



## Bathouism and its Relevance in the Present World

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting the fact that Bathou is the original religion of the Bodo people. It also will discuss the religious and cultural status of Bathouism, focusing on its existential journey across the periods. Despite having religious aspects, Bathouism reflects the Bodo customs, rituals and other traditional practices or habits. Bathouism worships the Nature through its supreme God, Bathou Bwrai (also called Sibwrai). It has five principles- *bar* (air), *dwi* (water), *ha* (land), *orr* (fire) and *okhrang* (space). These are the fundamental elements of universe. Sijou tree is planted on the east rear of the courtyard and raised base of land is structured circling round the root-level of the Sijou plant for the worshiping activities. Religious performances of Bathouism ranges from the household to the community level. Bathouism has been continuing facing internal and external challenges and it is standing as a contributor to the global peace. To adapt to the present world, much modification and improvisation have been done to it, it must keep with modern education. New trends entered the Bathouism during 1990s. These new trends have made the Bathouism more scientific with real-life experiences and more rational with reasons. Change is necessary for survival and Bathouism assimilating changes within itself has done the best. Nothing is permanent except change and the religion of Bathouism will be permanent when it changes as per the call of time,

**INTRODUCTION:**

Frazer says that religion is “a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life.” It was Einstein who said, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” Swami Vivekananda said, “You cannot believe in God until you believe in yourself.” People believe that there is mysterious and superior power which has given birth to the universe; and the way of worshipping this mysterious supreme power with some practical/real-life performances is popularly called religion. Faiths and beliefs constitute the institution of religion which gets varied across the globe; and this variation is justified on the demographic composition on the globe and inquisitive nature of the people. Looking forward to the Supreme Power with different nomenclature, the religious performances are grounded on factual phenomenon of life.

Bathou is the original religion of the Bodo people. Bathouism is defined as the phenomenon of belief system that is related to the Bathou religion. Socio-cultural habits and practices of the God/god fearing Bodo people are embedded in Bathouism which is one of the species-identifying traditions of the present world. Thus, Bathouism encompassing the Bodo customs, rituals and other traditional practices or habits is rather considered as a culture than religion: and this is the foremost institution to define the identity of Bodo nation or community. With the spread of Bodo population in some countries of South East Asia and states of India, Bathouism can be placed not as only religion but as a culture. Indigeneity is seen in their day to day life performance. Irrespective of the geographical diversity, indigenous behavior regarding Bathouism is seen across the population. The Bodo people has not forgotten what is nativistic to them as told by Bhalchadra Nemade. It is like Hinduism, Bathouism is not accepted as mere religion but it is accepted as life sustaining human process to answer the questions of existentialism from both the physical and spiritual sides. Some of the Bathou gurus claim that Bathouism came to the earth before Hinduism and thus, Bathou religion is the oldest religion on the earth. Bathouism worships the Almighty in the name of *Bathou Bwrai* who is also called *Sibwrai*, *Siu Bwrai*, *Jiu Bwrai* and *Nuathari*. In *Bathou Bwrai*, the meaning of the ‘Bwrai’ is the senior most or the eldest member supposedly in the family: usually siblings are seen to address their aged parents as ‘bwrai’ (father) and ‘burwi’ (mother). So, the word *Bwrai* is suggestive of father or the aged guardian who has the ownership of a system. In *Si Bwrai* there are two concepts- *Si* signifies the soul (*swler*) which is covered under our body. Thus, *Sibwrai*



addresses the Almighty Who sits within one's mind and Who is the owner of one's mind and body. Another name, *Siu Bwrai* means that life is a breath of air (air is identified with *siu..iu* blowing sound) and inhaling and exhaling of air says a life. So, the supreme God of the Bodos are also called over as *Siu Bwrai*, the owner of the human's breathe and air. In *Jiu Bwrai*, the word *Jiu* means life (*jiwan*) and the followers of Bathou religion believes that the God with different names is the owner of one's life. The name *Nuathari* means unseen body sitting up in the Heaven or sky (*nua* means not seen and *thari* mean high soul or body). As a whole, religious approach of the Bodos is concerned with transcentalism.

The principles of Bathou religion is based on five elements- *bar* (air), *dwi* (water), *ha* (earth), *orr* (fire/heat) and *okhrang* (sky/space) which are the fundamental elements of universe. In the Bodo language *ba* means the cardinal number five (05) and *thou* means deep thought. So, Bathou religion believes that the universe is formed of the *bar*, *dwi*, *ha*, *orr* and *okhrang* and *Sibwrai*, the God is the creator of these five elements. A bathou alter is a must-do in every Bodo household and this is set up in the east rear-side of the courtyard (square) facing the east direction. There, raised base of earth in approximately 5 (five) diameter circled by a bamboo fence is structured. The circling fence is structured with 5(four) nos. of long flattened stripes and eighteen pairs of pillars which are all made from a single bamboo. The space around the fence is called Bathou Bidab appearing as one's raised heart. Directing the east, an opening is made to the circle by twisting the three pairs of pillars to the half of the standing position and these are intertwined into the rounding long strips to web a form that is known as *dauthu bikha* (heart of dove). At the middle of the *bathou bidab* sijou plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) is planted. Surrounding the fence of the *Bathou bidab* or Bathou alter, tulasi or tulusi (*ocimum tenuiflorum*), commonly known as holy basil is planted along with some flower plants. In eighteen pairs, one pair of pillars is set up in attachment and each of the pillars are cut downwards from the both sides at the top to the middle. The top most part measuring almost one inche when cut appears as the alphabet V and this V shape is called *ferenga lanjai*. This V shape also appears as attached two shoulders of two standing men/women. The sijou plant has five thorny ridges and this is also having addition to the conceptualizing *ba* (five) of the Bathou religion. As for the process of worshipping, top part of banana leaf is placed at root-base of sijou plant. One pair of betel leaf is placed on the banana leaf and again, one pair of areca nut (*tamul* in Assamese and *goi* in Bodo) is placed on the betel leaf pair. Just behind the heaped banana leaf, betel leaf and areca nut there is positioned an earthen lamp (*chaki* in Assamese). Burning *dhup-dhuna* (incence and frankincense) and thereafter, sprinkling holy water from brass-made *lota* with *duburi*



*hagra* (*duburi bon* in Assamese and barmuda grass in English), the worshipping process begins in Bathouism.

**Objective:** The present paper will have the objectives-

1. To revisit the original principles of Bathouism
2. To find scientific and rational viewpoints in Bathouism
3. To find the new trends in Bathouism.
4. To situate the religion of Bathouism within the global perspective.

**Literature Review:** Books and research works are making continuous flow on the people's religious attitude including both the spiritual and intellectual aspects. In his *The Golden Bough* Frazer says, "If the one acts from the love or fear of God, he is religious; if the other acts from the love or fear of man, he is moral or immoral according as his behaviour comports or conflicts with the general good. Hence belief and practice or, in theological language, faith and works are equally essential to religion, which cannot exist without both of them." Liladhar Brahma in his book 'Religion and Dances of the Bodos' (1993) speaks about the principles of religion has said, "Through the ages, a lion part of them are converted into many religions of the world like Hinduism, Christianity, Islamism etc. Though this act of convert came like flood, yet some of them enthusiastically were swimming against the current and strictly adhered to their origin religion 'Bathou' as a result of which the Bodo culture were saved from being completely lost." The same book signals the emergence of new revolution among the Bodos especially the new generation of 1990s about the Bathouism. The parent organization of Bathouism in its religious tribune named "Bathou Thandwi" (Jathai Bisan, January 2014) discusses the deep philosophy and cultural manifestations of Bathouism. Giving the institutionalization and formalization process, the methods of building the bathou alter and the praying songs (hymns), this book talks about the monotheistic content of Bathouism: *buhumni swrjigiriya saseyanw* (the creator of the world is only one). Dr. Piyali Roy in the research article 'Influence Of Bathouism In The Development Of Social Values' terms the Bathouism as a folk religion of Bodos. Dr. Roy talks about the evolution of Bathouism through various social, cultural, spiritual, religious and historical stages/factors which leads to its different branches like Bihar Bathou, Bwli Bathou, Aroj Bathou, Noni Bathou, Jangkhrao Bathou and Sonathon Bathou. But she rightly stresses that Bathouism remains unchanged as for its philosophy despite its different forms. In 'Boroni



Gudi Sibsa arw Aroj' Modaram Brahma (1926) has said about the three functions of God-creation, preservation and destruction:

“The power of God can be counted in three

Names separately-

Creation, preservation and destruction.

We should worship such God.”

**Hypothesis:** The hypothetical theory of the paper is based on the following points-

1. Bathouism is not only a religious but a vast culture.
2. It is scientific and rational.
3. Change is imperative for its survival.
4. Bathouism is shinning with spritualism and intellectualism.

**Discussion:** Bathou religion worships a single God. Across the population of universe there is only one creator and this thought of Bathouism is indicated by the use of a single bamboo: every material of fencing around the *Bathou Bidab* (Bathou alter) is made of one bamboo only. The single bamboo is indicative of a single God. The round fencing suggests the roundness of the earth where the God's activities are situated. The plantation of the Sijou plant at the altar tells about the evergreen immortal soul of God. The thought of one world, one earth and one humanity covers the Bathouism. The origination of the universe and its elements has been effected from a single point of power which is identified as the transcendental God. Bathouism believes that all lives of the universe have same soul and this soul is the indication of a Creator:

“Ong, Hring, Khling, Fwt, Che

Hey afa swrjigiri,

Bwrai-Bathou?

Nwngnw sungiri sunraja,



Okhrangni giri okhranraja,

Barni giri bar mwdai

Dwini giri dwi khungri

Hani giri bwswmuthi ha?" (Bathou Thandwi, 2014)

(*Ong, Hring, Khling, Fwt, Che/Oh, Father Creator, Bwrai-Bathou?/You are the owner of sun, Sun God,/You are the owner of sky, the king of Heaven,/You are the owner of water the king of water,/You are the owner of earth, king of earth).*)

The Bodos with Bathouism conceive the Almighty in the form of air, water, earth, heat/fire and sky/space which are hot topics to get focus and discussion in the present day Environmental Science. *Ong means* the boundless space in the sky, *Hring* means the unseen presence of the air, *Khling* means the sound of liquid substance (water), *Fwt* means the solid hard substance i.e. earth and *Che* means the heat or temperature from the sun. These are the fundamental forces of the planet earth to sustain lives and their healthy balance is necessary for the sustenance of the planet earth itself. When environmentalists across the globe talks about pollution, they are concerned with these five elemental forces- air, water, earth, heat/fire and sky. These are also the forces binding the organic and inorganic elements on the earth and the heavenly bodies of universe. Modaram Brahma through the character of Chiknaburi in 'Boroni Gudi Sibsa arw Aroj' has the lines:

"The air we exhale

Is absorbed by trees and plants.

The air they release,

Is inhaled by us all." (P-7)

These lines by Brahma refer to the inborn relationship between the humans and the products of mother nature. This reflects the Wordsworthian worshipping of the nature and other romantic poets. The beauty of Nature tells about the beauty of mind and thought as John Keats says, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' in his poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' The God manifests himself in the form of air, water, earth, heat/fire and sky for sustaining the living and non-living phenomenon of planet earth. Nature is a power and a



living spirit; it has both the creative and destructive powers which are meant directly or indirectly to the humans; there is continuous process of correspondence between Nature and the humans. Nature is the past, present and the future of the human world as P B Shelley says in the poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’:

“The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind

If the winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”

Therefore, all earthly matters are physically different but internally one. This is noteworthy that the new and educated generation of Bathouism attempts to prove that the sijou plant is evergreen and good supplier of healthy air within the immediate circle of household; and this is seen that the people (not only the Bodos) are seen planting sijou plant at the four corners of their household *basti* (area). This is also seen that the Bodos use the gummy juice of sijou as medicine for cough. Keeping in view the compulsory attitudes of religion, the Bodo people are found to plant the tulsi plants and some other flowers plants near to or around the Bathou altar. The leafy branch of tulsi plant is used to springle water at the worshipping duration. It has direct religious usage along with some medicinal values. Flower juices are also used for some medicinal remedy. The offerings in the name of God tell about some rational and scientific ideas about the altar. These tell us not only the spiritual ones but also the daily life welfare. The origination of Bathouism speaks refers to the well-being of the nature and environment which falls within the essentialism of humnas and the other forms of beings. Thus, the contemporary academic multi-disciplinary study can be done on Bathouism: spritualism, culture, folk medicine and environment.

The worshipping process of Bathouism starts with a short-while session of *raisongnai* (preface) which can be understood in terms of chorus in theatre. This session reciting some mantra lines, introduces the cultural and traditional life of the Bodos to *Bwrai Bathou*:

*“Thaigir Khonga Khongba*

*Sijouni Chiria Chiriba*

*Sifungni gudunga gudungba*

*Baro Bwraini acharabw acharba.”* (Bathou Thandwi, 2014)

(Thaigir [Elephant apple] is of five rinds/Sijou is of five ridges/Sifung (Bodo flute) does have five holes/So the Bodo old man has five spiritual words.)



Thus, this is found that Bathouism is not a mere religion but it's a vast human culture with the vision of humanity and the Bodo culture is founded on the five fundamental elements of nature, beyond which the life or the continuity of the universe is impossible. One can distinctly sense the nature-worship in Bathouism. An important rationality in Bathouism is seen at the contemporary times: when a Bodo woman goes for *Aroj* (Bathou prayer) every Tuesday evening, she waters any plant that is at household. Caring a plant is caring the environment of planet earth:

*"Seeds beget trees.*

*Birds are born of eggs.*

*Cattle out of womb.*

*Are not they born thus naturally?"* (Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aroj, 1926).

The Bathou Bwrai is in every object of environment and the process of continuity can be perceived in the workings of the environment.

Every aspects of Bathou alter is scientifically viewed by the new generation. Bathou alter through its materials of offerings and fencing says about the procreation and creation. Positivism is sensed in the structure of Bathou alter. The word 'pair' says the human duty of procreation and creation of lives. Pair of betel leaves, pair of areca nuts, pair of pillars and stripes in fencing also says about male-female copulation for creation of life. These pairs say about the man-woman co-operation to carry out Godly duty of procreation. In Hinduism, the erotic temples with sexual images are also glaring to suggest the sacred duty of procreation and creation. The offerings of eatable items like gram, grapes, apples etc. are scientifically- proved nutritious food for health and this is known to all that apple has got place in Christianity as the fruit of knowledge: the knowledge of healthy senses.

During 1990s new emergence occurred in Bathouism. The modern educated intellectuals of Bodo community did reforms on the performing acts of Bathouism. The reforms were formally done with the institutionalization of Bathouism. Before that Bathouism continued traditionally only at the Bodo households and the religious performances were done from individual experiences. Now it has been a collective phenomenon of collective performance. All Bathou Religious Union (ABRU) was formed in 1992 with the aim of reforming and bringing institutional and formal status to Bathouism. Before ABRU, another organization of Bathouism named Dularai Bathou Gouthum (Bathou Mahasabha) was established



in Guwahati in 1962. Both organizations have been separately working for the well-being and propagation of Bathouism. About ABRU this can be said that the organization came into being at the time when the Bodos' conversion to other religion was high after decolonization of British. People forgot and compromised with the conversion during the colonial period but conversion after decolonization is a pain. Long before the institutionalization of Bathouism, a Brahma dharma saint, Kalichar Brahma cleansed the Bodo sociol-cultural values off dirty practices by organizing among Brahma dharma among the Bodos. The socio-cultural values are saved but the original culture of Bathou religion was dimmed. In to-days' time religious conversion is still usually seen and here, they get justification in the name of state secularism putting the indigeneity of Bodo community to the 'shamble gate.' The organization attempts many innovations and modifications on Bathouism: they are trying to save their original and cultural religion from downfall. So, reforms and changes have been effected to religious performances of Bathouism. Building of Bathou alter, system of offerings and prayer songs at the community level are done as per the guidelines of the parent organizations. ABRU is working from the centre to village bodies. The state machinery of ruling has recognized the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of Assamese month, Magh as official holiday as the Bodos celebrate Bathou Puja on this day. Before this it was only state restricted holiday though the BTC administration since its inception declared it as official holiday. ABRU has its flag with five segments of colours which is seen at the district, anchalic and village level. The colours are from the top- *gwmw bwrai* (deep yellow), *laigang* (green), *gufur* (white), *gwja* (red) and *gwthang* (blue) respectively signifying density of earth, water, air, sun/fire/light and sky. Across the Bodos, Bathouism appears in one form with *kherai* and *daudini* dance which are expressive of Bodo popular culture which encompasses the every nativistic aspects of the community. This oneness in system is scientifically welcome one in the democratic principles and this asserts the Bodo identity to the globe. The globalization agencies should honour the indigeneity of local communities if it wishes to surface as a game-changer of the world culture.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Bodo households are educated. Educated generation has learnt what is right and wrong. So, some superstitious and extreme beliefs have been avoided by Bathouism as per the call of time. Shedding blood of animal and birds in the name of worshipping are almost avoided among the Bodos. Presently, the worshipping is done by offering flowers and some affordable eatables to Bathou Bwrai. Earlier, there was no *Aroj* in Bathouism. Some informal mantras taking god/goddesses happened with it. These prayer songs *Aroj* are composed in such a way where real life-situations are juxtaposed



with the spiritual ideas. Some Bodo literary experts step forward to say that Bathou prayers are found to form a place in the Bodo literature. Bathou scholars. For instance, one *Aroj* is sung at time of distress:

*“Gwrwbw angni manwba khwmsi dorsi*

*Bikha angni manwba dwrfw dwrfw*

*Jabaidwng ang manwba urang faranga*

*Gabjridwng hangkhraidwng gosai*

*kharao marao halai hafai.”* (Bathou Aroj: Jothai Bathou Aroj Bidang, 2019 P-10)

(My heart/soul is broken to pieces/My heart is beating closely/I am feeling volatile/I call over/pray to you God/Anxiously and nervously).

Thus, formalization and institutionalization has made Bathouism attractive and acceptable; and this is receiving global response spontaneously. To move with the modern education and to keep with the changes, the Bathou scholars have reformed the religion and made the same acceptable; and doing something big to thwart the menace of conversion.

**Conclusion:** The largest tribe in Assam, Bodo community has its rich cultural heritage. Called *Danava*, *Asur* and *Pichas* in the pre-historic period, the Bodos are civilized, modernized and educated members of the present 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Along with the spiritual culture, the Bodos are blessed with their language, traditional dances, festivals, rituals and customs which are source of tourism industry of the state. Struggling through the passage of challenges, the Bodos have been continuing their identity on the globe; and this has been possible only because of the religious culture of Bathouism which has distinct universal/global relevance. Bathouism is a religion of humanity and it always seeks after the divinely creation of ‘a new’ and bring a change for the well-being of universe: its peace-loving followers are well illustrated in the following lines of an *Aroj*:

“Whom you hate,

To hate a human being

Is to hate God Himself.



God loves one and all

If we love all as our own/God will love us all.” (Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aro, edition 5 2017 p-45)

Or

“If one create a new?

There is some one, the greatest

There is some one, the strongest,

Blows the wind, at His word. (Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aroj, edition 5 2017 p-45)

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