Chapter 4

Traditional religion
CHAPTER IV

Traditional religion

Religion is concerned with any specific system of belief about deity often entailing rituals, a code of ethics, and a philosophy of life. It deals essentially with three subjects of the nature of reality: the nature of man, its relation to this reality and the way to reach this reality. The first two subjects belong to philosophy proper and it is the third subject which brings the other two also into the domain of religion. As long as religion merely defines the nature of reality and seeks to lay down the true values of human activity, it is no more than philosophy and ethics, but when it seeks and promises to help human soul to take these truths to heart and to put them into action with the object of resolving the problem of suffering, which is inherent in the innermost core of man, the self-consciousness, then it becomes religion proper. Religion without philosophy has no meaning and so, they are closely related. Lucy Mair describes religion as a system of beliefs and practices. According to S. P. Kanal "every religion has its system of beliefs about soul, God and the universe and it prescribes a certain ethical life for its followers." In this sense, religion as an organized system of beliefs and practices includes many other aspects, such as legends, myths, code of ethics, rites and rituals, etc. In view of the tribal religion, it consists of system of the beliefs, practices, ceremonies and worship involving one supreme god and other lesser divinities. For this reason, the religion of the tribes has own distinct characters and so, it is called tribal religion which is one of the aboriginal
forms of religion itself. It is an old or traditional community religion which sprang up within the sphere of the community. Magic is also included as a part of their religion. In the name of their religion, they worship a number of gods and goddess which are unknown to the non-tribals. Like major religions, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and others, the tribal religion did not have any sacred religious scriptures, founders and preachers, but the name of the deities inherent in the tribal tongue and religious ethos in their hearts as well as minds is very astonishing. Since ages they practiced the religion as an oral religion in their society. Most of the tribes of northeastern India, particularly of Brahmaputra valley in Assam still practiced the rites and rituals of the society according to the tenets of their traditional religion.

Origin

Traditionally, the religion of the Bodos is ‘Bathou’. This religion played a very important role in building the socio-economic and cultural life of the traditional Bodos. Since when they practiced this religion in their community has been a matter of controversy. However, most of the tribal religions of the North East India and other parts of the land, are considered as the religions of the non-literate tradition. The folk religion of the tribes is one that has evolved in the community without any external intervention. Bathou religion of the Bodos is primarily the folk religion and its philosophy is the philosophy of the Bodo community. As regards the emergence of the Bathou religion in their community, the Bodos have their own traditional story. They worship Bathou Bwrai as the supreme God in the name of Bathou religion. The evidence from their traditions reveals that Bathou Bwrai has also many other alternative names, such as Anan Gosai, Bathou Bwrai, Bathou Raja, Khoria Bwrai, Sijou Bwrai, Sijou Gosai, Sijou Raja, Si Bwrai, Jiu Bwrai, etc. but these names are given to Him on different aspects of His creation. The embodied Bathou Bwrai is the first holy man or the prophet who preached religious and spiritual things among the Bodos in ancient times.

It is evident from their myth that the Bodos have their own theory of creation of the universe associated with the emergence of Bathou religion in their community. According to the myth, the Bodos believe that before the creation of this universe, there was absolute vacuum, but an infinite and eternal God called Obonglawri, Aham Guru.
and Anan Gosai who existed formlessly in a great void became tired of His formless existence and desired to take the form of flesh and blood. Thus Obonglawri, the Eternal and the omniscient did as He desired and shaped Himself into a lively human being, and called Himself Jiu Bwrai and Si Bwrai.6 During this time the spiritual words are surged suddenly in his consciousness. This manifestation is evident from the following verse;

"Lawba lawswm
khawba khawswm
ada gwswm
dwiao barswm".7

In English translation: "O dear, take the five organs of perception and the five organs of action and plunge into the ocean of worldly life."

The verse cited above reveals that a divine being philosophically could never be created alone without mind, five organs of action and five organs of perception. As the surge began, a divine man or being broke out into the absolute vacuum. It is believed by the Bodos that He is the prime spiritual one who possessed first ‘Jiu’ or soul or life, and so, He is called as ‘Jiu Bwrai’, ‘Siw Bwrai’ or ‘Si Bwrai’.8 Since the beginning of their belief in religion, the existence of God is conceived clearly by them as the infinite Being at all times and that He is not limited by space.

In the Bodo mythology, it appears that Si Bwrai or Aham Guru, the ultimate God uttered the first five spiritual words when He emerged into this vast void. The five spiritual words or sounds are awng, hring, khling, fwt and che. 9 With these five spiritual words, Aham Guru, Bathou Bwrai created the first five elements, viz., earth, water, air, fire and ether. These concepts are also found equivalent to the Panchabhuta of the Hindu mythology. The words awng, hring, khling, fwt and che however, represent the five basic elements of all creations of the universe. These spiritual sounds are believed to be the first language or sounds used by Bathou Bwrai, the supreme God in the world. So, when the Douri (priest) chants any Bathou mwnthwr (mantra) on religious rituals of the Bathou he first of all, recites these five spiritual sounds. In the earlier days of Bathouism even the
Ojas (man oracle) used these spiritual sounds as the first utterance for any worship. Later, these words started to be used by all the Bathou followers in all their religious worships.

The Bodos believe that the universe was created by none but by Jiu Bwrai or Si Bwrai. The word ‘Jiu’ means life and ‘si’ means soul. And the word ‘Bwrai’ is called the old man or the first holy man who possessed the first human soul. It is probable that the word ‘Jiu’ later on led to corruption of ‘siw’ and then ‘siwa’ was the corrupt form from ‘siw’ and the sanskritised Siva came later. In the Hindu philosophy, the emergence of God Siva is related to the possession of first human soul.\(^{10}\)

According to the belief among the Bodos, Bathou Bwrai or Si Bwrai is the first incarnation of the God. He is omniscient, omnipotent, benefactor and creator of the universe. He is also the earliest man popularly known as Mwn-sin-sin Bwrai meaning the wisest of all. The supreme God, Bathou Bwrai created his consort Si Burwi or Bathou Burwi and then created the universe. Then to proliferate human population on the earth, they firstly created Darimuba, the male and Singrimuba, the female as a couple in the world.\(^{11}\) It may also be referred from their popular folktale that Bathou Bwrai came down from heaven in person as Mwn-sin-sin Bwrai to perform the prohibited marriage ceremony of young couples called sikhri sikhla and sikhri jwhwlaw in Bodo. The intense prayers of these disappointed lovers moved the heart of Bathou Bwrai and so He came down from His heavenly abode to fulfill the desire of the young couples. He sat under a Sijou tree (euphorbia splendens) and solemnized the marriages of those couples demonstrating certain religious rites in the Bodo society. The Bodo people believe since time immemorial that the great holy seer, Bathou Bwrai is said to have five heads to preach the religious and spiritual things, and have five eyes to look into the troubles and distresses of the people on earth. Thus the facts available from hither to prevalent religious tales of the Bodos show that Bathou Bwrai may be considered as the divine prophet of Bathouism or the divine exponent of the Bathou philosophy.\(^{12}\)

Another significant development in the Bathou religion was the emergence of eighteen pairs of couples of Bathou guru or gods and goddesses. These couples are symbolically referred to the Bathou gods and goddesses or gurus. In the Bathou religion, the Bathou altar represents all the eighteen pairs of gods and goddesses or gurus. The
adherents of the *Bathou* religion believe that in ancient times, the principles of the *Bathou* religion were preached by those married couples of gurus among the Bodos. So, these eighteen pairs of couple gods and goddesses are worshipped and propitiated by the *Bathou* followers in a very phased manner at the *Bathou* pantheon. The eighteen pairs of married couples of the gods and goddesses are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Mwn-sin-sin Bwrai</th>
<th>Mwn-sin-sin Burwi</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Si-Bwrai</td>
<td>Si-Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Eheu Bwrai</td>
<td>Eheu Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hafao Bwrai</td>
<td>Hafao Burwi</td>
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<td>5. Khuria Bwrai</td>
<td>Khuria Burwi</td>
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<td>6. Mahela Bwrai</td>
<td>Mahela Burwi</td>
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<td>7. Bwrli Bwrai</td>
<td>Bwrli Burwi</td>
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<td>8. Song Bwrai</td>
<td>Song Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Khwila Bwrai</td>
<td>Khwila Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Agrang Bwrai</td>
<td>Agrang Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Hajw Bwrai</td>
<td>Hajw Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Gongar Bwrai</td>
<td>Gongar Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Rojong Bwrai</td>
<td>Rojong Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Hasung Bwrai</td>
<td>Hasung Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Emao Bwrai</td>
<td>Emao Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Aham Bwrai</td>
<td>Aham Burwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Mainao Bwrai</td>
<td>Mainao Burwi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a belief in the Bodo society that in ancient times, the development of Bodo traditions, customs and culture took place due to the contribution made by those godly gurus. So, by installing the eighteen pairs of bamboo split posts at the altar of *Bathou* the worshippers of this religion remember those godly protector gurus in their society.\(^{13}\)

As stated earlier, *Bathou Bwrai* is the Supreme God in the traditional Bathou religion. According to the Bathou religion, He is the God of all, the absolute, supreme
reality, the giver of life and universe. He is never represented in any idol form, but through his living symbol, the Sijou tree is planted as an emblem of the supreme God at the altar of Bathou. Thus the Bathou has no faith in idol worship of any kind. This is an extraordinary concept of the unknowable supernatural power of the universe.

The emergence of Bathou Bwrai is related to the possession of first human soul. In the Bathou philosophy, Bathou Bwrai is Anan Gosai, Obonglawri, Swrjigiri which is called Purna Brahma in Hinduism, Allah in Islam and God in Christianity. It may be referred that the belief in the existence and conception of supreme God is also prevalent among the Khasis of Meghalaya in their traditional religion and the supreme God is called ‘U Blei’ by the Khasis. According to their religion, the supreme God, U Blei is almighty, all powerful, omniscient and omnipresent. In this way, Bathou Bwrai or Si Bwrai is also an omnipotent God in the Bodo community.

Concept of Bathouism

The term ‘Bathou’ has significant meaning in the Bodo society. It is a combination of two meaningful words, ‘ba’ and ‘thou’. Literally ‘ba’ means five and ‘thou’ means deep or a profound principle. So, Bathou means five deep spiritual things the unfolding of which needs ones close introspection. The Bodo religion and its philosophy are very much related to the numeral ‘five’. But the Bodos never use the numeral word before anything and even in counting of a thing, the numeral word is invariably added to the end of the noun. If the word ‘Bathou’ had been derived from ‘Pancha-tatwa’ called five-philosophy, it should have been ‘thou-ba’ but not ‘Bathou’.

It is probable that there was a close relationship between Bathouism and ‘Taoism’ of Chinese people, because in China there was a ‘Tao-te-ching’ religion of Kung-Fu-Tzu and Lao-Tzu. The word ‘Tao’ of the Chinese religion was known as ‘dhau’ meaning the way to live and forward in the world. So, the Chinese ‘tao’ might have made an impact on the religious belief of the then Mongolian Bodo people who worshipped a Sijou tree from the very beginning of their religious life. It is believed that the implication of the Bodo word ‘thou’ meaning move forward signifies the same implication of the Chinese ‘tao’ which means the way to move forward in the world. The word ‘Bathou’ might have been derived from the Bodo word ‘bao’ means to worship or adore, and the
Chinese word ‘tao’ means ‘way to move forward in the world’. Thus Bathou is an adorable way of life. In the Bodo mythology, the origin and development of religious philosophy of the Bodos centers round the superpower of the Almighty God, Bathou Bwrai. The concept of the Bodo philosophy is said to have originated from the Bathou religion which is specially based on the belief of Bathou Bwrai, the supreme God. Many scholars also have defined about the term ‘Bathou’. The Bathou seems to have been referred to ‘five deep spiritual thoughts’ or deep philosophical facts of Bathou Bwrai. The Almighty God, Bathou Bwrai is the custodian of the five basic elements of creation and that is why it is sometimes equated with the Indian concept related to Panchabhatta. In this sense, the five basic ingredients are represented by Bathou. These are ha (soil), dwi (water), bar (air), or (fire) and okhrang (ether). It is a true fact that the survival of the human beings has no meaning in the world without the components of these five elements. The creator of five elements is none but Bathou Bwrai, the Supreme God. God Bathou is nirakar meaning invisible, shapeless and formless. But His role is understood and imagined, and even His divine powers and qualities through His creation of these five elements are visible. In this context, He is identical with sakar (the visible).

Philosophy of Bathousim

The religious philosophy is usually developed along with the progress of the civilization. In the traditional Bodo society, the five deep philosophy of the Bathou religion was developed with the passage of time. The Bathou religion contains some universal truths and even the five elements with their meanings are also depicted in the Bathou philosophy. It is apparent from the hymns or mantra which is chanted by the Douri (priest) or Oja (oracle man) in the rituals of Bathou religion cited below:

“Sijouni siria siriba
thaigir bikhonga khongba
sifungni gudunga gudungba
Bathouni bandwa bandwba
Boroni asara asarba

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The meaning of the verse cited above may be translated thus: the Sijou tree is of five ridges, the thaigir (elephant apple) is of five rinds, the sifung (flute) is of five holes, the 'Bathou' is of five knots, the Boros have five number of principles, and the Bodo Bwrai has five moral words or preachings.

Symbolizing the religious and spiritual principles of Bathou religion the Sijou tree is planted on the eastern most corner of the courtyard of the family, but it is surrounded by a circular fence of split bamboo strips folded with five fastenings (See Plate 1). Bathou Bwrai or old man had five moral words of preaching under which the social offences of the Bodos are justified in the society. These are:

1. Ogorbad
2. Fongslodbad
3. Daokhibad
4. Khawalibad
5. Khoulwbwrbad

These are called 'bad khanthi' or bad institution in the Bodo society. With the help of the bad institution the Bodos regulate their society in a proper and discipline way for the maintenance of peace in the society. The Bodo people dare not to violate these five restrictions. If anybody violates then he or she is held responsible in the society for committing social offences. It is through the institution of these five bads that the Bodo society becomes free from the social offences committed by the disorderly persons. The fact is that the maintenance of peace, discipline and free from social offences in the Bodo society lays on these restrictions which have the force of the law. Thus this is the basis of Bodo customary law.

The Bathou religion has also the realization of five imaginary gods which were worshipped firstly by the earlier Bodo people, viz., Hailong (the god of earth), Agrang (the god of water), Khoila (the god of air), Sanjabwrlee (the god of light), Rajkhumbree (the god of sky).
In addition, much importance is given by Bathou religion on reverence to the five authorities. These are father, mother, guru (teacher), gosai (gods) and gossaisri (goddesses). To lead and live the life of the human beings Bathou Bwrai entails five bindings in accordance with the Bathou philosophy. The five bindings of life are:

1. *Jwnwm* (birth)
2. *Juli* (marriage)
3. *Dukhu-daha* (sadness and distress)
4. *Sukhu-gwjwn* (pleasure and peace)

It implies that the human beings are required to undergo life in the world through these five bindings called ‘bandwba’. Each man and women possess his or her ‘si’ (soul or *atma*) and this ‘si’ is encircled by the ‘bandwba’. The fastening of five pairs of bamboo strips around the Bathou altar signifies the bandwba or five bindings of life of the Bathou religion.  

The five-fold precepts

Traditionally, Bathou has a five-fold preaching of moral conduct and spiritual truths. This is evident from the traditional ‘*mwnthwr*’ (mantra), verses, stories and folktales related to the religious rites of Bathou faith. But these teachings are believed to have been taught by the great holy prophet, Bathou Bwrai to the Bodo people through ages.

The five-fold precepts of Bathouism:

1. Precept on five holy sermons of the Bodo Bwrai or Si Bwrai

   (i) A meditative prayer to God
   (ii) Conversation on religious and spiritual matters
   (iii) Offering of alms to the poor or in need
   (iv) Love for all living beings
   (v) Working together mutually.

2. Precept on five holy Realizations

   (ii) Realization of *Sijou* as Supreme Soul
(iii) Realization of the linkage of the Jiuma (human soul) with the Sijou
(iv) Realization of Mainao or Bathou Burwi
(v) Realization of five great elements: Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether and their relation to five gods, viz., Aileng (the god of earth), Agrang (the god of water), Khoila (the god of air), Sanjabwrlee (the god of fire), Rajkhumbree (the god of sky)
(vi) Realization of the need of worldly affairs.

3. Precept on five senses of love
   (i) Love for Obonglawri (Eternal God)
   (ii) Love for fellow beings
   (iii) Love for husband-wife and children
   (iv) Love for animals and all objects of nature
   (v) Love for one’s Motherland and the world.

4. Precept on hatred for five sinners
   (i) Sinner of killing
   (ii) Sinner of stealing
   (iii) Sinner of telling a lie
   (iv) Sinner of one’s indulgence in illicit and unnatural intercourse
   (v) Sinner of association with bad company.

Thus, Bathou has many aspects of religious, moral and spiritual teachings which are grouped into five categories in its philosophy. The five is the most typical structure concerned with the 'Bathou' religion and its philosophy. The Bathou religion entails the philosophy of 'Panchak darsan' or the philosophy of five spiritual things. But as a number of sacred importance the concept of five deep religious philosophies as in Bathouism are visible in all other major religions and philosophies of the world. For instance, the five joyful mysteries, five sorrowful mysteries and five glorious mysteries are prevalent in Catholicism, and five wounds of Christ’s crucification. In Islam too, there are five pillars of faith, five categories of law and even the believers pray to Mecca five times each day. Similarly, in Hindu philosophy, five organs of sense, five organs of action, five energies, and five steps to enlightenment are found. The Buddhist also seeks to know the five wisdoms, the five powers and the five rites of purification.
Deities of Bathouism

There are a good number of Bathou deities which are worshipped and propitiated in a very phased manner in the Bodo society. They are invariably sheltered in a hierarchical position at the Bathou pantheon when they are worshipped and propitiated.

*Bathou Bwrai*

*Bathou Bwrai* is conceived by the Bodos as the greatest and highest reality. He is the Supreme Being. So, it can be said that the religion of the Bodos is monotheist in nature. Although the Bodos believe in one supreme God called *Bathou Bwrai* yet he has many other manifestations. In fact, the world is created by God for his manifestations. In the Bathou pantheon, the supreme God, *Bathou Bwrai* is worshipped by the worshippers of this religion along with other lesser deities. The system of idol worship is not prevalent in the Bathou religion. This is evident from the opinion of S. Endle that “in the typical Kachari village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be found; but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air and sky are alike peopled with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings, known usually as “Modai,” all possessing powers and faculties far greater than those of man”. Mwdai is a Bodo word which means deity or gods and goddess. *Bathou Bwrai* is the chief mwdai or God of the Bodos. According to the Bodo tradition, *Bathou Bwrai* is a creator, protector, maker, conductor or even destroyer. He is unseen, omnipresent and omnipotent, and preached the five deep elements in Bathou philosophy.

The Bodos believe in the existence of only one Supreme Being in the traditional Bathou religion. So, the Bodos are monotheistic in their religious conceptualization. *Bathou Bwrai* is the only Supreme God or power for the Bodos. ‘Bwrai’ is a Bodo word which literally means old, aged, expert and knowledgeable, etc., but in terms of religion, it is invariably referred to as supreme.

“Rang rashi

gwhw rashi
English rendering: “The Creator, the sustainer, the destroyer. Quality of all three in one, powers of all three in one, guardian of all the three abodes.”

The verse cited above reveals that Bathou Bwrai is the lord of all creatures. He is creator, sustainer and even destroyer in one. He seems to have equated with the trinity, but these qualities are found associated with three different gods in Hindu pantheon, viz., Brahma, Vishnu and Moheswar. Besides, it may also be referred that in the Christian concept of trinity God performs three different functions as the father, the son and the Holy Spirit. According to the Christian theology, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are one and the same in unity. It is in this way that in the Bathou religion, Bathou Bwrai is supreme Spirit and so, He is the only protector of all.

The Bodo people have many other manifestations of gods and goddesses within the sphere of their faith. The worship of Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi along with other lesser divinities is carried out through rituals. Since the Bathou religion is a ritualistic act of worship some of their traditional festivals and ceremonies, such as Kherai, Garja, Marai festival, etc. are performed according to the tenets of the Bathou religion. In Kherai festival, the Bodos worship and propitiate supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi along with other lesser divinities at Kheraisali for receiving their blessings and to get a good harvest. The evidence from the Bathou tradition shows that the Bodos have two categories of gods and goddesses, viz., (1) household gods called ‘noni mwdai’ in Bodo and (2) village gods, gamini mwdai. The deity is called ‘mwdai’ in Bodo. The difference is that the household gods and goddesses are worshipped and propitiated by the Bodos in the homestead while the later by the whole villagers collectively outside the village in some selected place called ‘thansali’ usually near a sacred grove of trees or bamboos after cleaning and purifying the ground.
Bwrai, the supreme God is the chief of the household deities. He is worshipped and propitiated under various names, such as Bathou Bwrai, Bathou Raja, Khuria Bwrai, Si Bwrai, Song Raja, Gila Damra, Zwmn Bwrai, Sijou Bwrai, Sijou Raja, etc. Bathou Bwrai is not worshipped in an idol form, but he is worshipped by symbolizing a Sijou tree at the centre of the Bathou altar. In every household, the Bathou altar is installed by the Bathou adherents at the north eastern corner of the courtyard of the family.

Mainao Burwi

Mainao Burwi is the consort of Bathou Bwrai. She is the chief of female deities. She is also called by the Bodos under various names, such as Bathou Burwi, Khuria Burwi, Siw Burwi, Bulli Burwi, Mawthansri, etc. But unlike her husband Bathou Bwrai, she does not have any particular symbol visible to the human eye. She is the guardian of the rice field and is regarded as goddess of crops which is equivalent to Hindu goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. She is worshipped at the period of harvesting the Ashu (ahu in Assamese) and maisali (sali in Assamese) crops and hence she is also called Sali Mainao and Ashu Mainao. Since the Bodo people are the purely agricultural community she is held in very high regards in the traditional Bodo society.

Lesser gods and goddesses

In the Bathou pantheon, many gods and goddesses are given the seats in different hierarchical position and according to their position they are propitiated and worshipped by offering the sacrifices of animals, such as pigs, pigeon, goat, ducks, and fowls along with areca-nuts, 'betel leafs, banana fruits, etc. In addition to Bathou Bwrai, there are some lesser divinities which are worshipped and propitiated by the Bodos on the rituals of Bathou religion. They are Ayleng, the god of earth; Khuria Bwrai the bodyguard; Agrang, the general of Bathou Raja; Rajkhandra, the grandson of Bathou Bwrai; Rajputhur and Rajkhandra, the son and grandson of the Bathou Maharaja respectively. Song Raja, the god of forests and wild animals, Manasu, the goddess of river and the owner of fish, Ranachwndri, the goddess of war, Abla Khungur, Mwsa Raja (Bag Raja), Bhandari, Sali Zwmn, Khuber and Ai Baoli, etc. Bwrli Burwi is another household deity and is the goddesses of learning which is equivalent to Hindu goddess, Saraswati.
Laokhar gosai is the god of cowherds and is identified as Lord Krishna of the Hindu religion. But Song Raja is given a place inside the main house along with Mainao, the goddess of crops and he is symbolized by or placed on a slightly raised altar inside the house. He is worshipped by the women, especially during their monthly menstrual periods. But the offerings made to Song Raja inside the house are later on brought outside the house and is placed at the altar of Bathou.33

The Bodos have a very high degree of religious reverence and fear of God. Besides all their Bodo Gods, they also have various non-Bodo gods and goddesses which are worshipped and propitiated at the Bathou pantheon, especially during the time of Garja festival. They are also sheltered on the hierarchy position in the Bathou pantheon. During the time of Garja festival, many non-Bodo deities or Aryan gods, such as Bangal Mwdai, Mahadeo or Mahadev and his followers, like Sila Rai, Rupa Rai, Bera Bhanga, Santha Mara, Dhamka Mara, etc. are worshipped and propitiated by the Bodos. Of all non-Bodo deities, Mahadev is the chief deity. Some of their non-Bodo gods and goddesses worshipped at the Bathou pantheon are Garakhia Gosai, Madhab Gosai, Gadab Gosai, Baro Gopal, Baro Gapini, Ai Thakurani, Ai Sati, Ai Parbati, Ai Durga, Dao Kali, Ganesh Thakur, etc. Bishahari is a household female deity. She is worshipped and propitiated at the north-eastern corner of the homestead after cleaning and purifying the ground. The system of worshipping Bishahari is very simple. The Bodos perform Bormani ritual in the name of this deity in their society.

The Bodos are known to believe in the existence of various kinds of supernatural powers and their habitual interference in their traditional society. The Bodo people, call these kinds of supernatural powers or evil spirits as ‘hagrai Mwdai’ or ‘bhuts’. They believe that the evil spirits exist everywhere, such as in water, fire, air, mountains, jungles, lakes, streams, shrubs, marches, graveyards, etc. They also consider these spirits to be spiteful rather than benevolent. These spirits are believed and feared to have caused sickness, suffering, misfortunes and other similar calamities in the affairs and life of human beings. The fact is that sometimes these spirits create these malicious activities in order to receive propitiations from them through sacrifices. And one of the worse species of evil spirits popularly known to the Bodo villagers is Kuber. The Bodos have many
Kubers, such as Jal kuber, Thal kuber, Kal kuber, Ish kuber, Akhla kuber, Bis kuber, Batana kuber, Maya kuber, Langthia kuber, Saya kuber, Kuber Bwrai, Kuber Burwi, etc.35 Most of these Kubers are found among the neighbouring non-Bodo Hindus and their practices are also almost similar.

Bathou Bwrai and Siva

As stated earlier, Bathou Bwrai is worshipped by the Bodos as the supreme God in their traditional religion. Bathou Bwrai is called by the Bodos on various names, such as Khuria Bwrai, Si Bwrai, Jiu Bwrai, Bathou Raja, Sijou Raja, Bwrai Bathou, etc. It is stated in the Mahabharata, Puranas and Yogini Tantras that the Mongoloid tribal group called ‘Kirata’ were the earliest tribes to have inhabited the ancient Assam. It is revealed from Kalika Purana that Siva ruled in ancient Kamrup along with the Kiratas and there is also reference of the existence of fifteen sacred temples dedicated to Him.36 But taking the advice of Vishnu he left this Kingdom and Naraka ruled the country. From this juncture of time, probably the worship of Devi started to emerge. The evidence from the sources of Yogini Tantra shows that in ancient Kamrup there was more than one crore of different places, such as soil, mountains, water, etc. where the male organs of Siva were scattered. Afterwards, the worship of Siva lingam spread to different places of Assam among the Hindus.37

The account of Hiuen-Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited Assam in the first half of the seventh century CE describes about the adornments and sacrifices offered by the people to the deities called Devas. Besides, there is also reference of about hundreds of deva-temples, many of which were probably dedicated to Siva and different sectaries.38 Probably Lord Siva remained one of the most popular Gods of early people of Assam during the period of Indo-Mongoloid ruling dynasties who were supposed to be the Bodo group of people. Most of the non-Aryan kings or Bodo kings, such as Pushya Barman, Salastambha, Brahmapala and others were associated with the worship of Lord Siva during their rule in ancient kamrup.39 There is description in the Yogini Tantra:

“Siddesi Yogini-Pithe dharmah
Kairatayo matah”40

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It is apparent from its depiction that the religion of the ancient Kamrup was Kirata in origin.

Siva as mentioned in Yogini Tantra was worshipped in the form of Lingam and more than a million lingams were prevalent in Kamrup. But unlike Siva, the supreme God Bathou Bwrai is not worshipped in the form of statue or idol since ages. So, probably during the period of Indo-Mongoloid ruling dynasties in ancient Kamrup, the cult of Siva remained as a part of their religion along with their traditional beliefs and practices. The fact is that from this time, there is reference of some royal Bodo-Kachari kings who converted into the fold of Hinduism. It was through their conversion that some elements of Hinduism might have crept into the domain of the traditional Bodo religion and later on, supreme God Bathou Bwrai might be identified or sanskritised as Siva probably from the process of Aryanisation. Hindu God, Siva was not worshipped by the Bodos as Siva but as Bathou Bwrai and Bathou Bwrai is indentified with Siva. In the Hindu traditions, Lord Siva was the creator of all forms of dances, music, play and art. A cosmic dance known as “Tandava Nritya” was performed by Lord Siva. This cosmic dance so called ‘natriya’ means dance of destruction of the world. During his cosmic dance Jarapagla, an expert dancer produced ragas, like Basanta Bhairava, Panchamas and Megha Parvati who was called by Bodos as Bhurlum Buri or Sibraini. Like Si Bwrai, Lord Siva is called under various names, such as Bhutapati, Pasupati, Pretapati and Ganapati. He is the supreme god, creator, destroyer and protector of all creatures. Thus most probably the Bathou religion of the Bodos since long past came into contact with the Saivism cult of Hindu because many common elements are visible in both the religion.

On the eve of the expedition against the Ahoms, the Koch king, Nar Narayan worshipped Lord Siva according to accepted sastric rites and gave up the old habit of worship that is, Kherai worship. It is mentioned in Raj Vamsavali that Mahadeva advised him in his dream to perform Kherai puja to be successful in his expedition against the Ahoms. And at the insistence of his Kachari soldiers the worship of Bathou Bwrai (supposed to be Siva) was done in accordance with the tribal customs on the banks of the Sankosh river. The tribal system of worship was usually consisted of sacrifices of swine,
buffaloes, pigeons, goats, ducks, cocks, zumai (rice beer), etc. There is also reference of dancing of a Doudini (female oracle) (deodhai in Assamese) performed to propitiate Bathou Bwrai. Nevertheless, the sacrifices of life and offering of zumai and sereh are not prevalent in Hindu rituals but in Bodo rituals who worship Bathou Bwrai. This contrasting characteristic in the way of worship differentiates between Siva and Bathou Bwrai. Thus, probably most of the Bodo-Kacharis then held their original tribal beliefs and practices just as they still are existent in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The age old beliefs and practices of the Bodos were mainly centered round the worship of Bathou Bwrai as supreme God with their religious rituals.

It is seen that the religious rites and rituals of the Bodo community in the name of Bathou religion are different from that in the Hindu system of worship. Apart from this, Bathou Bwrai is never worshipped in any idol form but the Bodos worship Bathou Bwrai by symbolizing a Sijou tree which is planted at the north-eastern corner of the courtyard of Bodo family. In the Bathou religion, the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai is unseen, formless and shapeless. And a Sijou tree of the Bathou religion is also not alike to the shape of ‘Siva linga’, the male organs of generation. In this sense, it may be said that the linkage of Bathou Bwrai with Siva could only be a matter of later addition probably in the late nineteenth century and in the beginnings of the twentieth century.

According to S. Endle, “the religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as ‘animistic’ and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear or dread”. Apart from S. Endle, some other European writers, the old census reports of India, the District Gazetteers of Assam and most of the monographs written on different tribes of Assam explain the religion of the Bodos as animistic with belief in ghosts and spirits. But P. C. Bhattacharya does not agree with this view and avers that the religion of the Bodos is not animistic. The Supreme God, Bathou Bwrai is worshipped by the Bodos along with other lesser divinities. They also believe in ghosts and spirits, but the belief of the Bodos in the conception of Supreme God is predominantly remarkable. The opinions of some scholars and the Bodo writers also acknowledge the same. Perhaps the foreign writers might have either limited access to the limited resource or misunderstood the meaning of the God and its philosophy in their study. However, it is
apparent from the Bodo tradition that their belief in the existence and conception of a Supreme God, *Bathou Bwrai* is predominant in their traditional Bathou religion. Some other lesser gods and goddesses are also worshipped by them. Thus the Bodos are monotheistic by religion but the form of their worship may also be characterized as polytheistic. Unlike the Hindu, the Christianity and the Islam – major religions of the world the Bathou has neither founder nor scriptures as the main sources for teaching or preaching. Nevertheless, the *Oja*, the *Douri* and *gamini gwra* or the village elders were the main custodians and teachers of their religious traditional beliefs in relation to Bathou philosophy, to propagate and pass on teachings or holy sermons from generation to generation.

**Development in Bathouism**

The Bodos believed that in the days of yore, the Bathou religion evolved in the world. In the historic period, the Bodo groups of people were known as the ‘*Kiratas*’. In the period of the Mahabharata, they were referred with different names, such as *Danava, Asura, Mlechha*, etc., but these nicknames were given to them by the Aryans who thought others to be inferior and uncivilized. From the meaning of the different names attributed to them, the non-Aryans were described as uncivilized by the Aryans. Since the Bodos believed in Bathou religion they followed certain principles and practices in their traditional society and so, it is probable that the development of religion and philosophy of the Bodo religion occurred much earlier. Prior to the coming of Christianity in the early years of the nineteenth century among the Bodos, a large number of Bodos had already embraced the Hindu religion and adopted the Aryan culture. There is also reference of a few members of the Bodo society who converted to Islam. Besides, from the last decade of the nineteenth century the rapid growth and development of Christianity in the Bodo populated areas influenced a large chunk of Bodo population affecting the authority of the traditional Bodo religion. Surviving solely based on oral history and folktales, the traditional religion of the Bodos had little chance against the four-front onslaught of the Hindu and the Christianity which had stronger religious literature. It is learnt that before the coming of Christianity among the Bodos, the history
of the Bodo religion and its teachings were not recorded, and the interpretation of their religion depended entirely on the credence of their oral tradition.

It may be mentioned that the Bodos and their culture became rudderless between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the valley of Brahmaputra. This led to gradual erosion in their rich culture and tradition. The traditional Bodo society came under the rampant onslaught of some social evil practices in the name of Bathou religious rituals and festivals. The disproportionate and habitual use of zumai, sereb and meat in the name of religion and festivity had demoralized the common people in the Bodo society. On the other hand, the Bodos and their religion were affronted by the high caste Hindus and consequently, a large number of the Bodos converted into the fold of Hinduism. The main reason behind their conversion was to escape from the insult and derogatory remarks which the high caste Hindus unscrupulously attributed to the non-Aryan people during that time. Some of the Bodo converts however forgot all their traditional social customs and traditions after adopting other religions, like Saraniyas, Modahis, Koches, etc. There is a section of the Bodos who converted to Hinduism (especially the Brahmas) and Christianity, but they maintained their traditional Bodo identity and spoke the language. The process of conversion among the Bodos was continued to a great extent, but there was a large number of the Bodos who still adhered to their original faith and maintained their original culture.

In the early years of twentieth century CE the Brahma dharma propagated by Kalicharan Brahma brought about inexpensive rituals and equality among its adherents. Kalicharan Brahma initiated the religious reform movement of Brahma dharma in the Bodo society. This religious movement greatly affected on the age old beliefs, religious practices and traditional culture of the Bodos which were mostly associated with the Bathou religion. Although there was no organized platform by which the followers of Bathou religion could resist this movement led by Kalicharan Brahma yet there was a reference of a counter movement which Joynarayan Basumatary and Satish Chandra Basumatary launched against the Brahma movement. The progenitors of this movement were the followers of Guru Kalicharan Brahma, but subsequently diverged from it and instead tried to revitalize the traditional Bathou religion by reforming certain elements in
its rituals and doing away with most of the evil practices inadvertently crept into it. The Bodo people were encouraged by them to perform the Bathou worship without the sacrifices of animals, fowls, goats, and offering of zumai, etc.\textsuperscript{52} It was in this way that the reformation in the religious worship of traditional Bathou began first among the Bodos.

The formation of the Boro Chatra Sanmilan in 1919 CE at Kokrajhar was another turning point in the development of the Bathou religion in the Bodo society. It brought about social consciousness among the Bodos and thereby contributed a lot to the development of literature and language besides the religion. The Boro Chatra Sanmilan adopted a number of voluntary measures along with the Boro Mahasanmilani to bring about the reforms in the age old beliefs and practices in the society.\textsuperscript{53} But the opinion of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in the Boro Mahasanmilani to abandon the traditional Bodo musical instruments, such as kham (drum), sifung (flute) and jotha (cymbal) at the religious ceremonies received a stiff opposition from one of his disciples, Nepal Chandra Brahmachari popularly known as Fwrlang Babaji and some followers like Satish Chandra Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma and others. Realizing the importance of rich cultural heritage of the Bodos, Babaji strongly held the view that the unique identity and culture of the Bodos vested in these three musical instruments.\textsuperscript{54} The preservation of rich cultural heritage thus sprang up in the minds of a section of the educated Bodo Brahma converts. Consequently, a section of the Bodo intellectuals who were staunch Bathou worshippers made an attempt to reform the traditional Bathou worship with some modifications in order to preserve their traditional religion and culture.

Reformation in Bathouism

The Bathou religious reformation brought some significant changes in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Bodos. It brought several reforms, such as in marriage institution, customs in life-cycle of man, restriction in using zumai, sereb and sacrificial mode of worship. The Bathou religion is an oral faith of the Bodos. This religion did not have any religious scriptures, founder and preacher and as a result, there were wide variations of practices, but there were also wide unity of thoughts, expressions and actions on fundamental concepts, objectives, tenets, principles and in respects of
behaviour and acculturation of multidimensional aspects of the faith. The Bodos had neither any formal institutions nor any preacher in the name of Bathou religion in their community. The Bathou religion of the Bodos did not have any institutionalized platform. But in the course of time the traditional Bodo society underwent a great change at various institutional levels, such as religion, marriage, economy, social customs and traditions as well as other spheres of life. A section of the Bodo intellectuals decided to have an indigenous association of the Bodos for the welfare of the Bodo people in general and for the preservation of Bodo culture and religion in particular. This section of Bodo elites came under the influence of Brahma dharma and learned a lesson from the social reform movement launched by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and the impacts were both negative and positive in the early years of twentieth century CE. As a result, in 1958 CE 'Sadou Asom Bathou Mahasangha' was organized by Dhupa Ram Basumatary for the purpose of spread the messages of the Bathou religion. It received a very less support from the Bodo community and faded out after a few years. Despite, it did pave the way for the Bodo intellectuals to organize the platform for the spread of messages of the traditional religion in future.

In 1960 CE, a 'Bathou Dharma Mahasabha' was convened by Bhaben Swargiary popularly known as Bhaben Fwrwngiri at Bhogpur of present Baksa district inviting twelve prominent persons of the district of Barpeta. In this meeting, the social workers like Pushpakanta Basumatary and Upen Basumatary were the president and the Secretary respectively. The difference between Bathou Bwrai, supreme God and the demigods was explained by Bhaben Fwrwngiri among the Bodo people. However, he never preferred the worship of demigods and goddesses as well as was objected to idol worship. For the cause of religious reformation and spread the Bathou religion far and wide, Bhaben Fwrwngiri visited different parts of Assam, such as Nalbari, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Baksa, etc. to convince the Bodo people about the greatness of Bathou religion in the Bodo villages. Many social persons, like Madhav Basumatary, Rupnath Basumatary, Bashistha Boro and others are also said to have taken part in this religious reformation venture. He also tried to reform some evil practices and habits in the Bodo society in the name of Bathou religion for all round development of the Bodos. Thus, his
efforts along with his fellow followers brought some changes at different aspects of socio-cultural and religious life of the Bodos.

Similarly in 1974 CE, a group of religious thinkers was formed in Khwirabari of undivided Darrang district under the leadership of intellectuals, such as Gaham Kochari, Boloram Boro, Jugen Basumatary. This was the first group of religious thinkers in Darrang to have studied the Bathou religion and its philosophy in the history of traditional religion of the Bodos. The leaders of Bathou Dharma Mahasobha, like Bhaben Fwrwngiri and Baneswar Basumatary were also invited to install the Bathou thansali (temple) at Salibari village of Khwirabari area in the present district of Udalguri. Accordingly, the Bathou thansali or Bathousali was installed in this village with the eighteen pairs of bamboo posts interwoven with dawthub bikha (dove heart). Besides, a Bathou Religious affad (organization) named 'Khwirabari Hadabsa' was formed with seventeen members of this region. This affad however, made an attempt to preserve the traditional social norms and values of the Bodo society as well as to spread the essence of Bathou religion among the Bodos.

Although a section of the Bodo elites tried to reform the Bathou religious beliefs and practices yet the traditional Bodo society could not be totally free from the period of darkness. Thus the conversion among the Bodos in large numbers into other sects of religion was continued. Consequently, the morality of the Bathou religion was invariably degraded in the society. So, for the purpose of modification of the Bathou philosophy and spread of the Bathou religion a new religious organization named 'Sanja Darang Bathou Dwhwram Affad' was formed in 1975 CE in the district of Darrang due to the initiative of Bihuram Boró. The celebration of the first anniversary of this affad was performed at Balisiha L.P. school in 1976 CE where Bhaben Fwrwngiri, Baneswar Basumatary, Kudiram Kachari also attended. In this convention, Sombar Daimary was selected as the Douri (priest) for the purpose of spread of the Bathou religion. Thus, a section of the Bodo intellectuals tried to reform and modify the Bathou religion in order to protect their legacy of rich cultural heritage and religion and thus to keep pace with other religions.

The Bodoland movement of 1987 CE was also a deciding factor in the course of self-determination in making the Bathou religion adjustable with the practices of modern
time. After having regained political consciousness through this movement, some religious minded people thought to give a distinct religious identity to the Bodos. On the other hand, the sacrificial offerings of goats, buffalos, pigeons, fowls, and offering and drinking *zumai, sereb* in the name of deities at different religious occasions and festivals began to be demeaning and unacceptable in the eyes of modern concepts of religion. So, a section of the Bodo elites began to feel ashamed of this grossness and tried to find the superior features of other faiths since the beginning of the 20th century CE onwards. The emergence of organized movements in the Bodo society thus tried to introduce innovation and to refine the rituals and related religious practices of Bathou religion. This ultimately led to the formation of the *Dularai Bathou Gouthum or All Bathou Mahasabha* (All Bathou Religious Union) on 10th May, 1992 CE for the purpose of reformation and modification of the age old practices. Since the formation of the Dularai Bathou Gouthum the different rules and regulations regarding Bathou religion were adopted and implemented in different levels of Bodo socio-cultural life. The Dularai Bathou Gouthum was a socio-cultural and religious organization of the Bodos who still continued to adhere to the traditional Bodo religion to preserve it and bring in it. The emergence of this organization however came as counteract to the attitude and works of the Hindus and Christian missionaries among the Bodos. Through this organization the Bodos tried to revive and modify their faith and customs, and also to preserve the traditional values of rich cultural heritage and their age-long religious teachings. This renaissance brought a respite to the otherwise a succumbing heritage of the Bodos. The main aims and objectives of this organization may be cited here.

1. To revitalize *Bathouism* along with propagation of its religious preaching all over the world.
2. To enshrine the divine ideas of the *Bathouism* along with its related traditional rites and rituals as well as social customs.
3. To publish and highlight the theosophical matters, philosophy, thought and beliefs, moral teaching, hymn and,
4. To organize discussions, seminars, study circles and researches as required on *Bathou* religion and its philosophy from time to time.
It is evident that many initiatives were taken by the organization to introduce some innovation and modification on the rites and rituals of the Bathou religion. The reformation leaders of this body tried to give a unified, institutionalized shape to it which had so long been practiced as an oral religion in their society. This organization controlled all the activities associated with the traditional religion of the Bodos. This organization has however, a powerful central body, district body and primary body to look after all the religious activities. Besides, a Douri of the primary or district level is appointed and approved. The Douri becomes the main holy custodian to perform the rituals and ceremonies at the community level. He is needed to attend the family rituals or ceremonies if so requires. Under the initiative of this organization, a Bathousali or Bathou thansali (Bathou temple) is set up in each primary unit as it is mandatory to have planted a Sijou tree as the living symbol of supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and the Bathou religion of the Bodos. In the Bathou thansali, the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi are worshipped by a chorus of Bathou devotees (aroj hanja) singing devotional prayer songs (aroj methai) accompanied by traditional music from instruments, such as kham (drum), sifung (flute), sherja (violin) and jotha (cymbal) (See Plates 14, 15, 16, 17). This new mode of Bathou worship is prevalent in modified Bathouism which is sometimes also called Bibar Bathou. However, annual sessions, seminars and workshops are also organized annually at different places where debates and symposia on Bathou religion and its philosophy are broadly discussed. Thus, the reformation leaders of this organization tried to preserve and develop the traditional Bathou religion in their society.

This reformation brought in the development of Bathou religious literature of various kinds. Many writers, poets, novelists, dramatists were devoted to produce new religious literatures for propagation and understanding the value of Bathou religion in the progress of the society. As a result, a number of Bodo prayer songs on Bathou religion are composed. There are also a considerable number of books written on Bathou religion and its philosophy. For instance, the first and the most important books on the religion of the Bodos is ‘Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aroj’ written by Madaram Brahma in 1926 CE. Similarly, Bihuram Boro’s writing on religious practice of the Bodos is also valuable and considered as highest quality. His religious books are Gibi Bithai (1984 CE) and Asarba
Besides, some of the books written on the traditional Bodo religion and the philosophy are *Gwthar Mwikhun* (1987 CE), *Bwrai Bathouni lama* (1988 CE), *Bathou Khanthi* (1988 CE), *Bathouni Alari, part-I &II* (1988 CE), *Douri* (1990 CE), *Abongni gwhw* (1991 CE), *Bwrai Bathouni Giyan* (1991 CE), and *Bathou Khanthi* (1999 CE) in addition to numerous souvenirs and mouthpieces. The religious texts, like ‘*Bathou Mung Santhou*’ written by Hareswar Machahary from Baksa district is also considered as sacred religious text book on the Bodo religion. But it seems that a section of writers tried to redefine the philosophy of Bathou in a new way to attract the common people which showed a slender departure from the old philosophy. A number of literature on the rites and rituals and procedures of prayer, worship and offerings became available in Bodo language which marked a good development in the history of the Bodo religion from the last two decades of the twentieth century. The writers however also infused a new spirit and zeal among the Bodo people to adopt this faith and devotion. A number of Bodo medium mission schools and ashrams were also set up by the reformation leaders for the purpose of spread of Bathou religion as well as for elevating the standard of the common people. These ashrams and mission schools are now set up in areas with substantive concentration of Bodo people. In these ashrams and mission schools the Bathou prayers are made regularly. In this way, the reformation leaders under this organization tried to give a cohesive and unified institutionalized shape to the traditional Bodo religion, *Bathou*. The fact is that the leaders of the organization were inspired by their allegiance to the traditional values. Thus a section of Bodo elites played a very crucial role in reviving the old Bathou religion and gave it a new form and a sense of status.

By the last two decades of the twentieth century the different sects of *Bathou* worship emerged among the Bodos, such as *Gudi Bathou* (Bwli Bathou), *Zangkhrao Bathou*, *Bihar Bathou*, *Moni Bathou* of Guru Rupamoni Devi, *Bathou Siva dharma* of Swami Nabin Brahmani. All types of *Bathou* worship are now accepted as different sects of *Bathou* religion. The most ancient and original form of Bathou worship is found in *Gudi* or *Bwli Bathou*. The modified form of Bathou worship popularly known as *Bihar Bathou* was a new sect of Bathou worship in the history of the Bodo religion. This modified form of worship gained much popularity among the Bodos in comparison to the other form of Bathou worship. The burden of ritualism is not very elaborate in this
religion and it also incurs a very less expenditure. The fact is that the religious practices of the modified Bathou religion is comparatively easy and simple where no sacrifices of life or rice beer are required for offering prayers or oblations to the Bathou deities.

Rites and rituals

The rites and rituals are the most important constituents of the Bathou religion. From ancient times, the Bodos have practiced the Bathou religion in the traditional style of worship. The supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and other lesser divinities are worshipped and propitiated at the Bathou pantheon. The place of Bathou worship is called 'Bathousali' or 'Bathou thansali'. Earlier, there was no fixed place of worship for community worship. The place of community Bathou worship was made by the villagers outside the house compound usually near the sacred grove of trees or bamboos after cleaning and purifying the ground, and there the Bathou altar was also raised on. The making of the Bathou altar is very simple but there are certain rules which the Bathou worshippers follow in preparing the Bathou altar. The altar of Bathou is called 'Bathou bindw' but there are two types of Bathou bindw, viz., Bathou bindw for the village community as a whole and Bathou bindw for a family in particular. The Bathou bindw for the village is installed at the land of village community and Bathou bindw for family is made in the north eastern corner of the courtyard of the homestead. Traditionall, the Bathou altar is made with elevated soil at about five to six inches but it is stretched a bit long and divided into three parts. In the middle part, there is the principal altar fenced by bamboo strips and the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai is sheltered and the second part of the altar is extended part from the principal altar to the northern direction where household gods called 'Noni mwdai', i.e. subordinate deities of Bathou are sheltered. At the end of the northern part of altar, Mainao, the goddess of wealth or crops (See Plate 6) is placed and worshipped. In the third part of the Bathou altar which is similarly extended part from the principal altar to the southern direction the 'Hagrani mwdai' (forest deity) not belonging to Bathou family of deities are worshiped. But it was observed that in the recent past, the worship of 'Hagrani mwdai' at the altar of Bathou seemed to have been discarded in some Bodo villages. Instead, in this part of altar the Bathou worshippers use
to worship ‘Ba-Raja’ or ‘Ba-gwhw’ (See Plate 7) which represents the five spiritual powers.

In the first part, a white piece of cloth is also hung up above the ground. This however represents the nirakar (formless) existence of the Almighty, Aham Gosai, supreme God of Bathou followers. In a Bodo homestead, a full grown Sijou tree with two to three small branches is planted at the centre of the principal Bathou altar. The Sijou tree symbolizes the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai. It is a kind of cactus. The term ‘Sijou’ has a special meaning. It is a combination of the two words, viz., ‘Si’ and ‘Jou’. ‘Si’ means life or soul (atma) and ‘jou’ means supreme. Hence, the Sijou itself stands for supreme soul or param atma. In the Bathou philosophy, its longevity symbolizes immortality and even it has also some specific characteristics. For instance, though it is cut down it is never parched and its greenish colour lasts for a long time unlike other plants. In fact it is somewhat like an immortal plant. The Sijou tree grows vertically upwards in five stems with five ridges and five depressions. Its ridges signify the Bathou or five ingredients like earth, water, air, fire and ether. Besides, the Sijou tree is believed by the Bodos to be the earliest plant among the vegetations in the universe that ever sprouted on earth. Bathou Bwrai is believed to have created it to symbolize the primary elements and to take shelter under its shade. Hence, the Sijou tree stands as an emblem of Bathou. The importance of Sijou tree at the worship of Bathou is clearly evident from their mwnthwr (mantra) or slokas which is chanted by the Douri in the Bathou rituals.

“Mwider-a gaabw

odal bifang gudi-ao

Mansi-a gaabw

Sijou gudi-ao”

In English translation: ‘The elephant sobs at the base of the odal tree and man prays at the base of the Sijou tree.’

The evidence from Bathou mantra reveals that traditionally, the Sijou tree is highly revered for religious rituals of Bathou. There are certain social traditions and
customs to plant a *Sijou* tree at the Bathou altar. According to the traditions, at the place of the altar where a *Sijou* tree is going to be planted, an egg of a hen and a stone are buried. The Bathou followers believe that an egg of hen stands for reproduction and the earliest evolutionary stage of the universe and a stone for truth and longevity. These are responsible for origin and creation of the universe. Then the upper part of a *Sijou* tree is curled five times with a white fresh rayon thread called ‘*awa khungdung*’ in Bodo. The Bathou worshippers believe this to be worldly illusion and affection since creation. A branch of *Sijou* tree is then cut off from the parent plant and then carried by a fresh white cloth called ‘*phali*’ in Bodo. Afterwards, the Douri sprinkles the sacred water on the *Sijou* tree and the Bathou altar with *thulunsi* (holy basil) and a *Sijou* tree is then planted on the elevated principal altar of Bathou according to the religious customs. The *Sijou* tree which is planted on the elevated altar, is surrounded by a round fence of five pairs of small bamboo strips in five layers from below to above which are interwoven to eighteen pairs of split bamboo posts. The five pairs of small bamboo strips symbolize the religious and spiritual principles of the Bathou,— the principle of the spiritual five. The eighteen pairs of bamboo split posts symbolizes the eighteen pairs of married couple of Bathou gods and goddesses or gurus. But there are also the followers of Bathou faith who install a sixteen pairs of bamboo split posts surrounding the *Sijou* tree found mostly in Kokrajhar district believing in the sixteen pairs of married couple of Bathou gods and goddesses or gurus. The adherents of the Bathou religion living in the districts of Kamrup, Nalbari, Udaguri, etc. however accept the eighteen pairs of married couples of Bathou guru or gods and goddesses and install the eighteen pairs of bamboo spilt posts at the Bathou altar. The eighteen pairs of symbolic married couple of Bathou guru are believed to have developed Bathou religion and its philosophy. Of the five pairs of bamboo strips in the front side, the middle three pairs are twisted traditionally in a particular style and it is called ‘*Dawthub bikha hebnai*’. The *Dawthub bikha* (dove heart) is made from the third steps of fencing from the ground. But the third steps of fencing has also a special meaning which stands for the three-fold power of Bathou, viz., creation, existence and cessation. The fencing of the Bathou altar is prepared out of a single purified bamboo but nobody is allowed to jump over the bamboo. The fact is that the bamboo is believed to have occurred impure if someone crosses it. The *thulunsi* (holy
basil) and jathrsai plant (a kind of shrub) are also planted near the altar of Bathou. The offering prasads or eatable things, a bunch of banana fruits, five shares of betel-nut and other sacred materials are placed on the five banana leaves called laijou and then the incense sticks are lit and placed under the Sijou tree. Besides, an earthen lamp called alaribathi in Bodo is also lit on the Bathou altar.

The principal altar of Bathou in the individual family is only seen in the courtyard but it is not as long as that of village community altar. The construction of the Bathou altar with specific standardized structure began among the Bodos from the middle part of the twentieth century. Installation of the Bathou temple or Bathou thansali, in structural form in the village community is the result of the impact of other neighboring communities and dawning of modern religious thoughts among the Bodos. There is also reference of the individual households who install the Bathou temple with structure within the homestead. The Bodo families still keep the Bathou bindw at the north-eastern corner of the courtyard of the homestead and worship Bathou (See Plate 2). From the recent past, there was a section of Bathou worshippers who built a small hut in front of the Bathou altar at their individual family for the purpose of convenience in worshipping. It was directly an outcome of the influence of Hinduism upon the Bodos.

In respect of offerings made to Bathou Bwrai and other lesser divinities, various materials are placed before their seats in hierarchical position of the Bathou pantheon during the worship of Bathou. In former times, there were three holy custodians or authority, viz., a Douri, a Doudini (female oracle) and an Oja (oracle man) to perform the rites and rituals of the Bathou religion. The chanting of the mantra and guiding the Douri on the religious rituals are the main duty of the Oja. Besides, he had to hypnotize the Doudini during the time of Kherai festival. The fact is that the worship of Bathou Bwrai and other lesser divinities are done by performing the Kherai puja in the Bodo society. The sacrifices of life and other materials offering to the gods and goddess are carried out by the Douri under the guidance of an Oja.

In the name of Bathou worship, various fragrant worshipping materials, such as dhup, duna, chandan and incense sticks are burnt surrounding the entire Bathou altar. But to propitiate the gods and goddesses at Bathou pantheon in earlier times, a number of
animals, like goats, pigeons, buffalos, ducks and fowls, etc. were sacrificed. The offering of zumai, sereb were also common. If there have not been occurred any trouble either on the sacrifices of animals, fowls and birds or on offering other eatable materials to Bathou Bwrai and other deities then the worshippers believed that the gods and goddesses were satisfied with their offerings and hence, it is hoped that the village would be free from any natural calamities, evil spirits and other shortcomings. In the offerings, the female animals and beasts are sacrificed in the name of Bathou Burwi and the male animals are sacrificed to Bathou Bwrai. 73

There is also a tradition to drink the blood of sacrificed animals by the Doudini during offerings of sacrifices to Bathou Bwrai and Bathou Burwi. The Bathou worshippers believe that the drinking of sacrificed blood by the Doudini is done on behalf of Bathou Bwrai, supreme God. When the Doudini drinks the blood of sacrificed animals she becomes unconscious and later on speaks in the language of prophecy. But after a few minutes later she recovers back as earlier and begins dancing and moving around the Bathou altar five times for each deity with the melodious tune of the traditional musical instruments. She continues to drink the blood while sacrifices of animals are made till the end of the Kherai puja. In earlier times, such type of the worship continued for three days and nights at a stretch. Throughout these days and nights, the Kherai dances are entertained to please Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Bunvi as well as other lesser deities. But the drinking of blood of sacrificed animals by the Doudini during the time of the Kherai festival has become unacceptable to the modified form of Bathou worship. The Kherai dance of the Doudini to propitiate the deities has no song but these dances are performed in accordance with the tune and rhythm of the traditional musical instruments, such as kham, sifung, jotha, etc. It is through the observance of Kherai festival that the Bodo people pray for the boons and blessings of Bathou Bwrai. 74 Besides, from the birth to the end of man’s life the followers of the Bathou observe the various rites and rituals in the every phases of life according to the tenets of Bathou religion.

The history of Bathou religion did not have any tradition of singing prayer songs while worshipping the gods and goddess at Bathousali. In the early period, there was only an Oja and a Douri who performed the religious rites and rituals for the wellbeing of the
village community and for having the bumper crops. The chanting of mantra by the Oja at Bathou worship was meant to invoke the deities and to hypnotize Doudini at Kheraisali. But gradually there emerged a section of Bathou worshippers who worship Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi by singing prayer songs accompanied by traditional musical instruments at the temple of village community. The prayer songs, however, are not any other songs but these are derived mostly from the mantras chanted by the Oja in the context of Bathou worship in ancient religious practices. Later, the composition of many prayer songs by the Bathou worshippers marks a good turning point of development in the history of Bathou religion. These made the meanings and the purpose of various Bathou mantras easy to understand and liberated, which otherwise were the privilege of only the Ojas. Most of the prayer songs are sung in praise of Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi at the community temple for the welfare of the village community by singing devotional songs. The prayer songs are also sung by a chorus of Bathou devotees in the individual household if an individual family formally invites them for the purpose to pray for the wellbeing of the family members. On every Tuesday, at the Bathou thansali of the village community the regular prayers are held by a chorus of Bathou devotees to Bathou Bwrai, the Almighty by singing the prayer songs accompanied by the tune of the traditional musical instruments (See Plate 5). Earlier, there was no fixed day as such for regular community prayers among the Bathou worshipers. Besides, certain religious sacred books are also read and discoursed for the worshipers on the holy Tuesday. The fact is that the day Tuesday is considered as auspicious day for the worshippers of Bathou religion. In case of religious affairs in some places, all the feasts among the Bathou followers are increasingly served with vegetarian food. Further, some of them became vegetarian and even avoided drinking of zumai, sereb, etc. either at their family or any other public places. However, their offering of fruits, flowers and other eatable ingredients in the name of respective gods and goddess remained unchanged. This religious practice appears to be like that of ‘Bhakti’ cult of Vaisnavism of neighbouring Hindu society. However, this mode of Bathou worship is called Bibar Bathou which has now assumed a dominant place in the Bodo society.

As stated earlier, the Bodo villagers did not have fixed place of worship but probably from the last two decades of the twentieth century, a considerable number of
Bathou temples had been installed in the villages of Bodo community (See Plate 4) and even at individual households of the worshippers of Bathou religion. It was in this way that the reformation leaders of Bathou religious organizations brought various changes in the age old practices of the Bathou religion. The Bathou religious organization of the Bodos however, is like that of Ka Seng Khase of Meghalaya which striving for the preservation of their traditional Khasi religion along with restoration of their original Khasi identity.

Priesthood

There are mainly three categories of priests, namely Douri, Oja and Doudini. They are traditionally regarded as the three holy custodians who perform the religious rites and rituals of the Bathou religion. They also perform other social functions. But unlike the Hindus, the authoritative priestly caste system is not prevalent among the Bodos. In olden days, all religious rites and rituals were performed by the Douri under the guidance of Oja. But the performance of the rituals and ceremonies at the village community level now remained vested on the shoulders of Douri without the interference of Oja. Generally, the Douri is selected by the village council for a certain period of two to three years from amongst the man of village elders who have good knowledge about religious rites and rituals in the society. The office of the Douri is not hereditary. There are now two Douris (priests), viz., gahai Douri (head Douri) and leng-i Douri (assistant Douri). They are now called gwhari-asari in the modified form of Bathouism. The gahai Douri is assisted by leng-i Douri on the religious activities and in absence of the former, the latter acts as gahai Douri in performing all religious and social functions of the village community.

In earlier times, the holy custodian known as Oja was mandatorily employed in performing the religious functions of Bathou religion either at the villages or the individual family. There is a reference of the Oja who with the help of shells, cowries also used to detect the cause of illness and foretell the future life of the people. It was supposed that he is capable to deal with the ordinary ailments or illness of village community by indicating the approximate method of propitiating the offended deity called ‘mwdai‘ in Bodo. The Bodos believe that the anger of deity is the main cause
behind all the ills. Apart from him, there is also a female holy custodian who performs the religious rituals in the Bodo community. She is called 'Doudini' (female oracle) in Bodo. Earlier, in case of any special emergency or outbreak of plague, pestilence, famine in the village a Doudini was called in for detection of the cause of any illness or evil by performing the Kherai festival. In Kherai festival the shamanic dances are performed by a Doudini around the Bathou altar through which oblations are offered to various gods and goddesses and even spirits while she is almost in the state of a hypnotic trance. But in times of the Kherai festival all religious rituals are carried out by the Douri under the direction of Oja. In the recent past, the role of Oja became insignificant gradually from the arena of religious rituals except in some Bodo village in remote areas where the older form of Bathou worship (Bwli Bathou) is still in vogue and the importance of two priests, gahai-Douri and leng-i Douri in observance of Bathou religious celebrations (See Plate 3) is seen in the traditional Bodo society.

Thus, the modified form of Bathou worship called Bihar Bathou played an important role in the Bodo society. Most of the Bodo people are drawn towards this new mode of Bathou worship. The religious practice of this Bathou occupies an important position among the Bodos except in a few interior areas of the Bodo villages where the older form of Bathou religion, Bwli Bathou still prevails.

Notes and References


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31. Endle, Sidney, op. cit., p. 35.
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39. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 159 (No. 5).
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46. Endle, Sidney, op. cit., p. 36.
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65. Interviewed, Nabin Ch. Basumatary, ex-panchayat member, Dwilajan, Baksa, age-70, 23rd June 2011; Boro, Anil Kumar, op. cit., p. 123 (No. 54).

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75. Interviewed, Haren Boro, social worker, Barghagra, Baksa, age-57, 25th June 2011.
