



# Bathouism: The Preservation Of Indigenous Religion And Cultural Identity Among The Bodo People Of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

Religion plays a significant role in a society. One of the main social structures that helps a society or culture create its own social and cultural identity. There are strong conventional beliefs about religion and other social aspects of life in every tribal group. The Boro community is the protological source of Bathou religion in this world. Oral literature and mythological stories are the only historical accounts of Bathouism. One of the biggest ethnolinguistic groups in Northeast India, the Bodo people of Assam, have a rich cultural legacy rooted in the native religion known as Bathouism. Bathouism, which is based on the worship of “Bwraibathou or Bathoubwrai” (the supreme deity) and is represented by the sacred Sijou tree (*Euphorbia Neriifolia*), is a sophisticated fusion of oral tradition, rituals, and nature worship. Religion and folk culture have a strong relationship since religion is an institution that links folk culture to the different traditional practices, ceremonies, and rituals of the society. The Bodos’ have a very structured and close-knit social life. To enjoy their social life, Bodos adhere to a set of communal norms and regulations. They enjoy and support a communal life, cooperation, mutual aid, teamwork, farming, fishing, and celebrations, among other activities, in which the entire community works and has fun. The values, ceremonies, rituals, beliefs, social norms, ethics, and philosophy of the Bodo community are the main components of Bathouism. This native religion has been under pressure from modernization, cultural assimilation, and religious conversion in recent decades. The significance of Bathouism as a cultural anchor that maintains Bodo identity in the face of swift societal change is examined in this paper, in addition to its role as a religious system. Researchers have noted that the Bodos’ traditional religion, known as Bathou, is deviated from the Hinduism philosophy.

**Keywords:** Bathouism, Sijou, Bodo, Religion, Animism, Assam

## 1.INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Deities

The Chief deity, known as “Bwraibathou or Bathoubwrai” among the Bodos (bwrai - “the elder”)-omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, and is believed to have established the five principles. The Sijou tree ( *Euphorbia Neriifolia*) represents “Bwraibathou or Bathoubwrai” is also known as Gila,

Damra, Khuria Bwrai and Sri Bwrai (Shib Bwrai) and he is also associated with the Hindu God Lord Shiva.

The second important deity is known as “Mainao” associated with the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. She is Bathoubwrai’s daughter and is the “protector of the rice fields” and worshipped for prosperity and good fortune. Aijwrai Bwrai is believed as a family protector or ancestral spirit, Kherai Bwrai is associated with harvest and agriculture and the major ritual is known as the Kherai Puja, Doudini a female shaman who communicates with spirits during the Kherai Puja but she is not believed as a God. Another spirit or deity associated with protection and healing is Hagra Bwrai. Since the Sijou plant represents the ultimate God rather than the deity itself, Bathouism is not idolatry.

### 1.2 Bathou Altar

*Sijousali*, the Bathou altar is a place of prayer that is built in the easternmost courtyard of every Bathouist residence. It is typically built with an elevated platform and surrounded by a circular bamboo-strip fence. The fence itself is composed of five fastenings and eighteen pairs of bamboo strips, each of which has symbolic meaning and represents different aspects of life and Bathou deities. Other than that there are no fixed places for worship like temples or churches etc. The perennial nature of the Sijou tree—that is, its resistance to withering is seen as a metaphor for the Supreme God's immortality. This plant has xerophytic features. A Tulusi plant or Holy Basil (*Ocimum Tenuiflorum*) is also planted on the right side of the Sijou tree. In the nature-based religion of Bathouism, the tree has a very significant importance. The term Sijou is believed to be derived from two words “Si” means “Soul or Life” and “Jou” means the highest place or the Chief. *Bathou which means; Ba:five, and Thou:deep in boro*. Bihuram Boro writes in his *Gibi Bithai* (1984) the word Bathou comes from combining different words. And its five principles are: (i) Bar: air (ii) Orr: fire (iii) Ha: earth (iv) Okhrang: ether (cosmic energy) (v) Dwi: water. The five divine beings in Bathouism are represented by the tree’s fivefold structure, which is divided into five parts: roots, stems, branches, leaves, and thorns.

As commonly believed in Bathou religion, by worshipping the Sijou tree, followers believe they can obtain Bwrai Bathou in the form of a living human or symbolic figure, which allows them to receive His blessings, as Si-Bwrai is said to have promised before leaving this world. Since then, the Boro people have firmly believed that the Sijou tree represents the living symbol of Bwrai Bathou.

### 1.3 Rituals

Bwrai Bathou is worshipped on several occasions, such as New Year's, Magw Domasi (Makar Sankranti), Bwisagu (Bihu), etc. Mostly people celebrate Bathou Puja on the second Tuesday of the Bodo month of Magw (Magha) usually known as Gwthar saan. On this day, Bathou is worshipped by the Bodo people in their household Bathou altar or village community altars along with the 18 main gods and goddesses, Mainao Buri, and Baghraj, the Sijou tree is worshipped in this puja as a representation of Bathoubwrai. Key elements in the Bathou puja-

- Round stone: Stands for soil and solidity.
- Chicken eggs: A symbol of life and fertility.
- Wine and meat offerings: Show how the puja incorporates both natural and cultural customs.

The priest conducts the rites and makes sure the puja remains sacred. Together with traditional dance, music, and chants, the community comes together to offer prayers, fostering a culture of peace and spiritual vitality.

### 1.4 The Bodo Community

In Assam, the Bodo tribe is known to be the largest indigenous tribal community belonging to the Bodo-Kachari ethnolinguistic family. About the second millennium of BC (Before Christ) they began to settle in the plain areas of Assam. They are located throughout Assam, but mostly they are settled in the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri, Goalpara, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, and Dhemaji. In addition to

these districts, they also co-exist with other tribes of Assam in other districts like in Dima Hasao with the Dimasa tribe which also belongs to the Bodo-Kachari family. Small groups of Bodo people also exist in West Bengal, Nepal, and Tripura. They ruled from Cooch Behar to Naga Hills with Dimapur as their capital as mentioned in Assam history. In the sixteenth century A.D. they are known to have migrated to the western portion of the Brahmaputra River, the North Cachar Hills, and the Cachar plains, having ruled all of Assam until the 12th century AD.

In terms of language, the Bodos are a part of the Tibeto-Burman language family also a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family and culturally they are Indo-Mongoloids. They use Devanagiri script for writing. Bodo language is one of the 22 Indian languages included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

## **2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The study intends to explore how the Bodo community of Assam have managed to maintain their traditional and cultural identity while preserving their indigenous religion which is Bathouism, in today's world of modernization and recent religious conversion.

## **3. STUDY AREA**

The research centres on the northeastern Indian state of Assam, which is home to a large population of Bodo people. In the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), the study will primarily focus on Bodo-dominated regions such as Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri districts. These areas play a major role in the ongoing practice of Bathouism and are rich in Bodo cultural activity and strong cultural identity in light of today's modernisation.

## **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper uses a qualitative methodology to investigate the ways in which Bathouism contributes to the preservation of the Bodo people's traditional religion and cultural identity in Assam. The study's methodology is exploratory and descriptive. Its main aim is to describe Bathouism's ancient religious activities and how they support cultural identity and comprehend their experiences, beliefs, and customs. Additionally, it examines the difficulties of maintaining these customs in the present time.

Through a detailed examination of the Bodos' cultural evolution has revealed that the Aryan, Austric, and Dravidian civilizations have had a significant effect on the culture of Bodo people throughout the course of various Indian historical periods, but it was first analysed that the Bodos' inherited their culture from the Mongoloids.

## **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Bathouism as an Indigenous Religious System**

Bathouism is the indigenous religion of the Bodo community and forms an inseparable part of their cultural identity. The religion has neither a known founder nor a fixed date of origin, and unlike many organized religions, it has no canonical religious text. Its philosophy, rituals, beliefs, and traditions have been transmitted orally from one generation to another through myths, folklore, festivals, and customary practices. This oral tradition has enabled Bathouism to survive for centuries despite the absence of written scriptures.

The Bodos are considered one of the most prominent indigenous communities of Assam. Through a detailed examination of the Bodos' cultural evolution, it has been observed that Aryan, Austric, and Dravidian civilizations have influenced their culture over different historical periods. However, scholars generally agree that the Bodos inherited the core elements of their indigenous culture from their Mongoloid ancestors. Their traditional religion, customs, festivals, and social institutions continue to reflect this cultural heritage.

Bathouism revolves around the worship of Bathoubwrai (Bwrai Bathou), who is regarded as the Supreme Being, the creator, protector, and sustainer of all life. The religion also recognizes several other deities, such as Mainao, Aijwrai Bwrai, Kherai Bwrai, and Hagra Bwrai, each associated with different aspects of social and agricultural life. These beliefs demonstrate the close relationship between religion, agriculture, nature, and the everyday lives of the Bodo people.

### 5.2 Symbolism of the Sijou Tree and Religious Philosophy

One of the most distinctive features of Bathouism is the worship of the Sijou tree (*Euphorbia neriifolia*), which symbolizes Bathoubwrai. The tree is planted at the Sijousali, the Bathou altar, traditionally located in the eastern part of every Bathou household. The altar is enclosed by a bamboo fence consisting of eighteen pairs of bamboo strips tied with five fastenings, each carrying symbolic religious significance. According to Bodo belief, the Sijou tree is not worshipped as a deity itself but serves as the living symbol of the Supreme God. The perennial nature of the tree represents immortality, continuity, and resilience, reflecting the eternal nature of Bathoubwrai. This symbolism also illustrates the Bodo community's close relationship with nature and their ecological worldview.

The word Bathou is commonly interpreted as *Ba* meaning "five" and *Thou* meaning "deep." These five principles represent the essential elements of existence: Bar (air), Orr (fire), Ha (earth), Okhrang (ether), and Dwi (water). Likewise, the five structural components of the Sijou tree, namely its roots, stem, branches, leaves, and thorns, symbolize these five divine principles. Thus, Bathouism is not merely a system of worship but also a philosophy emphasizing harmony between human beings, nature, and the universe.

### 5.3 Bathouism and the Preservation of Cultural Identity

Religion plays a significant role in preserving the social and cultural identity of any community. Among the Bodos, Bathouism functions not only as a religious belief system but also as a repository of indigenous knowledge, traditional customs, ethical values, and collective memory.

The Bodo community maintains a structured and close-knit social life based on cooperation, mutual assistance, collective farming, fishing, and community celebrations. These social values are deeply embedded in Bathou religious practices and continue to shape community life. Rituals, festivals, and ceremonies provide opportunities for different generations to participate together, thereby ensuring the transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural practices.

Bathouism has also contributed significantly to preserving the Bodo language, folklore, oral literature, and ritual traditions. Since the religion has historically relied on oral transmission rather than written scriptures, festivals and ceremonies have become important means through which cultural identity is sustained. In this sense, Bathouism serves as both a religious institution and a cultural framework that strengthens ethnic identity among the Bodos.

### 5.4 Social Values and Community Life

Religion serves as the foundation of many moral, social, and spiritual values. Bathouism teaches cooperation, compassion, tolerance, responsibility, forgiveness, brotherhood, justice, and peaceful coexistence. These values are reflected in various religious ceremonies, festivals, and everyday social interactions.

Community participation forms an essential part of Bathou religious life. During Bathou Puja and Bwisagu, people gather collectively to offer prayers, perform traditional dances and music, prepare food together, and celebrate their cultural heritage. These communal activities strengthen social solidarity and reinforce the spirit of cooperation among community members.

Bathouism also promotes environmental ethics through its reverence for nature. The worship of the Sijou tree, respect for natural elements, and agricultural rituals demonstrate the Bodo community's belief that human well-being depends upon maintaining harmony with the natural environment. Such indigenous ecological knowledge remains highly relevant in the contemporary context of environmental conservation.

### 5.5 Challenges and Contemporary Developments

Despite its historical significance, Bathouism has undergone considerable transformation due to modernization, urbanization, globalization, and religious conversion. Many Bodos gradually embraced Hindu reform movements such as Brahma Dharma, while others adopted Christianity or different Hindu traditions. These developments have inevitably influenced traditional religious practices and cultural expressions.

The emergence of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and the Brahma Dharma movement in the early twentieth century represented an important socio-religious reform aimed at strengthening Bodo identity while responding to changing social conditions. The movement emphasized monotheism and moral discipline and sought to protect the community from cultural disintegration. Bathouism itself has evolved over time and today includes different traditions such as Sanaton Bathou, Abru Bathou, Rupamoni Bathou, Narayan Bathou, and Swrijgiri Bathou. Although these groups differ in certain practices, they continue to share the fundamental belief in Bathoubwrai as the Supreme Being.

Recognizing the need to preserve indigenous religion, the All Bathou Religious Union (ABRU) was established in 1992. The organization has played an important role in promoting Bathouism through religious awareness programmes, documentation of rituals, publication of religious literature, and organization of community worship. These initiatives have contributed significantly to preserving Bathouism in the face of rapid social and cultural change.

Researchers such as Bihuram Boro, Ramdas Basumatary, Bhaben Narzary, Kameswar Brahma, Premananda Mushahary, and Mahini Mahan Brahma have also contributed substantially to documenting Bathou philosophy, rituals, and cultural traditions. Their scholarly works have helped preserve indigenous knowledge and provided an academic foundation for future research.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through its many festivals and ceremonial traditions, the religion teaches mainly about discipline, social sensitivity, justice, toleration, adaptability, and mutual understanding. There are societal lessons to be learned from any religious activity.

Modernity has caused the Bathou faith to split into many groups, such as Sanaton Bathou, Abru Bathou, Rupamoni Bathou, Narayan Bathou, Swrijgiri Bathou, and others. Based on the ancient form of Bathouism, each segment has its own individuality. In 1992, the All Bathou Religious Union (ABRU) was established. ABRU has been working in a number of ways to provide the religion a more structured and formalized form. Religion and society are like two sides of the same coin. Social change will result from changes in religion, and vice versa. The Bodos have their own distinct traditional religion, beliefs, and ways of thinking. It holds that there is only one God, whom they refer to as Bathoubwrai. In addition to being limitless, he created all living things. One of the Bodo community's identities is Bathou. It wouldn't be incorrect to argue that this is the sole source of their culture, traditions, customs, beliefs, rituals, festivals, etc. Bathou serves as a unifying factor among its own people. It serves as the foundation for their ideals and society. Their social ideals are only the result and reflection of their diverse religious practices.

Bathou religion has evolved and reflects societal shifts; many rites, such as the sacrifice of animals, birds, etc., have changed as a result of the religion's acceptance of modernity. Now, fruits and flowers are presented to God in place of sacrifices. Currently, its many ceremonies represent education and lifestyle improvement. The ancient Bathou's religious traditions have been abandoned in favour of various new ideas and structures.

## 7. STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, research papers, and historical documents. It does not incorporate primary data collected through field surveys, interviews, or participant observation among Bathou practitioners. Therefore, the findings are interpretative and may not fully reflect regional variations in the contemporary practice of Bathouism across different Bodo communities. Future research may adopt ethnographic methods and field-based investigations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the changing nature of Bathouism and its role in preserving indigenous religion and cultural identity.

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