Chapter 6

Religious fairs and festivals
Fairs and festivals are an integral part of the religious life of the people. In the midst of various quandaries and hardships of life, the people live in their own world of merrymaking, fairs and festivals, songs and dances which make them shut their eyes from the stern realities of life for a moment.¹ Any fairs and festivals has been celebrated in accordance with the belief of the people in religion since the dawn of the civilization. The ideas, myths, legends, and dogmas are notions associated with holy and unholy things in religious beliefs. As a way of paying respect to holy things and avoiding unholy things the rites and rituals of the religion are performed in the society.² Most of the tribes still maintained their social customs, beliefs and practices since ages in different parts of India. The Bodos in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, are no exception to it. They also have performed the traditional fairs and festivals in different seasons of the year since time immemorial. Depending on their celebrations of the different seasons of the year, many writers have classified the fairs and festivals of the Bodos into seasonal or agricultural, religious, ritualistic and ceremonial. Each fairs and festivals have some socio-cultural and religious activities. However, the fairs and festivals of the Bodos can be classified primarily into religious and seasonal or agricultural but they are also very closely connected with the society.
Kherai festival

Traditionally, the Kherai is one of the largest religious festivals of the Bodo society. It is both community and domestic religious festival. The Kherai festival is an indispensable part of the Bathou religion. The performance of the Kherai festival deals with the worship of Bathou as center and primary source of divinity. The Bodo society perform the Kherai festival in the name of the Almighty Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi along with other lesser divinities on some specific occasions with great pomp and grandeur. According to D.L. Bhowmik, the purpose of each puja is meant for general welfare of the society, the state and the worshipping family or families. Similarly, the Kherai festival is also celebrated by the Bodos for the purpose of getting the blessings for the welfare of the human beings and for good harvests.

The origin of the Kherai festival among the Bodos has been a vague matter till a very recent past. But it can undoubtedly be said that since time immemorial the Bodos have performed the Kherai festival associated with the worship of Bathou in their society. Many writers have given different opinions regarding the origin of the Kherai among the Bodo community. According to Liladhar Brahma, the 'Kherai' originated from the word 'Khoirabrai'. Khoirabrai is the primitive spiritual creator of the universe who first created the universe and all the living beings. And the Kherai is the institution by which the primitive spiritual creator is prayed in utmost reverence. In the true sense of the term, the Kherai is a prayer institution. The view of H.B. Chhetri Atreya in this regard also appears to be the same. Mohini Mohan Brahma, one of the renowned Bodo scholars opined that the word 'Kherai' might have originated from the 'Khe' sound which is produced at the time of animals or beasts sacrifices for Bwrai Bathou, the supreme God of the Bodos. And the Kherai festival is performed in his name, Kherai Bwrai. It is evident from his opinion that Bwrai Bathou is worshipped in the form of Kherai Bwrai during the time of Kherai. But one of the firm Bathou religionists, Soneswar Boro describes the meaning of the word 'Kherai' as 'the habit of worship or devotion to one Almighty God'. In the opinion of a section of the Bodo scholars, the 'Khe' means kneeling down, 'ra' means uttering and 'i' (ai) means to God and hence it leads to the
formation of the word ‘Kherai’. Here, the word ‘Kherai’ is referred in term of a system of prayer or devotion to God. In the Kherai festival, Bathou Bwrai and his consort Mainao Burwi, the goddess of wealth or crops along with other lesser divinities are worshipped and propitiated at Kheraisali (place of worship) with a view to get their blessings for the welfare of the village community and for having good harvests.

In accordance with the necessity and scope of the villagers, the Kherai festival is celebrated by and large at different seasons of the year on some specific occasions. These occasions may be cited here.

- The Kherai festival is observed at the first day of the Assamese month of Kati or Kartik (October-November). This is the festival to please Mainao Burwi, the goddess of crops equivalent to the Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of wealth. In this festival Mainao is prayed for blessings with abundant production of seasonal paddy and other crops. It is related to winter crops, especially maisali (sali in Assamese) and hence, it is known to the Bodos as maisali Kherai or sali Kherai. It is also sometimes called darshan Kherai.

- Traditionally, the Kherai festival is also practiced on the seventh day of Achar, Assamese month (June-July) for the welfare of seasonal fruits, crops and villages at the time of Amthi-sua. It is called Ashu Kherai because it is directly related to the paddy cultivation of the rainy season. This festival is also known as umrao Kherai.

- Further, the Kherai festival is held at Kheraisali either on the first day of the Assamese month of Magh or on the full moon day of the month of Magh called Maghw purnima (January-February). During this Kherai festival, the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai is specially prayed and hence, this festival is called Bathou festival. It is also known to some Bodo villagers as phalo festival.

- On the first day of Assamese month Bwisag (April-May), another Kherai festival is also carried out to observe ‘gwdan bwswr’ or the new year. It is a
very festive time throughout the week of the *Bwisag* where the Bodos enjoy a very colorful festival of merriment. During this festival, the supreme God, *Bathou Bwrai* is prayed for the welfare of the human beings.

- In former times, the Kherai festival was performed by the Bodo family when the latter is befallen into any unprecedented troubles or infected by any incurable diseases. It is called *'Nokhorni Kherai'* meaning household Kherai. In the course of time, the observance of this Kherai festival disappeared long back from the society.

In addition, the Kherai festival is also organized by the villagers collectively when any trouble or epidemic diseases occur in the entire village. In earlier times, the Kherai festival was also performed with a view to detect the witchcraft in the village. It was due to the suspicion that some witch might have brought the danger, evil spirits or incurable diseases, epidemic and disturbances plaguing the village. In the recent past, this tradition is discouraged from the Bodo society. However, the Kherai festival is now celebrated collectively by the villagers, but not by individual family.

**Worship and propitiation**

There are a number of gods and goddesses to worship in the Kherai ritual. In the *Bathou* pantheon, the Kherai deities are given the *asan* (seats) in the hierarchical position during the time of Kherai. The offerings are also made to them in accordance with their position. Their offerings consist of sacrifices of animals, fowls, ducks, pigeons along with flowers, *zumai* (rice beer), *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit). etc. In Kherai some of the principal deities worshipped and propitiated in a very phased manner may be described below.

- In Kherai the supreme deity is *Khuria Bwrai* or *Bathou Bwrai*. *Khuria Bwrai* has his consort, *Khuria Burwi*. These deities are sheltered at the topmost position at the Bathou altar. In the name of each deity, a number of small pieces of banana leaves are placed at the altar of Bathou extending from the *Bathou hindw* (principal altar) to the left side. It is called *pathali bonai*. The banana fruits, a pair
of betel-nuts are placed on the banana leaves and *dhub* (incense stick) and *dhuna* are also burnt surrounding the Bathou altar. Here *Khuria Bwrai* is worshipped and propitiated with offering sacrifice of pigs. The head and blood of the sacrificed pig is offered at the *asan* of *Khuria Bwrai*. There is a tradition to sprinkle and purify the animals, fowls and pigeons as well as various other materials with the *dwi santhi* (sacred water) before sacrificing and offerings made to each deity. The whole work is done by the *Douri* (priest) under the guidance of an ‘Oja’ (oracle man).

- There is a deity called *Aileng*. This deity is the bodyguard of *Khuria Bwrai*. For this deity, a cock needs to be sacrificed. This deity is worshipped for safety against the attack of the enemy.

- *Bathou Bwrai* has also a general and his name is *Agrang* deity. He is worshipped and propitiated by the sacrifice of a he-goat.

- *Khoila* deity is the messenger of the supreme deity. For this deity, in previous times, a cock was sacrificed for the purpose of getting relieved from any problem.

- The Bodos believe that *Kharji* deity is the minister of *Bathou Bwrai*. To prepare oneself for the battle, a he-goat is sacrificed for him.\(^{11}\)

- The two male deities, namely *Rajphuthur* and *Rajkhandra* are worshipped too. They are the son and the grandson of the *Bathou Maharaja* respectively.

- There is also a god of forests and wild animals called *Song Raja*. His consort is *Song Rani*. The Bodos believe that if they are pleased then it would help them in hunting the wild animals in the forests. For these deities, a red cock is offered. Similarly, the Rong tribes of Sikkim call this deity ‘*mut*’ and they also sacrificed a cock for him.\(^{12}\) Besides being worshipped in Kherai, the *Song Raja* and his consort, *Song Rani* are also worshipped before entering into the forests to hunt wild animals. In this ritual, a pair of betel-nut is offered to them and a red cock is also set free in their name in the forest.
- **Manasu** is the goddess of river and the owner of fish. In earlier days, she was worshipped in the river for getting fish. A cock is sacrificed to her.

- The Bodos believe that **Bathou Maharaja** has two daughters. They are **Alai khungri** and **Bilai khungri** who are also worshipped in the Bathou pantheon.

- **Rwnchwndri** is the goddess of war. Before initiating any war against an enemy, she is worshipped and propitiated by offering sacrifice of a cock. The blood of this sacrificed cock is drunk by a **Doudini** (female oracle) while dancing.\(^\text{13}\)

- In addition, there is also a deity for storing the food stuffs. This deity is known as **Bhandari**. To this deity, a cock is sacrificed for getting the food-stuffs.\(^\text{14}\)

- In Kherai there is a goddess of medicine and mantra for worship. Her name is **Bwrl Burwi**. It is a household deity. In former times, if any member of a family suffered from disease and illness very frequently, although a medicine had been taken, then **Bwrl Burwi** was worshipped by offering a pair of black pigeon. Afterwards, the medicine was taken by the patient. It was also believed that the mantra of an **Oja** chanted for its recovery from suffering, came into effect only after the propitiation of **Bwrl Burwi**.

- The god of cowherds is **Laokhar gosai** identifiable to Lord Krishna in the Hindu religion philosophy. In the name of this deity, a pair of pigeon is set free.

- In Kherai many other non-Bodo gods and goddesses are also worshipped. These gods and goddesses are sheltered on the western side near **Bathou** altar. Among them **Peer Saheb or Nawab Badshah**, a Muslim God\(^\text{15}\) is prominent and sacrifice of a duck is offered to him.

In this way, a large number of Bodo and non-Bodos deities are worshipped and propitiated by the Bodos during the time of Kherai but the names of the deities and their offerings to each deity seem to differ slightly from place to place and from region to region. But the system of their celebration and purpose is more or less the same.
However, a few numbers of deities had already been abandoned long back from the arena of Kherai although the Kherai festival is held among the Bodos.

It may be mentioned that the Kherai festival was celebrated during the reign of Koch king, Nar Narayan on the eve of an expedition against the Ahoms on the banks of the Sankosh river in the 16th century CE. It was performed at the insistence of the Bodo-Kachari soldiers of the king. One day before a battle against the Ahoms the king Nar Narayan was warned by Mahadev (Siva) in a dream for discarding his old habit of Kherai worship of the Bodo Kacharis. Further, he was also advised that if the king Nar Narayan performs Kherai according to the system of Bodo Kacharis, the king would be victorious in the battle against the Ahoms. This is evident from the text referred in the Darrang Rajvamsali about the advice of Mahadev to King Nar Narayan.

The altar of Bathou was made temporarily on the bank of river Sonkhos. Accordingly, the Kherai festival was celebrated during the reign of King Nar Nararayan. In this festival, a number of animals, like pigs, buffaloes, goats, fowls, and ducks, etc. were sacrificed at the Bathou pantheon in the name of Bathou Bwrai and other lesser divinities. The other offerings, such as zumai, sereb and other materials were also made to propitiate them. On that day, the shamanic dances were also performed by a Doudini (called deodhai in Assamese) during the time of Kherai. Thus the Kherai remained as an age old religious festival among the Bodos in ancient Assam.

Kheraisali

The place of Kherai worship is called Kheraisali. In earlier days, there was no fixed place to perform the Kherai festival. It was usually held in an open field after cleaning and washing the ground. But an altar of the Bathou was made temporarily in that place. The size of the Bathou altar however is a long one with extensions to both its south and north sides, and divided into three parts. It is purified by the Douri by sprinkling ‘dwi santhi’ (sacred water) on the ground. But since recent past the Kherai festival is celebrated at the ground attached to the Bathou temple of the village. The altar of the Bathou is made temporarily at the Kheraisali (See Plate 9) and a Sijou tree (Euphorbia
splenden) is planted in the middle of the elevated Bathou altar. The *Sijou* tree is surrounded by a fence of eighteen pairs of split bamboo post encircled with five pairs of split bamboo strips in five layers. The *Sijou* tree represents the living symbol of Almighty God, *Bathou Bwrai*. On the elevated Bathou altar, a slender bamboo pole with branches and leaves called ‘*aouathai*’ in Bodo is installed and a piece of white cloth is tied to it towards its upper part. The piece of white cloth represents peace and formless (nirakar) existence of the *Obonglawri, Anan Gosai*. It is called ‘*jatha*’ in Bodo. In a similar way, the two *jathas* are also planted in the corridor of the *Bathou bindw* on both the sides. In addition to the *jathas*, the eighteen pairs of *khangkhla* (a kind of reed) plant are also installed in the name of eighteen pairs of the married couple of deities, one pair for each pair of deities from the middle part of the altar to the northern end where *Mainao*, the goddess of crops is sheltered. The northern part of the altar, however, indicates the prosperous mother earth. Besides, an egg and a piece of stone are also placed in front of *Bathou* altar. Both an egg and a piece of stone represent a symbol of creation and truth respectively. It is worth mentioning that the altar symbolizes a way from heaven, down to the earth or from earth to the heaven which refers to a sacred link between the God of the heaven and the human beings of the earth. Thus it appears that the altar of the Kherai has a great philosophical significance.

The articles of offerings, such as areca-nuts, betel-leaves, bananas and other fruits are placed on the banana leaves at the base of the *Sijou* tree. The two ‘*alaribathis*’ (earthen lamps) are lighted; one at the base of the *Sijou* tree and another one meant for *Mainao*, the goddess of crops and wealth. Various aromatic articles, incense sticks, *dhuna* and *chandan* are also burnt around the altar. The sacred water called ‘*dwi santhi*’ is prepared by the *Douri* in a *lotha*, a metal pot by filling pure water with a bunch of ‘*thulunsi*’ (basil) plant buds, a few flowers and some rice is also dropped here. The sacred water is invariably placed near the Bathou altar. It is to purify the Bathou altar and other materials of offerings as well as to sprinkle on *Doudini* (female oracle) very frequently.
Ingredients for the ritual

It is very important to note that some ingredients are required for performance of the Kherai ritual. Some of the principal ingredients are:

1. a branch of Sijou tree (Euphorbia splendens)
2. gambari khamphlai (a stool made from gambari wood)
3. a gold ring
4. a pair of lotha (metal pot)
5. a bunch of thulunsi buds (holy basil)
6. sindur (vermillion)
7. raidwng lawthi (a cane stick)
8. three pieces of slender bamboos
9. four pieces of jati bamboos
10. guphur aowa khundung (white rayon thread)
11. mairong baksa (unpolished rice)
12. incense sticks
13. eighteen pairs of khangkkha plant (a kind of reed)
14. eighteen pairs of mwkhwana trees (a kind of plant)
15. dubri hagra (a kind of grass)
16. a few bunch of banana fruits
17. banana leaves
18. areca-nuts
19. *phathwi* (betel-leaves)

20. *dhuna* (a kind of resin)

21. mustard oil

22. *alaribathi* (earthen lamps)

23. *zumai* (rice beer), *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit)

24. *gongtham thungri* (three long swords)

25. a pair of *dahal* (shield)

26. a pair of *kham* (drums)

27. a pair of *jotha* (cymbals)

28. a pair of *Kherai sifung* (long bamboo flute)

29. pigs, goats, fowls, pigeons, ducks, etc.

*Role of Douri, Oja and Doudini in Kherai*

The Kherai is conducted by three principal performers; the *Douri* (priest), the *Oja* (oracle man) and the *Doudini* (female oracle). This worship is usually conducted by a *Douri* under the guidance of an *Oja*. In Kherai the stuff for worship are placed on the banana leaves in a phased manner at the altar of the *Bathou*. The *Douri* kneels down on the ground and starts the performance of the ritual. The *Oja* chants the mantra by sprinkling the sacred water from a metal pot with the top branches of *thulunsi* (holy basil). The mantra is called *mwnthwr* in Bodo. It is recited by an *Oja* to invoke the deities and to hypnotize a *Doudini* at the *Kheraisali*. The *Doudini* is also an important performer in the Kherai festival. She is called ‘*deodhai*’ in Assamese. During the worship the animals, fowls, pigeons, etc. are sacrificed and their blood is sprayed on the *asan* of each deity but the meat is eaten by the people themselves as *prasad*. The offering of *zumai*, *sereb* to the deities is very common in the Kherai.
At the beginning of the Kherai the Doudini is seated on the wooden seat made from gambari tree and an Oja hypnotizes her by chanting the mantra. But the wooden seat is made without using any metal. The mantra recited by the Oja at the beginning of the Kherai is as follows:

"Aham...!

Khwnasong khwnasong bari khonani mugasong
Angni hatraya jayw jaya, khwnasong khwnasong
Anan gosai binan gosai, swithw jugni gosai
Danilo nonga nwnglai
Gwdw-gwdaini thakhw-thakhw jugni mwdai

Aifwr!

Barigontham, Rangrasi, Gwhwrasi, Mwithahazi
Bibar jora lananwi khulumw khusi khusi

He Afa!

Bwrai Bathou Maharaja Sannigiri Sanja
Buhumnigiri raja Jiuni giri Sijou
Jib-jibi mansi-dumsini jiu
Dohai he-aifwr aphafwr
- Swrgwyao dong san-okhafwr
Patalaw dong thulunsi, jatrasi gwdw-gwdw".23

English rendering: “Aham...! listen listen the mugasong tree at the corner of homestead; Whether my words are true or not, listen listen; Lord the omniscient, Lord the omnipotent, The Lord of the Eternal period; you do not belong to the present only; you are the lord of many ages in the past; Mothers! three abodes, the creator, the sustainer, the destroyer; with a pairs of flowers, (we) pay obeisance in pleasure; O father! Bwrai Bathou the Almighty, the east is the progenitor of sun; the ruler is progenitor of the world, the Sijou is the progenitor of the life; lives of Living-nonliving, human- beast; alas o mothers and fathers; The sun and moon reside in the heaven; Thulunsi (basil), jatrassi exists pleasantly in the underworld.”

176
The Oja chants this mantra to glorify that Bathou Bwrai is the Almighty God, the creator and the master of the universe and all living beings.

There are three stages of activities performed by the Doudini from the beginning to the end in the Kherai. In the first stage, the Doudini is charmed by an Oja, then she is possessed by the gods and goddesses marked by bouts of jerking and shaking of her body. She also makes sounds such as ‘hiu hiu hiu’ indicating the advent of the spirit of Mother Goddess in her. Then it is believed that the Doudini has attained the celestial state of body and mind beset by supernatural power. She acts as a medium of communion between the man and the gods during Kherai. It is called ‘Doudini jakhangnai’ or ‘alongikhangnai’.

In the second stage, the Doudini falls into a trance. Afterwards, she is converted to a spiritual being in the third stage. It is believed that she is able to speak in the voices of the gods and goddesses. In this stage, she usually wears her hair loose and sways her head and the whole body. She is believed to have the gift of prophecy. And the Doudini foretells the village folk about the good and bad days of the people as well as the condition of the crops.

“Khobodar khobodar khobodar
Swima gari jananwi daja
Oma gari jananwi daja fishafwr
Swimagari jananwi jabwla
Omagari jananwi jabwla
Swima hengali lagaigwn ang phisafwr.”

The verses may be translated thus: “Be careful, be careful, be careful. Children, do not eat like the dogs; do not eat like the pigs. If you eat like the dog, if you eat like the pigs, I will set the tigers on you, oh children.”
It is clearly evident from the words of the Doudini that the villagers are advised by the Doudini to behave wisely and live well mannered.

**Shamanic dances of Doudini**

The shamanic dance of the Doudini in the Kherai festival has an important place in the domain of Bodo culture. The dance is called ‘mwshanai’ in Bodo. The Kherai dance is a religious dance of the Bodo community. This dance is devotional or spiritual in nature, dedicated to Bathou Bwrai, Mainao Burwi and other lesser divinities at the Kheraisali. The dance is performed only by a Doudini (See Plate 10). But there are also a number of followers to accompany her in the dance. The Doudini performs dances barefoot moving around the Bathou altar from right to left, sprinkling the sacred water from a ‘lotiia’ (a metal pot). The dokhna thawsi (a traditional wrap), aronai (a kind of scarf) and a blouse consist the main dresses of the Doudini during the Kherai celebration. The dances are performed with the beating of the kham (drums), the tune of the sifung (a long bamboo flute) and the rhythm of the jotha (cymbal). The Kherai dance does not include any song, but the Bodos believe that in the olden days, it contained songs. In the course of time, it had lost its songs. The Kherai dance in the earlier days usually continued for the whole nights and days. The nature of Doudini transforms while dancing and she imitates the nature of various deities assumed to have ascended on her. The dance of the Doudini is also followed by the worshippers of the village. But a little distance is kept from the dancing of the Doudini so that nobody causes any physical contact to her body. During the Kherai dance, if her body is touched physically, then she faints and it is believed that the oblations offered to each deity through her shamanic dances become a complete futile.

The Doudini performs eighteen types of Kherai dances each dedicated to eighteen core deities. Each dance is meant to appease and propitiate these eighteen deities of the Bathou for the welfare and prosperity of the whole village community. These dances are:

1. Bathou tharnai mwshanai
This kind of dance is performed in the name of Ailong deity. In this dance the Doudini takes a pot of sacred water and then dances around the Bathou altar while sprinkling it with a bunch of thulunsi leaves. The main object of this dance is to purify the Bathou altar and the Kheraisali, the place of Kherai worship.

2. Bathou gidingnai mwsanai

In this dance, the Doudini performs dances in slow motion around the Bathou altar during the Kherai festival. It is performed in order to please deity, Ai Bima.

3. Chotrowali mwsanai

The Chatrowali mwsanai is a kind of war dance dedicated to Rwnchwndri, the goddess of war. It is also known as Rwnchwndri dance. The Doudini holds a sword in her right hand and a shield by her left hand and then she dances moving round the Bathou.

4. Muphur gelenai mwsanai

The Bodo word ‘muphur’ means bear and ‘gelenai’ means playing. This dance is related to the Bwrlee Burwi, the goddess of medicine and mantra. This dance is performed imitating the nature of a bear. It is believed by the Bodo people that the god is also like a bear in nature.

5. Sagwlaw Bwnai mwsanai

This is called a tug of war dance. It is performed by the Doudini in the name of Abla khungur god. A long cloth is made like a rope and it is held by the female helpers on both the ends of the cloth where on the Doudini performs this dance by reeling and swinging on it. This dance is demonstrated to make preparations for the battle.

6. Naw jawnai mwsanai

This dance is performed in the name of Bwrai Soudri god. He is also known as Laokhar gosai, the deity of cowherds. It is a boat rowing dance. Here, a boat of banana is dragged by the female helpers and the Doudini wearing a turban tightly on her head and holding an oar in her hands follow them and performs the dance as if rowing a boating on the water.

7. Thungri gananwi sibnai mwsanai

This dance is performed by the Doudini to please Agrang deity, the general of Bathou Maharaja. In this dance, two long swords are held by the Doudini each one in
both her hands and she wields them putting her both feet on the sharp edge of a sword that is held firmly by the two male helpers on the ground. This dance is performed to show the universal truth of the Bathou religion.

8. *Dahal thungri sibnanwi mwsanai*

It is a kind of shield and sword wielding dance. It is also called *Khofri chibnai* dance in Bodo. This kind of dance is performed in the name of *Rajputhur* deity, son of *Bathou Maharaja*. The *Doudini* demonstrates her dance at the *Kheraisali* wielding a shield in her left hand and a sword in the right hand. This is the dance to give the lesson of self-defense in the battle field unlike the *Chotrowali* dance which is performed for success in the battle even though in both the dances the shield and sword are used.

9. *Khamao Barkhwnai mwsanai*

The dance is performed by the *Doudini* climbing on the *kham* (drums). It is dedicated to *Rajkhanda*, the deity of the sky. The Bodos believe that *Rajkhanda* is the grandson of *Bathou Bwrai*. The dance is performed by climbing on the *kham*.

This dance is performed to show the merrymaking after gaining victory over the enemy or the trouble.

10. *Gandola Bwnnai mwsanai*

It is a kind of dance of catching the dragonfly. The Bodo word 'gandola' means dragonfly and 'bwnnai' means trapping or catching. This dance is dedicated to *Alibwrai* deity. The dance is full of symbolic connotations. This dance is performed in order to show the tactics of attacking the enemy.

11. *Khwijema phonai mwsanai*

The Bodo word 'kwijema' means red, ant. 'Phonai' means get rid of. By this dance the Bodo society gets the lesson to deal with the enemies in their material and spiritual life.

This dance is performed to gratify the deity of the planet, *Abla khungur*.

12. *Mwsa gelenai mwsanai*

This dance demonstrates the act of playing with tiger. The Bodo word 'mwsa' means tiger and it is called *Bag* in Assamese. This dance is related to *Bag Raja* or *Mwsa Raja*, the tiger deity. *Mwsa Raja* is the chief of wild animals. The *Doudini* imitates the
nature of a tiger while performing this dance symbolizing the realism of strength or the energy.

13. *Dao thwi lwngnai*

   It is a dance demonstrating the drinking of blood from the sacrificed fowls. This dance is devoted to *Song Raja*, the deity of forests. It is another awesome act of the *Doudini* in Kherai worship where she drinks the raw blood of the fowls or chicken sacrificed to the deities while performing the dance in front of the *Bathou* altar.

14. *Mwisw gelenai*

   The Bodo word *‘mwisw’* means buffalo. *Mwisw gelenai* thus means the dance of ‘playing buffalo’. This dance is connected with *Ai-Dibaoliya* deity. This dance is demonstrated at *Kheraisali* imitating the nature of a buffalo.

15. *Mwsakhawri mwsonai*

   This dance is performed by the *Doudini* in the name of *Khoila* deity, the messenger of *Bathou Bwrai*. In this dance the feeling of joy of the devotees after the victory in the battle field is demonstrated.

16. *Gorai dabrainai mwsonai*

   It is a horse-riding dance. This dance is associated with the *Basumati*, the deity of the earth. In this dance the *Doudini* wears a turban around her head and takes a sword in her right hand and a shield in her left hand. After that, like a horse-riding the *Doudini* performs dance on the horse doll made of bamboo covered by the cloth. Through this dance the lesson is depicted on the art to control one’s mind and to lead a successful life.

17. *Badali Birnai mwsonai*

   It is a bat-flying dance. This kind of dance is related to the deity, *Sanjani Ali Bwrai*. The nature of a bat is imitated by the *Doudini* in performing this dance. The *Doudini* covers her face with a piece of thin cloth and demonstrates her dance at *Kheraisali*. She also holds on the *khangkhla* reeds in the *Bathou* altar while dancing.

18. *Mainao Burkhangnai mwsonai*

   This dance is performed towards the end of the *Kherai* worship. It is a kind of *Mainao* retrieval dance. *Mainao* is a goddess of crops or guardian of the rice fields alike to Hindu goddess, *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and fortune. After having performed
all types of dances, *Mainao* is seated on the ground in front of the *Bathou* altar without any movement. At this time, the *Oja* declares that the *Doudini* has possessed *Mainao*. Afterwards, an *Oja* carries out some rituals and the *Doudini* also retrieves the rice kept beforehand in the *Bathou* altar and performs the dance. She is then followed along by the worshippers of the village.

Apart from these, various other dances are also performed associated with the Kherai dances, such as *mawji membrang gelenai* (the spotted cat or civet dance), *laijoulai bonai, jaraphagla, thenthamali, chwrwnisla, neolai mwchanai, langtha gurji, dawang bunthua, raidwng sibnai, Kherai gwlaw, Kherai gusung, kala janai (or janai), khanai fwisri fwisri mwshanai*, etc. In these Kherai dances, the various facets of human life is expressed vividly through the manifestation of the body language.

When the *Doudini* performs dance, she portrays various emotions embodied in human life through physical and facial expressions and gestures. But she hardly opens her mouth to express the emotions. It may be said that some of the dances of *Doudini* is a composition of historic events commemorated through dance and music in relation to different deities. For instance, there is a dance of wielding the two swords by the *Doudini* moving around the *Bathou* altar. This shows the art of warfare in order to protect themselves from the attack of the enemy. But it seems to be based on warlike story and adventurous experiences are also enshrined in the religious practices in the society. It is partly comparable to *Khathakali* and *Yakhagana* of Southern India for its characteristics and performance. In fact, the historic culture of the Bodos relating to ancestral stories is depicted in the Kherai dances.

Thus the Kherai dance is embodied in a deep religious philosophy. It is purely religious, but its aim is a spiritual experience. Each and every dance of the *Doudini* has its own particular philosophical significances. The dances are mostly filled with symbolic connotations. It has been observed that the dance of the *Doudini* during the Kherai festival seems to have varied slightly from place to place.
Traditionally, the last rite of the Kherai festival is 'Mainao burkhangnai' meaning retrieval of Mainao, the goddess of wealth or crops. After having performed all types of dances, the Doudini is seated at the base of the Bathou altar. Then it is understood by the Oja and worshippers that she has been possessed by the spirit of Mainao. At this moment, the Oja makes prayer to Doudini in whom Goddess Mainao is vested by offering the sacrifice of a pig. The prayer goes as follows:

"De ai-Mainao, on-nanwi thudw noao borainanwi langnswwi nwnghou jwng nwi".º

In English translation: "O mother Mainao, let us kindly go home, we shall cordially receive and take you to our home now".

In this way, the Duodini is appealed to proceed to the granary of the village community. But symbolically the Doudini disagrees with their request at first. Her utterance for unwillingness to comply with the pleadings is clear from the words:

"He Boro-phisaphwr, nwnghswr angkhou bobeyao langnw? nwnghswr angkhou danw langgwn gabwnnw dwiyao phanse orao phanse khalamnanwi jagwn: onagari khalamnanwi jagwn; ang thangnai nonga nwnghswr ji lamajwng phwidwng he lamajwngnw thangphin".º

In English translation: "O Boro Children, where do you want to take me? you will take me this day and the other day carelessly, you will scatter me partly in fire and partly in water, I shall not go. Go back by the same way which you came by".
Then, again the prayer is repeated by the Oja to Mainao, the Goddess of wealth or crops. In addition to this, the Oja, Douri and the concerned village elders also take an oath and requests Mainao by uttering the words:

"he! ai Mainao,

jwng nwngkhw orao phanse

dwiao phanse khalama".  

English rendering: "he! Mother Mainao, we’ll not disperse you partly in fire and partly in water."

It says that the Oja, Douri and village elders assure her that they would not scatter her in the fire and water meaning that they will not be casual at using her.

Then, Mainao is satisfied with the request and assurance of the worshippers and agrees to stay at the house of worshippers but she warns them, as is apparent from the words of the Doudini:

"Thou phisaphwr, nwngswr angkhou gwjwnwi lakhi.

Ang nwngswrni noao thagwn,

nwngswr angkhou samphrambw sibibai tha.

Nwngswrni dwhwn-sompothia dinwi ese gabwn ese barailanggwn.

Angkhou nwngswr samphrambw mwjangoi khulum".  

In English translation: “Let us go, children, you keep me with great care, I will stay at your home, you worship me every day, your wealth will increase day by day.”

After being pleased such, the Doudini possessed with the spirit of Mainao slowly proceeds and picks up a basket of rice on her head from the mainao bindhw with a brief dancing. The devotees also become very happy and follow her dances keeping a little distance from her lest they touch her body in the process. She suddenly holds the two
bamboo posts in front of the Bathou altar while dancing and starts to shake it. Their
dance continues for a while till the Doudini suddenly loses her consciousness for a
moment. Following which a slogan is raised by the devotees in the name of Bathou Bwrai
under the direction of Oja. After a few minutes, sacred water is sprinkled on her by the
Oja. Consequently, she comes back to her earthly senses and with this the performance
of Kherai festival also comes to an end.40 Afterwards, Mainao is taken to the Ishing (the
kitchen) which traditionally happens to be the innermost room of the ‘Nomano’ or the
main house. Inside the Ishing, a small area on the ground is elevated to prepare the altar
for placing Mainao, the goddess of wealth brought from the Kherai. Every household of
the Bodos considers the ishing or the kitchen very sacred and so, there is a strict
restriction on entry into it. It is noticed that in modified Bathouism, the retrieval of
Mainao, the goddess of crops is done by performing the ritual on the bank of the river
nearby their village (See Plate 29). Afterwards, Mainao is brought to the Bathou temple
where some rituals are performed according to the tenets of the modified Bathou religion.
At the end of the ritual, Mainao, the Goddess of crops is welcome by the village women
from the Bathou temple (See Plate 30) and place Her in their granaries or ishing.

Like the Kherai festival of the Bodos, similar festivals are also prevalent among many
other neighbouring tribes. For instance, the traditional Kher puja of the Twipras is a ritual
performed in honour of goddess of Earth and the creator. The Khernang puja is
celebrated by the Dimasa Kachari of Dima Hasao (North Cachar) and the Kheraima puja
by the Bodos of North Bengal and Nepal.41 Their beliefs and practices are also found to
be almost similar. It may be mentioned that from the last decade of the twentieth century,
some Bodo elites undertook to work for bringing innovation and modification in the
Kherai worship. Consequently, some songs have been added to the dance of the Doudini
and more Bodo damsels are seen to have started to take part in the Kherai dance.

Thus, the Kherai festival is very festive one and in former times, it continued for
seven consecutive days. From the recent past, it was held mostly for a day and a night.
The adherents of Brahma cult and other Hindu sects among the Bodos however do not
observe the Kherai festival.
Garja festival

The Garja is a community festival of the Bodos. There is disagreement in regards the origin of the Garja among the scholars and so a number of different views have been opined on the subject. Bhaben Narzi describes the word ‘Garja’ as niskriti in Assamese. But Kameswar Brahma does not agree with him and describes the word ‘Garja’ itself as the meaning of expulsion. The fact is that during the time of Garja puja some evil gods who create or bring the epidemic, diseases are expelled openly from a certain area of the village. So, he calls this practice as ‘bhasainai’ or ‘bhasani’. Indramalati Narzaree avers that the word ‘bhasani’ is not the Bodo word and it might come from the impact of other neighbouring Hindu people. The act of performing Garja is called ‘Garja hwnai’. The Bodos call this festival or puja as ‘mwdai hwnai’ meaning to drive away the evil spirit. In earlier days, the god was also called by the Bodos as ‘mwdai’. So the mwdai or the deities may be either malevolent or benevolent. Hence the devotion in Garja means devotion to Bathou Bwrai and other lesser divinities at the time of the Garja festival. The benevolent deities are called ‘mwjang Mwdai’ or good deity and malevolent deities are identical with ‘gajri Mwdai’ or bad deity. Hence, Garja gods are supposed to be the protector and destroyer of evil forces too. The mwjang Mwdai or the benevolent deities are worshipped by the Bathou followers for the well being of the village community. The gajri Mwdai or malevolent deities are said to have brought troubles to all living creatures by creating the epidemic, disease and other natural calamities and evil spirits, etc. So, they are boycotted openly from a certain area of the village by performing the Garja puja. Such type of puja or ritual is also prevalent among the neighbouring Hindu people and it is ‘Dinga puja’. Thus the Garja festival is usually meant to either pacify the good gods or boycott the evil gods and spirits.

Garja puja is performed by the Bodos for the sanctification of the village and for the safety of the entire village community from any natural calamities, epidemic diseases, evil spirits, etc. The Bodos believe that the village and its inhabitants become impure due to mingling with each other in eating, drinking the zumai and sereh, merry-making from house to house during the Bwisagu (Bihu in Assamese) in the month of Bwisag (April-
May; Bohag in Assamese). Hence, for the purpose of purifying the entire village and its inhabitants the Garja rituals or puja is performed by the Bodos in a certain area of the village. It is a purificatory ceremony and also a preparatory ceremony for the performance of Kherai festival, since for conducting Kherai it needs a pure environment devoid of any contamination both spiritually and socially. Also, in order to welcome the goddess of crops to the village granary from a successful harvest, the Garja ritual is observed in the village. In earlier times, when the village or family faced any unprecedented troubles, suffered from epidemic diseases, cholera, etc., then for the safety of the village community or family from evil deities and their effects the Garja ritual was performed. It was also observed with a view to pacify the deities hurt due to any wrong doing in the village whenever it is detected.46 In the Bodo society, anyone found committing any sinful act are usually compelled by the villagers to arrange the Garja ritual to pacify the Garja deities as well as to purify the village and the whole village community. It may be referred that among the tribes of Tripura a similar ritual is practiced and it is called by them as Garia puja. It is usually held on the seventh day of the Assamese month of Bwisag (April-May). They worship two deities, called Kalia and Garia during the time of Garia puja for the blessings and welfare of the human beings.47 They also perform it in almost the similar way.

Types of Garja

The evidence from the mwntwr (mantra) of the Oja chanted during the Garja celebration reveals that there are various Garja gods and goddesses among the Bodos. These Garja gods and goddesses are usually worshipped and propitiated in the Bodo society in a phased manner during the time of Garja celebration. These gods and goddesses are listed below:

1. Mainao Garja or Lwkhi Garja
2. Asu Garja
3. Bwrai Raja Garja
4. Dhwn Kuber Garja
5. Sew Garja

187
6. Tulsi-Mulsing Garja
7. Dura Garja
8. Dawang Garja
9. Sindur Garja
10. Thia Garja
11. Bathou Garja
12. Gu-Garja
13. Dai Garja
14. Kalodan Garja
15. Gaw Garja
16. Sawria Garja
17. Dosomali Garja
18. Othorsanthi Garja.

Additionally, there are also some Garja mwdais or gods and goddesses addressed by the Oja during the time of Garja puja. These Garja gods and goddesses are Akhaisri, Jwmwn Jwla, Boromali, Sayanasi, Gambari, Budaru, Mawi Bwrai, Mawi Burwi, Mwnsri, etc. Most of the mwdais or deities are found to be very difficult to identify whether they belong to the benevolent or malevolent deity. Some benevolent Garja gods and goddesses are Mainao Garja, Bathou Garja, Asu Garja, and Bwrai Raja Garja. However, the names of the Garja gods and goddesses seem to have varied from place to place.

In the Garja ceremony, many non-Bodo deities also occupy an important place. These deities are generally called ‘Aryan’ deity or harsa mwdai. They are also given the asan in hierarchy position along with the indigenous Bodo deities in the Bathou pantheon during the time of Garja puja. The Bodos generally worship and propitiate them along with their indigenous gods and goddesses. Some of their principal non-Bodo deities are Mahadev, Bishohori, Garakhia Gosai, Chikana Raja, Ai Thakurani, Gonesh Thakur, etc. Besides, a number of their followers are also addressed by the Oja in Garja puja. For instance, Sila Rai, Rupa Rai, Bera Bhanga, Ai Kali, Maya Kali, Shaya Kali, Madhab Gosai, Baro Gopal, Baro Gapani, Nau Raja, Dighla Raja, Bai Raja, Ai-Parbati, Ai-
Among the non-Bodo deities, Mahadev is regarded as the chief deity. Non-Bodo gods, like Jagath guru and Jagannath and a Muslim deity called ‘Peer Sahib or Nowab Badsah’ are also worshipped and propitiated during the time of Garja ritual. The Bodos also believe in the river-gods. The river gods are traditionally worshipped and propitiated as symbolic gods during the time of Garja puja. Usually the Bodos did not have any particular name of the river gods in the traditional Bodo society. This is evident from the addresses made by the Oja that only the names of rivers which are very near to the place of celebration of the Garja festival are invoked. So, it appears that there are local and regional variations in regard to the names of the river gods of Garja ceremony due to the names of the different rivers located in different regions. But the basic concept and practices of Garja deities and their celebration are more or less the same and a few number of Garja deities are found to be very common. Some items of the Garja celebration consist of pig, cock, he-goat, she-goat, pigeons, fowls, ducks, rice, zumai, banana fruits, banana leaves, incense sticks, etc.

The celebration of Garja puja is well associated to the traditional belief of the Bodos. Accordingly, in pre-observance of Garja puja the condition of the village and the villagers are studied carefully whether any wrong or evil has occurred in the society. In the evening, one night ahead of the observation of the Garja ceremony, the proposed altar of the Garja puja is cleaned up by washing with water and then it is plastered with mud. This place is purified by sprinkling sacred water. After that, a pair of holy basil leaves, betel-leaves, areca-nuts, a rupee coin and nine grains of rice are placed on a piece of banana leaf on the altar. It is then covered with a songrai (platter) or a khada (basket). Afterwards, it is plastered with the mud around the songrai or the khada. The following day early in the morning, the covered articles are uncovered and examined. If the articles kept on a piece of banana leaf are found unaltered, then it is believed that there is no possibility of any danger for the villagers. But if it is found scattered then any person of the village is suspected to be involved in any illegal, sinful or immoral activities. Then the guilty person or wrong doer if found, is required to perform a purification ceremony in the village. After that only, the Garja festival is celebrated in the society.
general purpose of the Garja festival is meant to uphold the peace, chastity, purity and for
general welfare of the village community or family in the society.

Garjasali

There is no temple, for worshipping the Garja deities during the time of Garja
ceremony. The festival is usually held in an open field. It is held in a lonely grazing field
on the bank of the river where most of the people dare not to go. The place of Garja puja
is called ‘Garjasali’. Most of the Bodo villages have a fixed place to hold the Garja puja.
The Garjasali is cleaned up and then is plastered with mud. After that, the altar of the
Garja festival is raised and there on, a few small huts called ‘dera’ in Bodo are built (See
Plate 11) for the seat and the rest of the Garja deities. But there is also a small storied hut
with only a few numbers of steps, called (changghar in Assamese) only for Bwrai Raja.
Bwrai Raja is none but Bathou Bwrai Maharaja. Other Bodo minor deities are also given
the small huts to sit at the left side of the Bwrai Raja. But on the right side of the seat of
the Bwrai Raja there are also seats given to the non-Bodo deities.

There is a tradition for performing a purification ceremony one day ahead of Garja
festival in the village. It is called ‘salami hwnai’. It is probable that salami means a
purification ceremony where Bathou Bwrai is paid oblations. During the salami, a cock is
sacrificed by the village Douri and then the blood of a sacrificed cock is sprayed on the
seat of Bathou Bwrai. After that, the Douri uses to purify the Garjasali and the
households in the village by sprinkling the holy water from a lotha, a metal pot. This
practice is called ‘salami hwnai’.

There is no fixed date for celebration of Garja festival. It is customarily observed
twice in a year. The Garja is performed in the first Assamese month of Jethw and Asar
after the celebration of the Bwisagu festival. It is called ‘hambai garja’ or ‘mwdaini
puja’. This puja is essentially meant for being free of epidemic disease, cholera or any
natural calamities befallen. The Hambai puja is performed by the Bodos in a very lonely
and secluded place in some jungle, where the children and the girls are not allowed to
attend this puja. In this puja, a raft of banana called ‘thalir bhel’ is made and decorated
beautifully and offerings, like red flowers, eggs and the head of a sacrificed black he-goat
are placed on it. Afterwards, the raft is then carried to the river bank. The mantra is recited by the Oja and all the rituals are performed at the river bank. After that, it is floated away into the river. Similar practices are found prevalent among the neighbouring Hindu people and it is called by them dinga puja. By doing this, it is believed that all diseases are ejected, and the evil deities are also sent away from the area of the village and thereby villagers become free from any possible danger.

The second Garja festival is celebrated by the Bodos during the Assamese months of Kati or Aghwn. This Garja is known as ‘Lwkhi Garja’ or ‘Mainao Garja’. It is usually celebrated near the village on the southern side of the village. The puja is attended by all the members of the villages irrespective of age or sex. During this puja Mainao, the goddess of crops is welcome by the villagers and then places it into the Bakhri (granary) of the village.

Worship and propitiation

There are mainly two Douris and an Oja to perform all the rituals of the Garja ceremony. They are called ‘gahai Douri’ (head priest) and ‘leng-i Douri’ (assistant priest). In Garja puja a pair of betel-nuts is placed on a small piece of banana leaf spotted with vermilion which is offered to each deity inside the huts. The incense sticks and earthen lamps are also required for this ritual. After that, many sacrifices of life, like fowls, pigeons, ducks, etc. are carried out in order to propitiate the Garja deities. In earlier days, for Bwrai Raja a cock was sacrificed and he was also offered zumai and sereb. To Mainao Burwi, a hen is sacrificed along with the zumai. Likewise, a cock and a hen are sacrificed to Mawt Bwrai and Mawt Burwi respectively. Apart from this, three pigeons are set free in the sky in the name of non-Bodo gods and goddesses, especially Baro Gopal and Baro Gopini. A he-goat is sacrificed to Chikna Raja deity, and for Bima Ali or Ai Kali a she-goat is sacrificed. For Muslim gods named Peer Saheb or Nawab Badshah, a duck needs to be sacrificed. It is usually not done by the gahai Douri (head priest) and leng-i Douri (assistant priest) but by an ordinary person appointed as Douri temporarily. The temporary Douri for Muslim gods wears his gamsa or the loin cloth by letting its back portion or the lentvi loose at the time of offering the sacrifice.
Interestingly, when the sacrifice is being offered to Peer Saheb the word ‘Bismilla’ is uttered by the temporary Douri. Probably the Bodo society worship and propitiate Muslim gods to be free from the evil spirits of the Muslim gods. In the Garja sacrifices, the female animals or beasts are offered to the female deities and male animals are offered to male deities. By tradition, the blood of the sacrificed goats, fowls, pigeons are sprayed by the Douri on the asan of each deity at Garjasali. At the time of offerings, the Oja chants the ‘mwnthwr’ or the mantra, but the Douri kneels down in front of the asan of the deities. The Douri officiates the Garja ritual under the guidance of an Oja.

It has been observed that the sacrificial offerings to each deity at the Garja festival seem to vary from place to place but the purpose of the Garja festival remains the same everywhere. In the recent past, in a few places the Garja puja began to be performed with simple offerings, like flowers, fruits, prasads, etc. However, the original form of the Garja festivals still remained preserved but confined in a few interior Bodo villages.

Marai festival and Bormani hwnai

Marai is a name of the female deity. The Marai festival is performed by the Bodo society in between Assamese Bwisag and Saown months at the time of Omabwisa or the last day of the lunar month. This festival is celebrated once in a year. The Bodos believe that once it is celebrated it needs to be performed consecutively three years without any gap. If there remains a gap then it is believed that the village or family has to face any unprecedented danger. And to escape from this danger a pig or a black he-goat is to be sacrificed to Marai deity in the Omabwisa.

In earlier days, the Marai puja was performed only by the rich people, especially for the purpose of acquiring property and strength. It was the greatest sacrificial mode of worship. Various animals, such as buffalos, goats, fowls, pigeons, etc. were sacrificed in addition to the offerings of flowers, areca-nuts, betel-leaves and other materials. It is said that earlier, even the human beings were sometimes sacrificed to propitiate the Marai goddess. Therefore the children were not allowed to view this puja.
The Oja is the main person who officiates the puja accompanied by a few followers, usually a dancing group. In the Marai puja, the dancing and singing songs are performed by a group of dancers in praise of goddess Monosa alias Bishohori with a view to propitiate her. This kind of dance is known as Oja phalli. This type of practice is prevalent among the Bodos of the Mukalmua of Nalbari district, but a few number of families from the Baksa district perform this puja with simple offerings. Similar practices are also seen mostly among the neighbouring Assamese Hindu community.

It is seen that a section of the Bodos also performs Bormani puja in the name of the female deity, Bormani. The female deity, Bormani is identified as Bishohari or Monosa in the Hindu pantheon. This puja is privately performed by the individual family for the safety of the family, especially to escape from the attack of various diseases, like cholera, small fox, etc. This puja is prevalent among both the rich and the poor families of the Bodos.

There is no fixed date for the celebration of the Bormani puja. Generally it is carried out either on the first day of Assamese months of Bwisag or Magh and Aghan. If any family faces any unprecedented problems, then the Bormani puja is performed in the individual family. The Bodos have a traditional belief in their society that if any person walks, excretes or urinates knowingly and unknowingly at the place or near the altar of Bormani then goddess Bormani gets infuriated and angry and curses that person. The person cursed is affected by a sudden loss of his or her sense. Sometimes the member of a family becomes blind or gets deformed limbs, then the general belief is that these unusual problems are caused by the curse of the angry Bormani goddess. The people believe this may be because she is given either less respect in the family or not worshipped by the devotees. In this situation, the Bormani puja is celebrated at the individual household by offering sacrifices of a pair of white pigeons.

In this puja, there is no permanent place or temple of devotion for this deity. It is usually held in the north-eastern corner of the homestead of family after cleaning and purifying the ground. The main ingredients and other requirements of this puja are listed below:

1. a pair of betel-leaves
2. a pair of areca-nuts
3. a pair of coins like 25 paise or so
4. one bunch of banana fruits
5. laijoulai (banana leaves)
6. red flowers
7. sindur (vermillion)
8. dhuna
9. incense sticks
10. a pair of pigeons
11. a pair of chickens
12. a total black or white he-goat
13. a thungri (sword) (See Plate 18), etc.

It is important to note that all the items of offerings in the Bormani puja are spotted with vermillion except the red flower. There is no particular Douri to perform this ritual, but a village Oja plays a very important role in performing this puja. The Oja recites the mantra and the male head of the family makes the offerings to the deity. The blood of sacrificed animals, pigeons and chickens are sprayed on the banana leaves and their heads are also placed on these leaves. At the time of the sacrifice of the life, the Oja continues to recite the mantra invoking Bormani deity. But there is also a taboo associated with the performance of Bormani puja that nobody is allowed to stay on the eastern side of the place of puja. The devotees believe that staying on the eastern side of the puja may displease the deity and consequently, the purpose of the puja may be a failure. Thus Bormani deity is highly respected by the traditional Bodos. The Bormani puja is largely prevalent among the Bodos of Chirang, Baksa, Nalbari, Udalguri, Kamrup, etc. But most of the followers of modified forms of Bathouism now do not prefer to observe this ritual.

Hapsa hatharnai

The hapsa hatharnai is another domestic ceremony. It is performed by an individual family at the household. This ceremony is also accompanied by their relatives. It is carried out while an individual family enters or settles into a new house or homestead.
Bodos believe that if this ritual is performed in the family, some evil spirits cannot harm the family members or any living being of the family. The Bodo family in the past also performed this ritual for getting relief from all problems and sufferings in the family. Generally, it is held in a particular place in the courtyard of the Bathou altar. The main deities of the Hapsa hatharnai ritual may be given below:

1. Bathou Bwrai
2. Aileng
3. Khaji
4. Abla Khungur
5. Agrang
6. Khwila
7. Rajputhur
8. Rajkhandra
9. Mwsa Raja (Bag Raja)
10. Ai-Manasu
11. Ai Baoli
12. Khubir
13. Mao-thansri (Ai-Kamakhya)
14. Song Raja
15. Burlli Burwi
16. Sali Jwmwn

During the time of hapsa hatharnai ceremony Bathou Bwrai and Ai-Maothansri are sheltered separately at the altar of Bathou and other lesser divinities are also sited in a place of the extended elevation on the ground where a pair of small pieces of banana leaves (laijoulai in Bodo) is placed in the name of each deity. The offerings which include a two small pieces of cut areca-nut, betel-leaves, banana and other things are offered to each deity by placing on these lai joulais. Besides, an earthen lamp and incense sticks are also lighted.

The main items of offerings in the hapsa hatharnai consist of a pig, fowls, zumai, betel-nuts, etc. Earlier, a pig was sacrificed to Sali Jwmwn and the fowls to other lesser
deities. *Bathou Bwrai, Song Raja* and *Bulli Burwi* were also worshipped and propitiated by offering a full *dabkha* of *zumai* (rice beer). In the formula, *Bathou Bwrai* is addressed by the *Oja* as the chief deity. This puja is performed by the concerned family to become free from the attack or the harmful effects of the evil spirits. In a family, all the rituals are carried out by the *Oja*. It may be mentioned that after performing the puja in earlier days the *Oja* was treated by the family a delicacy of *zumai, sereb*, meat and other eatable things, but the role of the *Oja* in this ceremony gradually became redundant in the society except in a very few remote areas of Bodo villages. Instead, the *Douri* officiates this ceremony at present. This ritual is widely prevalent among the Bodos but the sacrificial mode of this worship has begun to be disused since the recent past. Instead, the simple way of worship with offerings of flowers, fruits, *prasads* (eatable things), etc., are now adopted to celebrate it.

*Gwthwinw bawnai*

The *gwthwinw bawnai* is a domestic ceremony performed at the individual household. The Bodo word ‘*gwthwi*’ means dead and ‘*bawnai*’ means to pay homage. There is a tradition among the Bodos that the family of the deceased man pays respect to the deceased by performing the *gwthwinw bawnai* ceremony. There is a belief among the Bodo people that if the deceased man is not worshipped by the living family by offering some edibles and drinks, then the family members may be harmed by the spirit of the deceased man. So, the family of the deceased man observes this ceremony. If there is any death in the family, the *gwthwinw bawnai* is performed to pay homage to the departed soul by the family before the very next *Bwisagu* festival. This ceremony is usually performed either at the dawn of the first day of the Assamese month of *Bwisag* or at the time of *Domasi* or *Maghw* festival. During the ceremony, all the members of concerned family take bath and the household articles are cleaned by washing. The house is then plastered with the mixture of cow dung and mud. This ritual is performed in a place wiped clean with water and which is situated in the southern side of the courtyard of the family. The main offerings of this ceremony consist of a cloth or dress, a pair of betelnuts and coins, cooked rice, *phitha* or cake, *zumai, sereb*, fruits, etc.
Along with some religious fairs and festivals, there are also some other festivals and ceremonies which are primarily seasonal and agricultural in nature, but the manner of their celebrations are carried out through certain specific religious rites.

Bwisagu festival

The Bwisagu is a popular seasonal festival of the Bodos. It is celebrated during the spring season, particularly in the last day of the Chwitro and the first few days of the Bwisag (mid-April) of the Assamese month. This festival is known as Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu among the Assamese people. The Bwisagu festival is observed in the Bodo society in two phases, firstly as mwso (cow) Bwisagu and secondly as mansi (man) Bwisagu. On the last day of the Assamese month Chaitro (April), the Bwisagu devoted to the cows or cattle is held for one day. On this day of Sankranti, the cows are bathed and wished for their wellbeing and then left freely in the field. There is also a tradition, in the evening on that particular day, before the arrival of cows an earthen lamp is lighted at the cow-shed for the welfare of the cows and expecting the cows to multiply in numbers. The old ropes are replaced with new ones.

The Bodos also have a tradition of eating bitter and sour food stuff during this period of Bwisag month. The bitter and sour tasting wild vegetables are collected from the forest and used to garnish the dish especially made of pork, chicken and meat of other animals hunted from the jungles. It is called ‘Gwkha gwkhwi janai’ (eating of bitter and sour) and sometimes, also known as Khungkha janai. The leaf of Khungkha plant is the most favourite bitter tasting wild vegetable among the Bodos. The Bodos believe that Gwkha gwkhwi janai is very essential to guard their health from any epidemic disease in the near future. In former times, this occasion was also often used to convey the sense of severance of all connection or relationship with someone due to formation of the bad blood or misunderstanding.

Mansi Bwisagu is celebrated throughout the first week of the month of Bwisag by all the members of the community. On this day, the supreme God Bathou Bwrai is worshipped and propitiated in the individual houses or collectively in the villages. In the past, the offerings consisted of sacrifices of life to the Almighty God, Bathou Bwrai and
the spirits of the ancestors. Since recent past all the members of the village who are mostly the followers of modified Bathousim make community prayer at the village temple. The devotional prayer song is also sung at the village temple for the well being and prosperity of their villagers. The followers of Brahma cult also make prayer to God by performing ahuti in their village (See Plate 27). The Kacharis of Darrang and Kamrup districts observe the BhatheU festival during the period of Bwisagu or in the month of Bwisag. It is called Bhasani in the northern Gaolpara.65

After finishing all the rituals of the ceremony all the members of the family and villagers take part in community feasting. In earlier times, there was no limit in drinking rice beer from the very day of mwsou thukwinai (cow bathing ceremony) in every family. The rice beer is consumed by them irrespective of their sex and age as much as they could during the festival. They forgive each other’s misdeed and exchange love, feeling of brotherhood through the merry-making, feasting, drinking, etc. The Bwisagu songs and dance are performed together accompanied by traditional music from instruments, such as kham(drums), sifung (flute), serja (violin), tharkha (a piece of split bamboo), jotha (cymbal), etc. The Bwisagu is observed by the Bodo Kacharis of upper Assam by singing Husori and a ballad-type Haidong geet.66

Thus, there is much festivity and fanfare in this festival and in earlier days, those first seven days of Bwisag in the Bodo society were passed by enjoying in careless abundance of meat, rice, zumai, sereb, etc. There was no scarcity of anything in the past compared to the present day. However, the neighbouring Assamese Hindu people also celebrate the Rongali Bihu in a similar way.

Katigasa saonai festival

The Katigasa saonai is a harvest festival of the Bodos. It is carried on the last day of the Assamese month of Ashin (mid-October). It is celebrated to get rid of any diseases and damages created by insects, or any natural calamities for getting a better paddy harvest. This festival is also known as Mainao festival. The neighbouring Assamese Hindus call this festival as Kongali or Kati Bihu. In this festival, Mainao, the goddess of crops is worshipped and welcome by the village community.67
In the evening, a pair of lamp on the rinds of thaigir (elephant apple) fruit is lit in the paddy field, entrance gate, cow-shed, granary, the ishing in the house, etc. It is put erected in the paddy field by piercing the rind of the thaigir fruit with a bamboo stick (See Plate 12). It is called gasa saonai (burning of gasa). An earthen lamp is also lit at the altar of Bathou. The followers of the Brahma cult also burn the gasa in the paddy field. This festival is essentially observed wishing for better paddy crops and begging pardon for any misdeed committed against Mainao, the goddess of crops. It has been observed that in the absence of a male person in the family, the Bodo woman also performs the burning of gasa in the paddy field (See Plate 13). Besides the burning of gasa, a section of the Bodo people also worship Mainao, the goddess of crops by offering a pair of betel leaves, a pair of areca-nuts on the banana leaves and by lighting up an earthen lamp in the paddy field. This festival is also observed by the neighbouring non-Bodo Assamese Hindus in a similar manner.

Maghw festival

The Maghw festival is a post-harvest festival of the Bodos. It is a community festival celebrated annually in every village when the entire village is lightened from the fieldwork. It is observed from the first day of Magh (January-February). This festival is also known as Domashi. It is also performed in commemoration of those who are dead. This festival is called by Assamese Hindus the Bhogali Bihu or Magh Bihu. On the last day of Assamese month, Push the Bodo womenfolk fry different type of pulses, such as sibing (sesame), sobai, mugu, etc., and a little quantity of these are sprayed at the cow-shed at night. Besides, to entertain the relatives and friends, they make varieties of eatable pithas (cakes), such as pitha aasi, pitha enthab, pitha lawdum, etc. They also mark around the walls of the granary and Nomano, main house with a mixture of cow dung and water. On this occasion, the members of the family use to tie with the rope of tharai (a kind of plant) around the fruit bearing trees of their house, commonly jackfruit tree, mango tree, areca-nut tree, coconut tree, etc. It is usually believed by the Bodos that the trees have also life and bear more fruits.
In celebration of this festival, another important feature is the construction of 'Belagur' by cowherds or young men of the village either on the river bank or in the post harvesting field. The Belagur is made from the paddy straws, dried banana leaves and bamboo poles. A night is spent at field near the Belagur amidst merrymaking, drinking of zumai, sereb, dancing and singing songs. In the early morning, the Belagur is burnt and prayer is offered to the fire of the Belagur by singing a song for the well being of their cattle and for the prosperity of their village. The supreme God, Bathou Bwrai is also worshipped by a section of the Bodos offering sacrifices of fowls. The drinking of tea with pithas (cakes) and consuming zumai, sereb and enjoying, singing and dancing are the common features of this festival. This festival is also followed by the adherents of the Brahma cult by burning ahuti (See Plate 28) on the Maghw purnima (full moon) for their general welfare. In the recent past, most of the Bodo people use to go the village temple for worship. The Maghw festival is very elaborate. It is performed with splendour and festive manner. Most of the Assamese Hindus community celebrates this festival in the same manner.

Amthisua festival

The Amthisua festival is closely related to the nature. It is called by the Bodos as 'Aisiua'. The 'ai' means mother and 'sua' means menstruation (unclean). So, 'ai-sua' means the menstruation of the mother earth. This festival is usually celebrated in the Assamese month of Achar (mid-June). A great ambubashi mela is also organized by Assamese Hindus annually at the Kamakhyta temple of Guwahati in Assam during the same period. It is a ritual of austerities celebrated with Tantric rites. The Bodo people believe that this was the period of menstruation of the mother earth. This period is considered as unclean period. During this period some agricultural works, like ploughing the land, digging the soil, cutting the bamboo and tree, etc., are prohibited. The women folk are also forbidden from entering the granary on this day. On the last day of Amthisua, some domestic articles, such as wooden seat, chairs, cloth, bench, brooms, etc. are washed with water. After that the Bodo families purify their house by sprinkling the holy water individually. It has been observed that from recent past a large number of the villagers are drawn to the
village temples and they worship the Almighty God, Bathou Bwrai offering some seasonal fruits of the time. After the community prayer, the villagers feast on the seasonal fruits, such as, jack fruits, mango, banana, pineapple, etc. The followers of the Brahma cult also celebrate the Amthisua festival by performing the hom-yogya at their village temples. The Amthisua is not an occasion of great merrymaking festival, but it is a festival to purify the unclean. Similar beliefs and practices are also found among the neighbouring Assamese Hindu community.

Wngkham gwrlwi janai

The ‘wngkham gwrlwi janai’ is one of the most important post harvest ceremony of the Bodos. The Bodo word ‘wngkham’ means rice, ‘gwrlwi’ means new and ‘janai’ means eating and thus it means ceremony of eating new rice. It is both individual and community ceremony. This ceremony is generally celebrated after the harvesting of maisali paddy (sali in Assamese) of the year is over, in the Assamese month of Aghwn (November-December). During this ceremony Bathou Bwrai and his consort Mainao is worshipped by offering a little quantity of the new rice along with various fruits, flowers and prasads as well as by sacrifices of fowls, goats, pigeons, etc. The Oja officiates this ritual. It is performed expecting for the better paddy crops in the following years. In this occasion, the relatives, neighbours are invited with the purpose of making merriment, feasting and liberal drinking of zumai. Earlier, the rice beer and meats of sacrificed animals were supplied abundantly. It is a ritual for one day merriment.

Thus, some festivals and ceremonies are apparently seasonal or agricultural festival in their content and purpose, but the manner of their celebrations is done through certain religious rites and rituals. In the same manner, the Bodo people after long decades of living in close proximity to the Aryans or Hindus also observe some Hindu religious festivals and pujas, such as Holi, Diwali, Siva puja, Biswakarma puja, Durga puja, Kali puja, Saraswati puja, Lakshmi puja, etc. And most of the Bodo festivals and ceremonies are almost similar to that of the neighbouring Assamese Hindus in the content, manner, purpose and style of their observations.
Notes and References


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202
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29. Boro, Anil Kumar, op. cit., p. 41; Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 69 (No. 3).
30. Boro, Anil Kumar, op. cit., p. 41.
32. Endle, Sidney (1911): The Kacharis (Bodos), Delhi, p. 37; Boro, Anil Kumar, op. cit., p. 42.
33. Brahma, Liladhar, op. cit., 20; Boro, Anil Kumar, op. cit., p. 42.
34. Interviewed, Chabin Brahma, Flute player of Kherai dance, Laukhata, Baksa, age-49, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2011.


37. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 74 (No. 3).

38. Interviewed, Biswanath Basumatary, ex-douri of Rangidara village, Baksa, age-62, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

39. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 73 (No. 3).

40. Ibid, p.74.


43. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 74 (No. 3).


45. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 74 (No. 3).

46. Ibid, p. 75; Khakhlary, Hari Narayan and Basumatary, Gabinda, op. cit., p. 154; Mosahary, R. N., op. cit., p. 60.


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204
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66. Brahma Chaudhury, Bijaya Laxmi (1993): Bodos (Kachari) at a Glance,
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68. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 55 (No. 3).
69. Ibid, p. 56.

71. Brahma, Kameswar, op. cit., p. 57 (No. 3).

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