

The significance of the five-fold fastening and 18 bamboo post in Bathouism

Alok Jwhlaw Daimary

Research scholar
Dept. of Indian Comparative Literature
Assam University, Silchar

Abstract: The Bodos are the aboriginal tribe of Assam, Northeast India. The dharma, or religion, of the Bodos, is unique to them and forms an important part of their unique identity. Since the beginning of time, Bathouism has continued to be in practice. It is thought to be among the earliest Dharmas. The Bodos have faith in Bathou Bwrai, the Supreme Being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present. The supreme deity, also known as the Bathou Bwrai or the Bwrai Bathou, is worshipped by the followers of Bathouism. A Bathousali (Bathou altar) is built in the courtyard of each Bathouist home. A Bathou Thansali (place of worship, temple), where followers pray every Tuesday, also exists in the community. Bathouism believers observe all the ceremonies and rituals constituted by "Si Bwrai and Si Burwi," the earliest humans known to have been born. The Sijou tree is a representation of the Bathou Bwrai on the altar. The Bathou altar, which is held together by 18 bamboo post and five folds, has a Sijou tree in the centre. The five-fold represents the value of five Bandws (Bindings) or ties of human existence that one must abide by, while the 18 bamboo post represents the 18 (gurus) gods and goddesses of Bathouism. This article attempts to highlight the significance of the meanings associated with the numbers five and 18 (gurus) gods and goddesses in Bathouism.

Keywords: Bodos, Bathouism, Sijou, Five-folds, 18 gurus.

Introduction:

A Mongolian ethnic group, the Bodo speaks a language related to Tibeto-Burman. The Bodos are the eighth-largest tribe in India and the largest tribal group in the whole Northeast. Bodos, Koches, Rabhas, Lalungs, Hajongs, Chutiyas, Meches, Dhimals, and Sonowals of the Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal, Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills, Tripuris of Tripura, and Garos of Meghalaya are all considered being members of the Bodo-Kachari race. In the Brahmaputra Valley and North Cachar Hills, descendants of the Bodo race are referred to as "Kachari," except for the Garos, Koches, and Tripuris (Barpujari, 2011). The Bodo are the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, originally known as the Bodo-Kachari, as used in contemporary socio-political terminology (Chaudhary, 2007).

The Bodo community, which is scattered throughout Assam, India, is among the most significant. The Bodo people's traditional religion is known as the Bathou religion. Considered being among the world's earliest religions. The name Bathou Bwrai or Si Bwrai is revered among the community as the highest deity. The Bwrai Bathou is a representation of the supreme soul, who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present at the same time. The Sijou tree, often known as the Euphorbia splendens, is the embodiment of the Bwrai Bathou.

The Bodo the terms Si and Jou denote, respectively, the ultimate and soul or atma. In the language of the Bathou faith, Sijou denotes the highest soul or atma, according to the word's derivation (Boro, 2017).

The term Bathou is a blend of two words: Ba and Thou, which signify five and profound philosophy, insight, or thought, respectively. Together, these two words form the term Bathou. Based on this, when we integrate the two terms, we get the phrase Bathou, which may be broken down into the meaning of five distinct profound principles.

These five principles or elements are:

- I. Bar (Air)
- II. Ha (Earth, Soil)
- III. Dwi (Dater)
- IV. San (Sun, Fire)
- V. Okhwrang (Either).

The Bodos' religion is not animistic. They revere Bathou, the most powerful deity. There are many gods and goddesses within. They also hold a belief in ghosts and spirits. But what is most fascinating is the idea of the Supreme God (Bhattacharjee, 1997).

Method:

For the present study, data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are collected through observations and informal discussions. Secondary sources are collected from books, journals, research papers, etc.

The study is carried out with the view of understanding the significance of **i.** The erection of the Bathou altar, and **ii.** 18 bamboo post and fivefold fastening, in Bathou dharma.

Results and Discussion:

Significance of the Sijou tree

The Sijou plant, *Euphorbia splendens*, is revered in the Bathou religion and has long been regarded by the Bodo people as a representation of life or the soul, or the supreme one. Its immortality, is intended to be symbolised by the plant's lifespan - it never withers away.

The Sijou tree bears thorns in addition to five rinds in total. The idea is that each pair of thorns represents a married couple. Rinds represent the five components (air, earth, water, sun and ether) that combine to produce the Bathou. Bathou, which in this context refers to five deep philosophical concepts. The Sijou tree is classified into five divisions to better understand its enormous significance.

- I. Rwda or roots.
- II. Gudi or trunk of the tree.
- III. Dalai & Dentha or branch & stem.
- IV. Bibar & Bilai or flowers & leaves.
- V. Su Jora or pairs of thorn.

These Rwda, also known as roots, are symbolic representations of the divine attributes that God has, but which are not readily apparent. The Sijou tree's single Gudi (trunk) symbolises the almighty, omniscient, and omnipresent God. The Sijou tree is a symbol of God, representing the power of creation. Like the various Dalai and Dentha (branches and stems) of the tree, these represent different species of living beings, including animals, plants, and trees, as well as all the entities that inhabit the cosmos. The Bibar & Belai (flower & leaves) have important meanings in the Bathou religion. The adherents of the faith see the leaves and flowers of the Sijou tree as a symbol of Mainao, which may be translated as "wealth and property". Bathouism believes that thorns of Sijou tree symbolise a husband and wife. They also signify day and night

Significance of Bathou altar

There may be two types of Bathou or Bathousali among the Bodos.

- I. Household Bathousali
- II. Community Bathousali.

1. Household Bathousali

A Bathousali is often constructed for the household of follower of bathouism. Inside of it is a Sijou tree, also known as *Euphorbia splendens*. Basil (tulsi) and Jathrasi (common name for a plant) are also planted on the Bathou altar. Every Bathou household would light their Alari bathi, which is an earthen lamp, on every Tuesday morning or evening.

Household Bathousali is associated with a few ceremonies.

Preparation for holy water (Dwi Gwthar khalamnai):

When worshipping Bathou, it is crucial to utilise holy water. The holy water is made with the following components:

- i. A glass made of brass to carry holy water.
- ii. Pure, fresh water.
- iii. A piece of gold, silver, or any kind of coin.
- iv. Five pieces of husked rice.
- v. Five leafy shoots of basal.
- vi. Five shoots of *Cynodon dactylon* (Bermuda grass).
- vii. Five leafy shoots of jathrasi (common name for a plant).

Five pieces of rice, with the husks removed, and any coin, gold or silver, are immersed in holy water. Jatrashi, Bermuda grass, and basal shoots that have been five times tied with cotton thread must also be used to sprinkle the holy water.

Using Crabs stool (Khangkrai Khi Bahainai):

The Bathou adherents believe the crab stool that have been dug out and stored at a spot that is considered being sacred. The Mainao altar is plastered with this mud and then sprinkled with holy water.

Using rice flour (On Gundwi Bahainai):

The adherents of the Bathouism believe that the pounded rice flour is authentic and free from impurities. They used it in the flooring of Bathou, Ba-Raja and in the Mainao bindw (altar) in the location where the plantain leaves were placed.

Preparing tilak (Fwtha Banainai):

The worshippers must wear the tilak. It is created by mixing holy water, sandalwood powder, fresh mud extracted by a crab, and the scent of the Agar plant. It is carried around on a laijou (plantain tree sprout) or other practical object. The Douri must use the middle finger of his right hand to put a tilak to the foreheads of the believers.

Items to be offered and rituals (Baonai Besad arw Baonai Khanti):

Despite their undying dedication to the Bathou Bwrai, the devotees think that making offerings is something the deity prefers. The items offered by the Bihar Bathou and Gudi Bathou vary. The items offered by Bihar Bathou adherents are as follows;

- i. A pair of sieves and a pair of betel leaves while welcoming Mainao.
- ii. Maihendw to place it in the Mainao Bitha (a tiny clay pot).
- iii. Rice grains or husked rice.
- iv. A piece of stone
- v. Some cash.
- vi. Pair of cowrie shells.
- vii. Incense holder.
- viii. Earthen lamp.
- ix. Mustard oil.
- x. cotton thread,
- xi. Incense, frankincense,
- xii. Dhunuchi.
- xiii. Match box,
- xiv. 18 pairs of Khangkla (a kind of grass),.
- xv. Laijou (sprouts of plantain leaves).
- xvi. Areca nuts.
- xvii. betel leaves
- xviii. Gram.
- xix. Banana.
- xx. Moong.
- xxi. Sugarcane.
- xxii. Coconut.
- xxiii. Fruits and flowers.

Items offered by Gudi Bathou in addition to the mentioned are:

- i. Rooster.
- ii. Pigeon.
- iii. Hen.
- iv. Goat.
- v. Flowers.
- vi. Prasad.

2. Community Bathousali

On the area designated as Thansali, the villagers must erect an altar for communal usage. The religious and spiritual beliefs of Bathouism are symbolically represented by the 18 pairs of tiny bamboo strips folded with five fastenings that is used to build a Bathou altar.

Bibar Bathou (fwsabnai bathou or modified) has three bithas in their Thansali; Rungsar Bitha (Ba-rajha bitha), Mitha Bitha (Bathou bitha) and Hasing Bitha (Mainao), and one Ali (way or path) known as Bwiswmuthini Ali (path for gods and goddesses).

The Gudi Bathou has four Bithas (altar) in their Thansali (place of worship); Mainao Bitha, Ba Raja Bitha, Bathou Bitha and Mwnsinsi Bwrai - Mwnsinsi Burwi Bitha and Bwiswmuthini Ali (path of gods and goddesses).

Significance of 18 bamboo strips and fivefold fastening

The Bathou altar is fenced using 18 bamboo post and five fastening out of a single bamboo. The religious and spiritual beliefs of Bathouism, as well as the 18 gurus and deities, are represented by 18 pairs of small bamboo post folded with five fastenings. These 18 bamboo strips or post represent the 18 gods and goddesses of the Bathou dharma whereas the fivefold fastening represents the 5 Bandw or Asar (rites and rituals) that Bathou adherents believe are attached to human being.

These gurus who occupy the prominent place in the Bathou religion are;

1. **Mwnsinsi bwrai and Mwnsinsi Burwi:** Earliest known human being to be born.
2. **Si Bwrai and Si Burwi:** The earliest manifestation of Bwrai Bathou's enlightened creativity.
3. **Ehio Bwrai and Ehio-Burwi:** The creator of kherai puja, who is also credited with being the first person to sing and dance.
4. **Hafao Bwri and Hafao Burwi:** The first person to spread the doctrines of Dharma.
5. **Khwria Bwrai and Khwria Burwi:** The creator of the instrument known as the kham (drum).
6. **Mohela Bwrai and Mohela Burwi:** Creator of the musical instrument known as the jotha (cymbal).
7. **Bwrlli Bwrai and Bwrlli Burwi:** The architect of both learning and literature.
8. **Song Bwrai and Song Burwi:** An enlightened person.
9. **Khwila Bwrai and Khwila Burwi:** In addition to being the one who designed the constitution, he was also the one who established the meaning of the terms Si and Jhou.
10. **Agrang Bwrai-Agrang Burwi:** The artisan who invented the handloom.
11. **Jwmwn Bwrai and Jwmwn Burwi:** Promulgator of laws and regulations, besides those who evaluate them.
12. **Hajw Bwrai and Hajw Burwi:** The one who can differentiate between truth and lies.
13. **Gongar Bwrai and Gongar Burwi:** Bureaucrat.
14. **Rojong Bwrai and Rojong Burwi:** Creator of various tools and equipment.
15. **Hasung Bwrai and Hasung Burwi:** Philosophers.
16. **Emao Bwrai-Emao Burwi:** First person to practise medicine.
17. **Aham Bwrai and Aham Burwi:** Shaman, sometimes known as a witch doctor.
18. **Mainao Bwrai and Mainao-Burwi:** The first person to start farming and collecting crops.

Each pair of gods and goddesses represents the need of a human companion to live a life. All these gods and goddesses have their specify role and worshiped alongside Bwrai Bathou.

There is a message in Bathou Dharma that outlines the essence of five doctrines that Bathouists comply to;

“Sijou Siri Siriba

Bathou Bindw Bindwba

Sifung Gudung Gudungba

Thaigir Khonga Khongba

Subung ni Asara Bw Asarba.”

English rendering

The Sijou tree has five rinds

The Bathou has five bindings

The flute has five tone holes

The Elephant Apple has five rinds

The custom of Human being are also five.

Similarly, there are five Asar or rites and rituals that both the adherents of Bibar Bathou and Gudi Bathou adhere to during their lifetime. They are;

Rites related to birth (Jwnwm Asar)

The initial round of fastening of the Bathou altar is symbolic of the birth rites and accompanying social folk customs and traditions. Jwnwm Asar of Bathou dharma focuses on the birth rites and rituals that go along with the welcoming and acceptance of an infant within the bounds of his or her family and community.

- i. The birth family is required to carry out a few ceremonies.
- ii. Ful Fobnai or gently cutting the umbilical cord and burying it.
- iii. Door Khengnai ni Maan or opening the rear and front doors.
- iv. Bathou ao Maan lanai or praying to Bathou Bwrai.
- v. Khalai Ji Sunai or cleaning dirty clothes.

Rites related to marriage (Haba Asar)

The customary rite known as the Haba Asar is carried out during the wedding ceremony. This custom, which includes pre- and post-wedding rituals, is followed under tradition. The Bodos have long followed rigid traditions for performing marriages, even if integration has led to certain regional variances in the norms. The Bodos categories weddings into five kinds based on the type of union.

- i. Aitha Haba eba Haba Gwlaio or arranged marriage.
- ii. Gwrjia Haba or stay-at-home parent marriage.
- iii. Daothw Haba eba Haba Gusung or brief marriage.
- iv. Daokha Haba; Balonda Haba or widow remarriage.
- v. Bihari Haba or second marriage.

Rites related to Suffering, pain, or anguish (Dukhu-Daha Asar)

Practitioners in the Bwli Bathou sect participate in rituals or pujas like the Kherai (a kind of community or family worship). To heal from any disease or misfortune, some families sacrifice animals and birds at their Kheraisali and Garjasali (place of worship).

On the other hand, followers of Bibar Bathou, a modified version of Bathouism, assemble each Tuesday for communal prayer at the local Bathou altar. They bring fruits and flowers in this collective worship session as offerings to the bwrai bathou, during this time of prayer.

Rites related to Peace, tranquillity (Sukhu-Gwjwn Asar)

Bathou also observe Garja, Kherai, Bormani, Biswahari, Gunakhar, and others in addition to seasonal celebrations, Bwisagu (Bihu), Khati gasa (Kati Bihu), and Magw Domachi (Magh Bihu). This Asar is linked to human pleasure and happiness, as well as serenity and tranquillity.

Rites related to Demise or death (Twinai Asar)

This Asar is a ritual that addresses death and the rituals that are to be followed by the deceased family.

The ritual that is to be followed when somebody dies:

- i. Making bier using a single bamboo to carry the corpse.
- ii. Placing the corpse in bier.

- iii. Feeding food and water to the corpse.
- iv. Tying knots and tearing cotton thread.
- v. Carrying holy water for both corpse and the people in the procession.
- vi. Burying or cremating the corpse.
- vii. Purifying and feeding dried Jute leaves to the people who went procession before returning from the place of cremation or burial.
- viii. Funeral.

Conclusion

Being a tribal religion, Bathouism shares many deep philosophies with other religions regarding nature. They believe in supernatural power that bless to them. Instead of worshipping any idols, people regard the Sijou tree as a symbol of worship. Even though they worship a single god. Additionally, they worship 18 sets of gurus (guides), or symbolically married pairs of deities, who are allotted to particular duties. The 18 small posts used to enclose the Bathou altar serve as a representation of these 18 pairs of gurus. All kinds of seasonal celebrations honour these 18 pairs of guides. The five-fold fastening on the Bathou altar is a representation of the rituals that Bathou adherents conduct that are connected to their everyday lives as well as the stages they must go through in their lifespan (birth, marriage, pain, pleasure and death). They believe that after death, the soul separates from the body because it is eternal. The corpse is burned, and the ashes are mixed with the dirt (Ha). In contrast to other major religions, they believe in the idea of rebirth rather than moksha, or salvation.

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