred Trees and Deities

The Bodo people associate many trees with traditional gods and goddesses. The '*Sijou*' tree is considered the sacred abode of God *Bathou*, and the Basil plant is also worshipped. Mango and Bel trees are particularly important, with their leaves used in celebrations from birth to death, signifying their sacredness.

Trees and Evil Spirits

Conversely, some trees are linked to evil spirits. Large trees are believed to be havens for these spirits, and '*fagons*' are thought to reside in bamboo plantations. Witches are believed to keep their souls in brooms, and both witches and evil spirits are feared to be afraid of thorny branches. Additionally, a tree from which someone commits suicide is believed to become the home of that person's spirit.

(G) BELIEF IN RELATION TO METAL

The Importance of Gold and Silver

Gold and silver are paramount among the Bodo people, symbolizing wealth, beauty, and good fortune. Losing or finding gold is considered a bad omen, while gold combined with certain stones is believed to ward off evil. Both metals are essential for marriage presentations to the bride and are used in initiation ceremonies and rituals. Gold is also considered sacred and used with water and basil leaves to purify homes.

The Role of Iron in Protecting Against Evil Spirits

Iron holds significant beliefs among the Bodo people, primarily for its protective qualities against evil spirits. Pregnant women carry iron knives, and individuals take iron tools into jungles for protection. *Ojhas* (traditional healers) sometimes prescribe iron ornaments for sick individuals to prevent further spiritual attacks.

The Cultural Value of Brass

Brass also plays a crucial role in Bodo society. Families without brass utensils are often perceived as poor. Brass utensils are esteemed gifts, particularly for brides during '*annaprasanna*' and marriage ceremonies. Brass bells are utilized in temples, and household items made from various metals are respected during traditional occasions.

As per as Bodo modern society and Christianity is concerned, there is a belief about evil spirits that might exist in big trees, haunted house, etc. Bodo Christians do believe the existence of evil spirits, referring them to be '*bad angels*' who were cursed and thrown away from heaven due to their misconduct. There is no belief among Christians in metals such as gold, silver, etc. to bring any fortunes, but consider them as God's gift to human for making life easier and more beautiful. Even '*annaprasanna*' is common in Bodo Christian society.

(H) BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT

Bodos, like many tribal and non-tribal groups, believe in witchcraft and fear its practitioners. Witchcraft, defined as the art of using magical power for harm, is a common concept globally. In Assam, witches are known as '*dainii*' and '*bhutuni*', while among the Bodos, they are called '*daina*' or '*daini*'. Unlike the general Assamese perception where witches are typically older women associated with darkness, Bodos believe that young women and men can also practice witchcraft. Witches are

thought to have spirit animals, knowledge of herbs for concocting spells, and supernatural abilities like shapeshifting, flying, and being in multiple places simultaneously.

Methods and Harmful Practices of Witches

Bodos believe that witches use magic to harm specific individuals, often by inserting small objects into victims to cause illness and death, unless counter-magic is applied. Witches collect personal items like clothes, hair, and nails from their intended victims, mix them with other ingredients, and bury them at the victim's homestead, leading to their decline. It's also believed that new recruits to witchcraft must prove their allegiance by causing the death of a close relative. Witches are also thought to be able to send pests like caterpillars, grasshoppers, or insects to destroy crops or enter a victim's body.

Precautions Against Witchcraft

To avoid being bewitched, individuals might regulate their lives to make themselves less vulnerable, including moving away from areas believed to be infested with witches or refusing to live near suspected witches. In Assamese tribal societies, the fear of witches encouraged neighbourly conduct. Another precaution was to cut off all contact with suspected witches, avoiding borrowing or lending objects through which magic might be worked, and refusing gifts from them, as these were believed to bring misfortune.

According to the respondents from Christian community, it was found that Christians are not engaged in practice of witchcraft, but they do believe and fear the act of witches, black magic which are present among traditional Bodo societies, and that the evil spirits are associated with these witch practices.

(I) THE OJHAS

Witchcraft is considered an undetectable activity by conventional means, requiring divination for its discovery. Individuals with special powers, acting as mediums for spirits, are believed to reveal such actions. Witches are thought to cause diseases, bring sickness, and death, while their evil powers need to be controlled.

The Role of Medicine Men and Ojhas

Medicine men, or ojhas, are believed to be the only ones capable of removing diseases caused by witches. They are experts in magic, charms, and divination, responsible for exposing witches and clearing areas of witchcraft. Ojhas possess the knowledge to perceive witchcraft and drive it away, often removing objects placed by witches to cause harm.

Witchcraft Motives and Countermeasures among the Bodos

Among the Bodo people, witchcraft or black magic is believed to be used out of jealousy or revenge. Witches use magico-religious items, including personal effects like nails, hair, and clothing, placed near a person's home to inflict harm. Affected individuals seek the help of an ojha, who can locate these harmful placements and negate their effects.

(J) FOLK BELIEF RELATED TO RELIGION

Religion is an integral part of the Bodo traditional culture, with their own traditional religion named *Bathou*. They worship *Bathou* as their supreme God, considering him as the all-encompassing being and a dominant force in their social patterns, economy, lifestyle, and way of thinking. In the Bodo language, *Bathou* religion is known as *Bathou Dhwrwm*, which encompasses corporate rites, rituals, social norms, ethics, and philosophy of the Bodos.

Deities and Worship Practices

Beyond the supreme god *Bathou*, Bodo people worship numerous other deities, with *Sibrai* regarded as the head of all deities. Their folk belief dictates that worshipping God with heart and soul ensures blessings and affection. Consequently, all social functions, including wedding ceremonies and other individual or social events, are performed according to the rites and rituals of their religion.

The Five Elements of Bathou

Bathou, the supreme god, is believed to be the almighty, superior creator, and destructor. The religion defines *Bathou* as comprising five essential elements: 'Ba' meaning five and 'Thou' meaning depth. These elements are Bar (air), Dwi (water), Ha (soil), Or (fire), and *Okhrang* (sky). Bodos believe that

no being or thing can be created without these fundamental elements. Historical records, such as '*The Kacharis*,' confirm the Bodos have practiced the *Bathou* religion since ancient times, referring to them as '*Animistic*'.

(K) FOLK BELIEF IN KHERAI FESTIVAL OR PUJA

The *Kherai* festival is a crucial religious festival for the Bodo community, rooted in the *Bathou* religion. This festival involves a puja (adoration) that can be conducted either with or without the assistance of a *doudini*, a female shaman.

Role of the Doudini (Shaman)

The *doudini* plays a central role in the *Kherai* puja. During a trance state, she addresses various religious and social issues through her spiritual connection. Rituals like chicken blood sucking and dancing on sharp swords, while astonishing, are part of the folk beliefs associated with the festival. Beyond sacrifices, the *doudini* also discusses current events and potential societal vulnerabilities.

Folk Beliefs and Societal Impact

The *Kherai* puja incorporates folk beliefs, involving sacrifices of flowers, fruits, and animals. While the veracity of the *doudini's* pronouncements cannot be directly confirmed, society is bound by these beliefs, which are seen to guide members away from immoral or sinful actions, thus maintaining social order.

(L) FOLK BELIEF IN GARJA PUJA

The Bodo community annually performs the *Songsariya Garja* Puja, also known by other names like *Bhela Hogarnai* or *Mwdai Hogarnai*, in every village. This puja is rooted in the belief that *Garja Mwdai*, a deity, is constantly visiting and consuming from the world. Each Bodo village has a designated, permanent location for this puja, typically chosen on an auspicious day after *Bwisagw*.

Preparation and Rituals

Preparations for the *Garja Puja* involve cleaning the *Garja Sali* (worship place) and constructing *Bithas* (altars) a day prior. A central, larger *Bitha* is made, with smaller huts built over each *Bitha*. Altars for holy deities are placed to the North of the main *Bitha*, while those for evil deities are to the South. The DOURI (priest) and villagers then gather at the DOURI's residence for a meal.

Checking the Village's Holiness and Identifying Offenders

On the morning of the puja, the DOURI and elders inspect rice left at the *Garja Sali*. If the rice remains undisturbed, the village is considered holy; if scattered, it suggests a curse. Following this, a meeting (DOUDIN ASHRAINANWI) is held where villagers chew rice or touch fire to identify offenders. Identified offenders are purified before the worship proceeds.

Worship and Dispelling Evil

The actual worship begins with offerings to holy deities. Subsequently, evil deities are symbolically chased out of the village on horseback towards their *Thansali* (worship place) at the corner of *Garjasali*. After the worship and offerings, the evil deities are ritually taken to a river bank.

The Role of Beliefs and Superstitions

The Bodo community, like many tribal societies, is deeply rooted in folk beliefs and superstitions, which form an unwritten social law. These traditions, though often lacking modern logical explanations, are revered and help regulate societal conduct, embodying customs and etiquette. Some superstitions are believed to contain practical wisdom and can foster a religiously disposed outlook.

From the field survey, it was found that *Bathou* and Brahma religious groups have similarity in belief and practice of indigenous religious practices, belief in Ojhas (healers from illness), *Kherai* puja, *Garja* puja, etc. participated by all the *Bathou* family members, also held commonly in the villages allocated for such prayers and activities. Bodo Christians do not celebrate or participate in the above-mentioned pujas, and normally are not allowed to visit to Ojhas healing from illness. But they can always use traditional medicines made from traditional plants, roots, etc. by those *Ojhas* and *Kobiras*.

9. Preserving Aged-Old Bodo Traditions

Bodo festivals like *Bwisagu* and *Kherai*, traditionally linked to agrarian practices and animistic beliefs, have integrated modern aspects. While core customs such as cattle worship and communal feasting persist, celebrations now often include stage performances, competitions, and cultural exhibitions, expanding their scale and style.

The rise of the Brahma religion in the early 20th century, spearheaded by reformers like Kalicharan Brahma, introduced a shift towards monotheistic worship and simplified rituals. This movement impacted festivals like *Bathou* Puja, which began to emphasize spiritual symbolism over-elaborate offerings. With the advent of mix marriage, for instance a girl from *Bathou* or Brahma marrying to a Christian boy has to adopt the religion of the boy and vice versa. Likewise, the Government marriage registrar system has indirectly affected the traditional marriage system, religious practices. Increased exposure to other cultures through education, migration, and media has led Bodo festivals to absorb external influences. For example, traditional instruments are now often accompanied by modern music systems, and Western-style clothing is frequently worn alongside traditional attire during celebrations.

In urban areas, Bodo festivals are often organized by cultural associations or student unions, serving as platforms for ethnic pride and political identity. Government recognition and funding have further aided in the preservation and promotion of these festivals on a larger scale.

Some older practices, such as day-specific dedications during *Bwisagu*, have either faded or become symbolic. The emphasis has shifted towards communal joy and cultural display rather than strict ritual observance, reflecting the Bodo community's resilience in preserving heritage while embracing the present.

The historical origins of Bodo festivals are deeply tied to the community's agrarian lifestyle, animistic beliefs, and reverence for nature. These festivals evolved as expressions of gratitude, seasonal rhythms, and spiritual connection even before formal religious systems were established. Customs were preserved through folk songs, dances, and storytelling, ensuring continuity despite the absence of written records.

Despite modern influences, a growing movement within the Bodo community aims to preserve and revive traditional festivals. Cultural organizations and academic institutions are actively documenting rituals, promoting indigenous music and dance, and encouraging youth participation to maintain cultural identity. Neighboring cultures of hills states of NE, Chinese, have also subtly influenced Bodo festival cuisine, enriching it with new flavors and practices.

10. Conclusion

Bodo festivals have been profoundly shaped by contact with neighboring cultures, leading to acculturation where cultural traits blend and adapt. This influence is particularly noticeable from Hinduism and Christianity.

Traditional Bodo festivals, such as *Kherai* and *Bathou* Puja, which were initially rooted in animistic beliefs, have integrated elements from Hinduism. For example, *Bathouism* is gradually transforming into a more structured, monotheistic religion influenced by Hindu philosophy.

Many complex rituals associated with social offenses (like Bad systems) and seasonal festivals (such as *Bwisagu* and *Domashi*) have been simplified or superseded by more generalized celebrations. This trend is partly due to the influence of mainstream Assamese and Bengali cultural practices, which advocate for more accessible forms of festivity.

Festivals from adjacent communities, like Durga Puja and Diwali, have entered Bodo regions, especially in urban and diverse population areas. There are growing concerns that these adopted celebrations might overshadow traditional Bodo festivals, potentially leading to cultural dilution.

Urbanization and increased media exposure have led to the incorporation of modern elements into Bodo festivals, including contemporary music, stage performances, and fashion shows. While these

additions enhance vibrancy, they also risk alienating the celebrations from their original rural and spiritual foundations.

The advent of medical sciences, ayurvedic medicines and some home remedies knowledge given by experts, doctors through social media has reduced dependence on local *Ojhas* or *Kobiras*.

Despite these evolutions and adaptations, Bodo festivals continue to serve as crucial markers of Bodo identity and resilience, reflecting the community's ability to maintain its cultural essence while integrating external influences. It remains as a challenge Infront of every Bodo son and daughter to preserve the adaptable Bodo traditions and practices for future generations.

References

1. Boro, Anil (2010). Folk Literature of Bodos, Guwahati: N.L. Publication. P.12
2. Brahma, Kameswar. (1998). A study in Cultural Heritage of the Boros, Kokrajhar: Spectrum Publication.
3. Devi, Premalata (1998). Social and Religious Institution of Bodos, Guwahati: Geophil Publishing House, Pp 93-95.
4. Brahma, K. Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos. Panbazar, Guwahati: Santiranjana Dey, 1989.
5. Brahma, Dr. Kameswar. A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.
6. Dorson Richard. M. Folklore and Folklife An Introduction. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago, 1972.
7. Rajkhowa, Benudhar. Assamese Popular Superstitions and Assamese Demonology. Gauhati University: Dept. of Folklore Research, 1973.
8. Informant- Deben Boro, Age- 63, village- Batakuchi, occupation- cultivator and preacher of Bathou religion, Udalguri district.
9. Informant- Nirmol Boro, Age- 70, village- Dhubguri, Tangla, occupation- cultivator, advisor of Bathou religion, Tangla Anchalik
10. Informant- Jehiskel Daimari, Age-47, Occupation- Religious Preacher, Advisor of BBC, Udalguri.
11. Informant- Carlus Narzari, Age- 48, Occupation- Businessman, religious leader (General Secretary, Udalguri Town Mandali, Catholic Church)
12. Informant- Kamakhya Brahma, Age- 52, Occupation- Subject Teacher, Brahma samaj leader
13. Informant- Poten Basumatary, Age- 54, Occupation- Clerk in Agriculture Department, President in charge, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Udalguri district.
14. Informant- Rusel Basumatary, Village- Landa Chuburi, Harisingha, Brahma Religious leader.
15. Informant- Jawaharlal Brahma, Village- Bwigriguri, Udalguri, Occupation- Udalguri Brahma Dharma Pracharak.