

The Bathou Altar of the Bodo: A Study on the Beliefs and Practices

Dr. Nushar Bargayary
Assistant Professor of History, Bodoland University
Email ID: bargayarynushar@gmail.com

Bardwi Chila Narzary
Research Scholar of History, Bodoland University
Email ID: narzebardwi@gmail.com

Abstract: *Each and every society has a set of beliefs, practices, rites and rituals with regard to traditional religion. Bathou is the traditional religion of the Bodo. Polytheism is the character of the traditional religion of the Bodo and Bwrai Bathou is the Supreme God. The forefather of the Bodo formulated certain traditional rules and regulations relating to their religious life. They have a well-established tradition of Bathou religion. Since time immemorial, the Bodo have had their own traditional methods for the construction of Bathou altar which inherited from their ancestors. This paper is an attempt to investigate the beliefs and practices associated with the traditional religion of the Bodo and the construction of Bathou altar.*

Keywords: Bathou, Bathou altar, beliefs, practices, rites and rituals.

The Bodo is regarded as one of the largest tribes of Assam. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of the Tibeto-Burman language family.¹ They are regarded as the first to settle in Assam and all of North Eastern India. They are mainly concentrated in Assam and some pockets of their settlement are also found in West Bengal, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland including neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Their civilization had developed on the valley of the mighty Brahmaputra river of Assam. Ever since the beginning of their civilization; the Bodos are the followers of Bathou religion. They have been revering the Bwrai Bathou as the Supreme God since ancient days. The Bodo word *Bwrai* signifies the old person having plenty of knowledge. There is no idol worship in the Bathou religion.² They do not have a fixed place for community worship.³ Temples, churches, or mosques are unknown to them. But one can see a *Sijou (Euphorbia Splenden)* tree planted at the centre of the Bathou altar as the symbol of the Supreme God in every courtyard of Bodo house.⁴ The tradition, socio-culture, rites and rituals of the Bodos are reflected through the worship of the Bathou religion.⁵ The Bathou

religion is an oral faith of the Bodos. No religious scripture, founder and preacher is found in the Bathou religion. The traditional religion of the Bodo cannot be performed without animal sacrifice. In fact, it is the foremost important and age-old practice of the Bodo. Every god and goddess is worshipped by sacrificing animals.⁶ Beliefs and practices have a close relationship with every religion. Various hard and fast rules of religion maintain discipline in society. Beliefs were given a place by the people in society as a consequence of feelings and struggles in day-to-day life. By the way of believing in religion, society is tied up with a rope of unity and fraternity. The beliefs and practices have very important values in all the social functions of the Bodo. Many sacred social functions like birth, marriage, death, etc. are done according to the established social norms.⁷

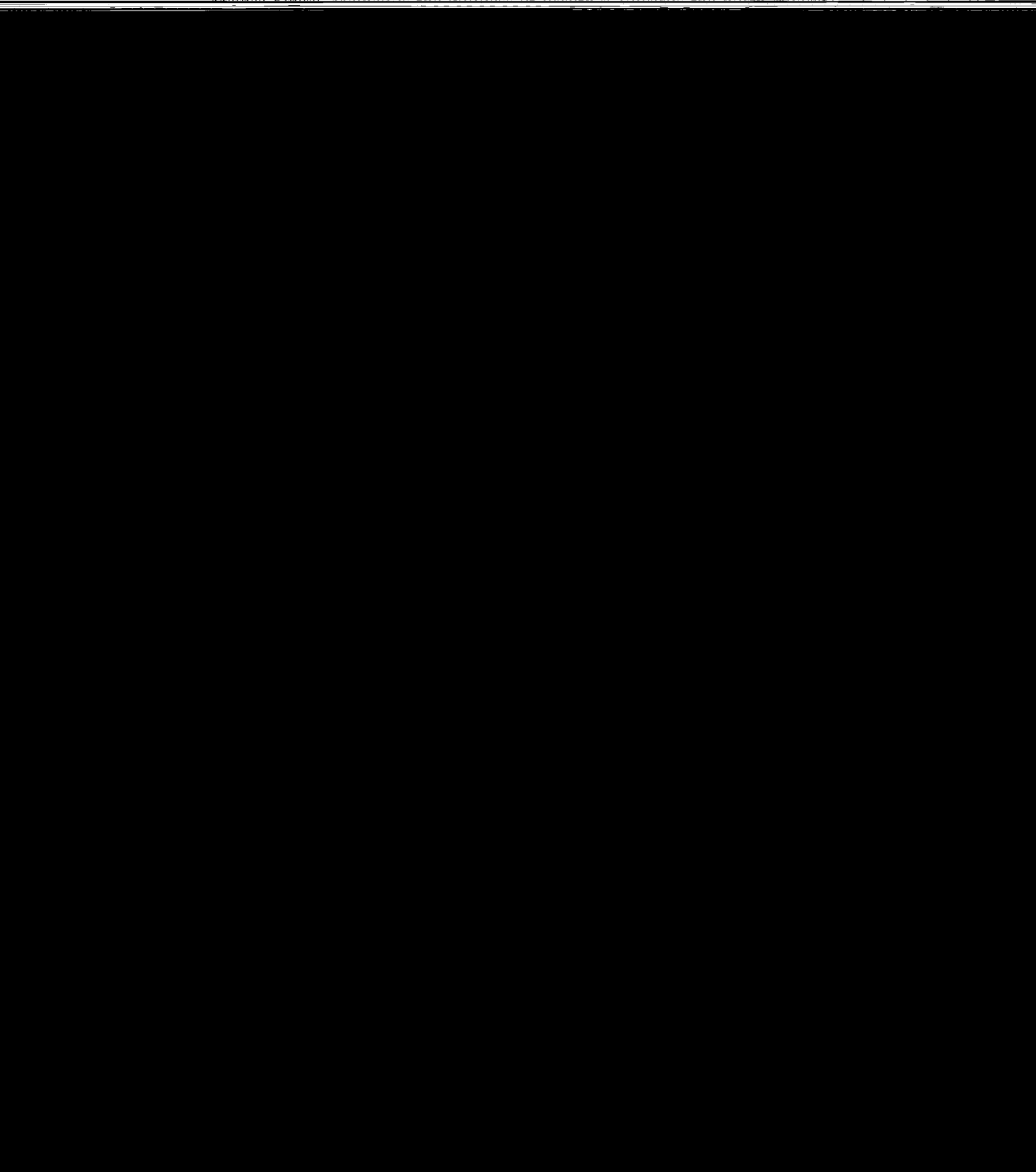
Beliefs and practices associated with the Bathou altar

The traditional religious beliefs and practices have made them unique and distinct amongst the various tribes of the region. They follow a different kind of traditional religious system which is free from the influence of other religious systems.⁸ Certain beliefs and practices of the Bodo are formed by their forefathers under the cover of religion to enlighten humanity. Mention may be made that the word '*Hama*' is considered the basis to uphold those beliefs. *Hama* is a Bodo term meaning 'don't'. To prohibit and forbid doing wrong the elder people used the word '*Hama*' to their children. Since then, certain traditional beliefs have been followed by them.⁹ Their ritualistic activities and performances, which are passed down orally throughout the generations, are closely linked to their traditions, mythology, and various folklore. The Bodos are deeply naturalistic in character. They worship nature to get rid of dangers as well. They were scared by seeing the natural calamities as a result they started to believe in the existence of Supreme Power.

Bathousali (Place of Worship)

Bathousali is a sacred place where the Supreme God Bwrai Bathou and other gods and goddesses are worshipped. *Bathousali* is divided into two parts and they are *Noni Bathousali* (place of family worship) and *Raijwani Bathousali* (place of community worship)¹⁰ *Noni Bathousali* is made in the north-east corner of the courtyard, not so far from *Noma No* (main house). It is believed that the north-east corner is very sacred and creates progressive energies. Being a sacred place, the north-east corner of the courtyard is reserved for *Bathousali*. The north-east corner also enhances good health, wealth, and overall power of the house.¹¹ In a *Bathousali* an altar is positioned with soil and is fenced with bamboo sticks. The Bathou altar is made with clean soil and made round in shape measuring around 100 cm high and around 75 cm wide approximately. A *Sijou* (*Euphorbia splendens*) plant is planted in the middle of Bathou altar.¹² Then the altar is fenced with bamboo sticks by making sixteen posts and five strips from a single bamboo. After that, it is overlapped with the holy soil. Apart from this, an altar is made

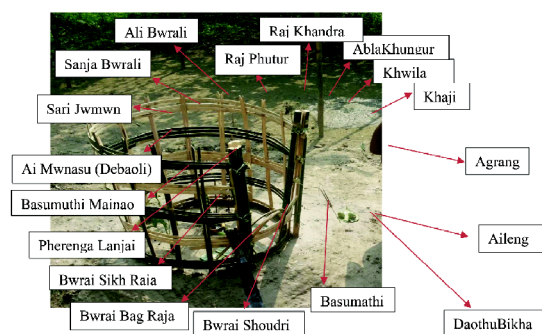
inside the *Esing No* (kitchen) which is belonged to Mainao goddess called *Meinoo Binda*. *Meinoo* is the goddess of wealth.¹³ Towards the south side of



fencing.¹⁹ The fourth fencing ring is fenced by keeping endodermis outside the altar and the fifth one is fenced with exodermis facing outside the altar. The reason behind the construction of Bathou altar by keeping exodermis and endodermis of bamboo inside and outside is that the altar remains strong and last for longer periods of time. The entire construction procedure must be completed with a single bamboo. If any of the slit bamboo were insufficient to create the required three fence rings, the entire process for construction must be restarted with new bamboo. Combining two slit bamboo is strictly forbidden by the traditional norm of construction of Bathou altar.²⁰

The first fencing ring is known as *Rang Rashi*, *Mwitha Haji*, *Bari Gongtham*. It signifies all the creatures of this universe have to undergo the natural law of birth, growth and death. Nobody can escape from this law of nature. After death, all have to embrace mother earth. The second fencing indicates that human beings can become parents of children through the social system of marriage by leaving the character of heartlessness, untruthfulness and injustice. The third fencing signifies that except human beings all creatures can become parents as they wish. But according to the philosophy of Bathou religion, a human being can become a parent by following all the rules and regulations of the religion and enjoying their wishes on the advice of Bwrai Bathou and its subordinate god and goddesses. The fourth fencing suggests setting aside the act of injustice, hatred, and heartlessness, human beings engage themselves for the betterment of human beings and leave some adorable advice to society at the end of their life. It is related to the end of life or death of a person. The fifth fencing ring teaches us to perform rites and rituals in the name of the departed soul. After death, a feast is performed for the departed soul for its eternal peace. It is believed that a soul can rest peacefully in heaven if a feast is performed in the name of the departed soul.²¹ These are the five truths of the creation of God from which human beings never can escape. The three small bamboo strips called *Seren* that are fenced on the fifth fencing ring signify the trinity power of one God i.e. the three powers of Bwrai Bathou called *Rang Rashi*, *Gwhw Rashi* and *Mitha Rashi*.

The name and position of the posts including some important components of the Bathou altar are shown in the following photo figure:



After the erection of Bathou altar, all sixteen posts are split into two equal parts from top to bottom. Each split post symbolises male and female and has its own name and role in Bathou religion. It is also observed that in certain places construction of Bathou altar is done by using eighteen posts.²² The followings are the names of sixteen posts of the Bathou altar and their role:

1. Ailing: It is believed that among the sixteen posts of Bathou altar, the post of Ailung is a symbol of a powerful God who can control one's hideous lust and greed. Being a first worshiper, he provides direction to disciples to worship Bathou along with him. It is believed that he protects his disciples from suffering evil deeds and ominous events.
2. Agrang: He is a God who offers blessings to his followers for peace and unity. He is a warrior who can fight holding two swords in both hands.
3. Khaji: He is a god of purity and truth. He provides guidance to his followers to keep purity and truth in their day-to-day life.²³
4. Khwila: He is a God of wind. He got the power of a whirlwind from Bathou. He can fight in a form of a whirlwind against the enemy without any weapon in his hand. He is a god who dragged Mainao Burwi (goddess of wealth) from the base of the sea and help human beings to leave on earth.
5. Abla Khungur: He is also a god of wind. He is a warrior with whirlwind power and protects his follower from suffering danger in day-to-day life. He also took a major role in dragging Mainao from the pedestal of the sea.²⁴
6. Raj Khandra: This god teaches the followers to worship the truth. He asks to control one's lust, hate and anger and advice to treat seniors and juniors equally. Being a god of culture, he has brought awareness among disciples to preserve their own culture.
7. Raj Phutur: He teaches the followers to do the best with the best desires. He teaches the followers to follow the principle of love begets love. He also encourages people to uphold the culture by displaying his dance near Kham (big drum) during Kherai.
8. Ali Bwrali: He is a god of cultivation. He teaches the disciples how to cultivate and take care of their crops.²⁵
9. Sanja Bwrali: He advises his followers not to harm or kill any animals and birds mercilessly. Even one's enemy is not to be attacked as revenge.
10. Sari Jwmwn: This is a goddess of wisdom. She educates her followers on how to earn knowledge and wisdom.²⁶
11. Ai Mwnasu (Debaoli): She is a goddess of natural power. She is the owner of all-natural seedlings. She distributes seedlings to human beings for cultivation according to the natural season.
12. Basumuthi Mainao: She is a goddess of mother earth and wealth. She teaches the followers the way to survive and to accumulate wealth for running their families from mother earth.

13. Bwrai Sikh Raja: He is the owner of wild animals. He teaches the followers to be obedient and polite to their parents, elders, and teachers. He teaches us to be self-restraint from an obstinate mind.²⁷
14. Bwrai Bag Raja: He teaches the disciples to be self-restraint while dealing with self-esteem. One should not behave aggressively or rudely with their possession of wealth, obstinate and anger.
15. Bwrai Shoudri: He is also a worshipper of Bathou. Human beings should be ready to face any eventualities in life. Human beings may fall and suffer in untoward incidents, but they can be rescued by Bathou if they offer prayer for help. He teaches the followers to offer a pair of betel nuts and betel leaves near any river when they cross the river for their safe journey.
16. Basumathi: No man and animal, plants and birds are immortal. Nobody knows the timing of life and death. It is a game of god. Basmuria is a carrier of the soul of dead things. He plays a character of horse riding signifying the meaning of taking away the soul of dead things to heaven.²⁸

The *Daothu Bikha* (replica of Dove hearth) in front of the Bathou is made by folding the post-god Ailing. The heart of the dove or *Daothu Bikha* is symbolized the soul and braveness of human beings. To make this shape, firstly the post of Ailung is split into sixteen pieces up to the second fencing ring and after dividing into two parts, it is crossed and bent down to each other.²⁹ After completing the fifth fencing ring of Bathou three bamboo sticks are webbed at the top which is called *Rangtham* or *Sili-Mala*. All the fifteen posts of Bathou are tied together with this *Rangtham* and this symbolizes the upholding of all gods and goddesses, social customs and traditions, beliefs and practices, rites and rituals with five principles of Bathou.³⁰

After the completion of *Rangtham*, the top part of the posts except Ailung are cut like a 'V' which is known as *Ferenga Lanjai*. *Pherenga* is a Bodo term meaning Drongo bird and *Lanjai* means tail. So, the term *PherengaLanjai* means the tail of Drongo bird. The cutting of the 'V' shape means these couple gods and goddesses have a great quality and more knowledge of the world and these are also given a prominent place in the Bathou religion.³¹ It is believed that *Pherenga* (Drongo bird) may indicate any untoward incidence to be occurred by its unusual behaviour and believe it to be a saviour of misfortune. It is a symbol of consciousness in day to day life of people. There is a practice of putting cotton during the offering of *Salami Puja* (purification ritual) into each *Pherenga Lanjai* of fifteen posts. This signifies the symbol of purity and marriage. In the past, the follower of the Bathou religion used to put cotton on the married women's hooped hair as a symbol of married instead of putting *Sindur* (vermillion) as used by Hindu women.³² Therefore, a little amount of cotton is put on each post. Even today some followers of the Bathou religion do not use vermillion as the symbol of married. After finishing the entire Bathou fence, an extra post is placed in the name of Goddess Asagi and Bwisagi with Agrang and Basumathi post is called *Khaoa Gainai*.³³ *Khaoa Gainai*

is done to make the entire Bathou fence stronger. The posts are made from the last extra slice of the bamboo used in Bathou construction.

The followers of the Bathou religion worship the *Sijou* (*Euphorbia splendens*) tree as a symbol of the Supreme God Bwrai Bathou.³⁴ They believe that only through this sacred tree their Supreme God Bwrai Bathou is found.³⁵ The *Sijou* tree has a peculiar quality than other normal trees. Normally it doesn't get shrunken and its green leave doesn't fade away soon, it lasts for a long time. It is very easy to germinate anywhere on the ground as well. Therefore, Bodo people have chosen it and have been worshipping it since time immemorial as the living symbol of Bwrai Bathou. It is believed that *Sijou* is the only tree where the Bwrai Bathou takes shelter.

The *Sijou* tree grows with five *Siri* (ridges) having many thorns and every thorn has a pair. The five ridges of the *Sijou* plant signify the five philosophies of Bathou religion of the Bodos or the five most important elements of the universe. These are *Ha* (earth), *Dwi* (water), *Bar* (air), *Or* (fire) and *Okhrang* (sky). Its pairs of thorns are symbolized the couple or husband and wife.³⁶ Apart from that, *Sijou* tree has also some other deep significance. The root of *Sijou* tree is compared with God. As we cannot see the shape or form of God, similarly the root of *Sijou* is also invisible; it can not be seen directly.³⁷ Without digging out the land and uprooting it, roots can not be seen. Roots help in growing and surviving the tree. Thus, although God is invisible, through his divine powers and great functions we can feel and imagine that God exists in the world and always helps us. The *Sijou* tree does not bear any branches or leaves at the trunk. The single trunk of *Sijou* signifies the presence of a single Supreme God in the world. As the single Supreme God looks after all the living beings of the entire world, similarly the single trunk of *Sijou* tree also helps to stand and survive the whole tree. In view of this concept, it is clear that the Bathou followers believe in the existence of only one Supreme God in their religion. The *Sijou* tree grows branches and stems just above its trunk. Through its branches and stems, the new branches, stems and leaves evolve and grow. This process of *Sijou* tree has a deep significance. It is believed that all the creatures of the world are only the creation of God. These may be animals, non-animals and human beings, have also power to reproduce their generations and this is the phenomenon of the world. The *Sijou* tree bears leaves and even flowers once it becomes mature. It is believed that the leaves and flowers signify wealth in the Bathou religion. Since all living beings eat food to survive. Some of them eat fruits and some of their flowers and leaves. So, it is considered wealth and property. On the other hand, the *Sijou* bears three flowers together in each thorn which signifies the existence of three layers of the world called *Barigongtham* in Bodo society.³⁸ Every flower bears five *Phaili* (petals) as well, which signify the five important elements of the Universe i.e. earth, water, air, fire and sky. The *Sijou* tree bears thorns that grow in the form of pairs. It has deep significance in the Bathou religion of the Bodos. The pair of horns symbolizes the couple, like the husband and wife of a human being. Through marriage, people are socially recognized as husband

and wife and they get new generations. Without a couple, a generation cannot be born, so the pairs of thorns of *Sijou* tree signify the opposite sexes.

The plantation of the *Sijou* tree in the Bathou altar is done according to the established norms of the Bathou religion. Starting from the cutting, bringing and plantation of the *Sijou* tree in the Bathou altar there are many traditional rites and rituals to be performed. Firstly, to bring the *Sijou* branch, a group of people gathers in which two young girls, a *Douri* (priest) and traditional musical instruments i.e. *Kham* (big drum), *Sifung* (flute), *Jota* (cymbal) are arranged. They take some important materials along with them. These are a new *Sandri* (bamboo sieve), a new *Kherkha* (used as a utensil), two pieces of new white cloths, a pot full of water, a *Sikha* (big knife), six pieces of earthen lamps, six pairs of betel nuts and leaves, basil leaves, *Jatras*i (a kind sacred plant used in religious activities), mustard oil, some amount of raw rice, incense sticks and enough flowers. After collecting these materials, at first, the group worships in front of the new Bathou altar where the *Sijou* is to be planted. After that, they march towards the old *Sijou* tree by taking all the materials. After reaching the place of *Sijou* tree, they start to prepare a *Puja*. *Douri* cleans the place of root area of *Sijou* and places the banana leaf thereon. Thereafter, materials like flowers, betel nuts, betel leaves, earthen lamps, raw rice, and a pair of coins are placed on the banana leaf. Then *Douri* asks the villagers to kneel and pray in front of the old *Sijou* tree and *Oja* (a person having the capacity to converse with gods by chanting mantra) selects a branch to cut. Before cutting the selected branch, it is tied five times with *Khundung Aaowa*³⁹ (white thread) and a white scarf is wrapped over it so that it can be handled easily then he cuts down the lower part. It should be cut with a sword in a single strike and kept on the sieve. After that, a lady carries it on her head and another lady welcomes her with a new sieve containing a pair of betel nuts and leaves, raw rice, flowers, lighting lamps and a pair of coins. In the meantime, musical instruments like *Kham* (big drum), flute, cymbals etc. are being played. After reaching the *Bathousali*, they make ready to plant it at the Bathou altar which is already fenced and cleaned. Before planting, at the centre of the altar, a hole is dug and some materials are dropped under it by folding in a banana leaf. These are a pair of betel nuts and leaves, 5 pieces of raw rice, a small stone, some amounts of holy soil, a coin of rupee and some flowers.⁴⁰ Then the hole is slightly filled up with soil and all are asked to kneel down and pray in front of the altar by *Oja*.

After finishing the prayer, a person plants the branch of *Sijou* facing towards the east side and fills up the hole. The other attending people also fill up the hole one by one who wishes to fill. Along with the *Sijou*, *Tulsi* (basil) and *Jatras*i are planted. *Tulsi* is planted on the right side of the *Sijou* plant which is believed to be the physical incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi on earth. It stands for honesty and truth. It is also believed to be the gateway to heaven and owned healing powers. *Jatras*i (a kind of sacred plant used in religious activities) is also planted at the Bathou altar on the left side of the *Sijou*. It is believed that *Jatras*i is the symbol of knowledge and wisdom. With these

processes, the construction of Bathou altar comes to an end. As and when, the process of construction of Bathou altar is completed, *Oja* examines Bathou altar whether it has been properly constructed or not as per traditional norms. If Bathou altar is not properly built then the entire process of construction has to be started from the beginning with new bamboo. At the end of the construction of Bathou altar, a ritual known as *On Denai* is performed where a *Daola Gwja* (red colour cock) is sacrificed in the name of Bwrai Bathou. The sacrifice marked the end of the construction Bathou altar.⁴¹

At the present, Bodo society is a religiously diverse society. Some Bodo has been converted to other religions. However, a significant portion of Bodo continues to maintain their ancestral faith, adhering to the old religious beliefs and customs. Right now, the traditional practitioner follows and engages in all of the rites, rituals, ceremonies, and other religious practices connected with the construction of the Bathou altar with or without modification.

Notes and References

1. Sekhar Brahma, *Religion of the Boros and their Socio-Cultural Transition*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2006, pp. 7-8.
2. D. Nath, *Religion and Society in North East India*, DBS Publication, Gauhati, 2011, p. 177.
3. Dr. Anil Boro, *Folk Literature of the Boros: An Introduction*, Adhunik Prakashan, Guwahati, 2001, p. 12.
4. Halfdan Singer, *The Bodo of Assam, Revisiting a Classical Study from 1950 of Assam*, NIAS Press, 2015, p. 8.
5. Interview with Chakradhar Narzary, Age: 75, Occupation: Oja, Vill.: Tengaigaon, P.O. Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 23/02/2020.
6. Interview with Rugung Boro, Age: 47, Occupation: Teacher, Vill.: Tengaigaon P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 23/10/2021.
7. Interview with RugungBoro, Age: 47, Occupation: Teacher, Vill.: Tengaigaon P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 23/10/2021.
8. Dr. Kameswar Brahma, *A Study of Socio-religious beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of The Bodos, With Special Reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District*, Punthi Pushtak Publisher, Kolkata, 2015, p. 158.
9. Interview with Phani Rabha Narzary, Age-61, Occupation- Village Headman, Vill.: Tengaigaon, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.- Kokrajhar on 17/07/2020.
10. Rabindra Nath Mosahary, *The Boros*, LBS Publications in association with Bodo History Research Forum, Guwahati, 2022, p. 141.
11. Interview with Onsumwi Narzary, Age: 55, Occupation: Housewife, Vill.: Kunguri, P.O.: Serfanguri, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 23/02/2020.
12. Rev. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2015, p. 36.
13. Interview with Chakradhar Narzary, Age: 75, Vill.: Tengaigaon, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 23/02/2020.
14. Chong Raja Narzary, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
15. "*Bo*" *Bathou Dhurwm Bijab*, Kokrajhar Jilla Bathou Dhurwmari Afad, Kokrajhar, 2013.
16. Nushar Bargayary, *Ethno History of the Bodo*, PhD thesis submitted to Bodoland University, Deborgaon, 2017, p. 162.

17. Indramalati Narzaree, *Boro Harimu Arw Thunlai Bijirnai*, N.L. Publication, Guwahati, 2010, p. 16.
18. Interview with Pwilao Basumatary, Occupation: Oja, Age: 68, Vill.: Amlaiguri, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 02/02/2020.
19. Nushar Bargayary, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.
21. Interview with Dandidhar Basumatary, Age: 67, Occupation: Oja, Vill.: Oxiguri, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 12/2/ 2020.
22. Interview with Bijel Basumatary, Age: 67, Occupation: Teacher, Vill.: Tengaigaon, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 12/2/ 2020.
23. Dr. Kameswar Brahma, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
24. Chong Raja Narzary, *Tengaigaon Gamini Garja Arw Kherai Pujani Khanthi*, Tengaigaon Gami Gudi Bathou Afad, 2020, p. 26.
25. Interview with Ashok Brahma, Age- 62, Occupation: Oja, Vill.: Amlaiguri, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 16/4/22.
26. Interview with Kiran Basumatary, Age: 45, Occupation: Secretary, Dularai Gudi Bathou Afad (Youth), Vill.: Khanthalguri, P.O.: Kanthalguri, Dist.: Udalguri on 12/2/ 2022.
27. Interview with Lahashi Boro, Age-58, Occupation: Doudini, Vill.: Bodopur, P.O.: Kochugaon, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 19/4/22.
28. Chong Raja Narzary, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
31. Interview with Kiran Basumatary, Age: 45, Occupation: Secretary, Dularai Gudi Bathou Afad (Youth), Vill.: Khanthalguri, P.O.: Kanthalguri, Dist.: Udalguri on 12/2/ 2022.
32. Interview with India Basumatary, Age: 67, Occupation: Douri, Vill.: Tengaigaon, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 12/2/ 2020.
33. Interview with India Basumatary, Age: 67, Occupation: Douri, Vill.: Tengaigaon, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 12/2/ 2020.
34. Mondal, Satyendra Nath, *History & Culture of the Bodos*, Edited by Bonny Narzary, Jalpaiguri, W. B., 2011, p. 221.
35. Binay Kumar Brahma, *Boroni Subung Harimu*, N.L. Publications, Guwahati, 2012, p. 98.
36. Birendra Giri Basumatary, *Boro Harimuni Mahar Mushree*, N.L. Publications, Guwahati, 2009, p. 39.
37. Chong Raja Narzary, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
38. *Ibid.* p. 26.
39. Binay Kumar Brahma, *op. cit.* p. 101.
40. Interview with Pwilao Basumatary, Occupation: Oja, Age: 68, Vill.: Amlaiguri, P.O.: Gossainichina, Dist.: Kokrajhar on 02/02/2020.
41. Nushar Bargayary, *op. cit.*, p. 165.