



# Ecological Consciousness And Religious Ethos Among The Bodos Of Assam An Ethnological Inquiry

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the ecological worldview and traditional environmental ethics of the Bodo community of Assam, India, through the lens of their indigenous religion, *Bathou Dwhwrwm*. The Bodos' integration of nature into their social, religious and cultural system reflects a deep ecological consciousness. Through animism, plant worship, animal reverence and sacred rituals rooted in nature. The Bodos sustains a model of environmental stewardship that predates modern ecological movements. Their worldview offers crucial insights into indigenous sustainability practices and spiritual ecology of forest-dwelling communities.

**Keywords:** *Nature, Religion, Culture of the Bodos*

## 1. Introduction:

The Bodos of Assam is an important and largest ethnic group of Assam having their distinctive cultural and linguistic traits. They are also one of the largest groups of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. They are also earliest inhabitants of Indo-Mogoloid stock to settle in the Brahmaputra Valley. Racially they belong to the great Mongoloid stock and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Chinese speech family.

Indigenous communities often embody a profound and symbolic relationship with their natural environment. The Bodos of Assam are one of such communities whose cultural and religious life has historically developed in close harmony with the forests, rivers and plains they inhabit. As traditional forest dwellers, the Bodos have fostered a way of life centered on peace, ecological balance and reverence for nature (Boro, 2020).

The present study aims to explore how ecological concern is embedded in the religious and cultural practices of the Bodos. Emphasizing their traditional Bathou religion (*Bathou Dwhwrwm*) this paper seeks to uncover the eco-spiritual dimensions of their worldview and practices that reflect their adaptive strategies for environmental sustainability.

## 2. Methodology:

In this paper the descriptive method is used so that the ethnological information of the Bodos could be focus descriptively.

## 3. Bathou Religion and the Environmental Worldview:

### 3.1 The Philosophy of Bathou Dwhwrwm :

The foundational religious system of the Bodos is *Bathou Dwhwrwm*, derived from 'Ba' (five) and 'Thou' (deep), which together signify the Philosophy of Five Deep Principles. These five principles are Earth (*Ha*), Water (*Dwi*), Air (*Bar*), Fire (*Or*), and Sky (*Okhrang*). These are the reminiscent of the *Pancha Mahabhutas* of the Hindu cosmology and from the spiritual building blocks of existence (Brahma, 1992; Narzary, 2004).

These elements are not abstract concepts but are seen as divine manifestations govern by specific deities such as *Aileng*, *Agrang Khwila*, *Sanja Bwrali*, and *Rajkhungri* (Basumatary, 2015) The supreme Deity *Bwrai Bathou* is also known as *Siu Bwrai* (Life giver) is believed to have first experienced earth in human form thus sanctifying nature as a divine gift to be protected and revered (Deka, 2019)

The *Bathou* is not a shadowy absolute but a determinate being in relation to the world and man. He is never represented in idol form but is well in evidence through his living symbol, the *Siju* or *Sijou* plant. In Bodo *Ba* means five and *Thou* means the deep spiritual and philosophical thoughts or principles. The religious thoughts of *Bathou* are very much related to the numeral *Ba* (five) in Bathouism of the Bodos. There is a peculiar and popular verse having the pentagonal relation to the religious numerical five among the Bodos. This particular verse really embodies the need of ecological importance among the Bodos. The verse runs as- *Thaigir khonga khongba, Sijouni chiria chiriba, Sphungni gudunga gudungba, Bathouni bandwa bandwba, Boro bwraini acharabw acharba*. It renders as- The dillenis indica fruit (*thaigir*, *ouw* in Assamese) has five rinds, the *sijou* plant has five ridge, the *siphung* (flute) has five holes, the *Bathou Bandw* (the bamboo fencing around the altar) has five knots and the great saintly Bodo *Bwrai* (the Bodo old man) has five moral words or preaching. Similarly, the original numerals of the Bodos are also five such as- *Se* (one), *Nwi* (Two), *Tham* (Three), *Brwi* (Four) and *Ba* (Five) respectively. Even the Bodo marriage are also in five as- *Chwngnanwi lainai haba* (Negotiated or arranged marriage), *Gwrjia haba* (Marriage by servitude), *Dwnkharlangna haba* (Marriage by elopement), *Kharsonnai haba* (Marriage entering the bride before settlement) and *Dongkha haba* (Marriage of widow or widower).

The person male or female, boy or girl who engages in adulteration is also punished or purified following the penance among the Bodos. The penance is called *Bad* in Bodo society. There are as many as five systems of *Bad* performed for penance as- *Agorbad*, *Fongslod Bad*, *Daokhibad*, *Khaoalibad* and *khoulbwbd Bad*.

### 3.2 The Sacred *Sijou* Tree and Ritual Space

Central to the religious life of the Bodos is the *Sijou* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*), believed to embody *Bwrai Bathou*. The tree's five ridges symbolize the five principles and every Bodo household plants it in the northeast corner of the courtyard, constructing a bamboo altar (*Bathou Thansali*) around it (Baro, 2020). Alongside the *Sijou*, plant like *Tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) and *Jatrachi* (*Justica assamica*) are planted and revered, demonstrating the deep integration of spiritual beliefs and plant conservation (Basumatary, 2015)

As the *Bathou Bwrai* (god) never dies, the *sijou* plant also never dies. The *Sijou* plant is the source of creating the nature. According to the Bodos *Sijou* is considered as the male power of the nature. On the other hand the earth is considered as the female power of the nature. Therefore the Bodos have the deep embodiment with *sijou* plant. The Bodos believed that the *sijou* is sacred and spiritual plant. They never disobey the *sijou* plant. They also used the *sijou* plant as herbal medicine in different diseases. Their relationship with *sijou* plant stands for the ecological importance.

#### 4. Animistic Cosmology and Ritual –Ecology Practices

##### 4.1 Spiritual Ecology and Nature Worship

The Bodos perceive nature as a living entity by spiritual forces. Natural phenomena- Rivers, forests and climatic events- are attributed to divine will. Adverse events like floods or droughts are interpreted as manifestations of divine displeasure (Narzary, 2004). This believes system compels adherents to engage in propitiatory rituals and respect the environment.

Ritual like *Kherai* and *Garza Puja* exemplify this eco-religious engagement. *Kherai* is performed in alignment with the agricultural calendar, invoking deities for good harvests and weather, while *Garza Puja* includes the veneration of river gods like *Manasu*, *Tharang*, *Champur* and *Gaurang* (Deka, 2019). The *Doudini*, priestess figure, serves as a medium between the divine and community, predicting harvest outcomes and guiding rituals practice (Deka, 1992)

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##### 3.2 Sacred Groves and Conservation through Sacrifice

Sacred grooves and forests altars play a vital role in environmental conservation. Deities such as *Hagrani Mwdai* (forest goddess) are worshiped in undisturbed forest area. Animal sacrifices- pigs, goats, and occasionally buffaloes are offered to ensure fertility, safety from wild life and general well-being (Baro, 2020). These rituals not only reflect the spiritual link to the environment but also create social mechanism for forest protection (Teronpi, 2017).

#### 5. Animal Symbolism and Sacred Associations

##### 5.1 Reverence and Ethical Treatment of Animals

Animals occupy a revered status in Bodo Society. The cow, associated with purity, is treated with reverence akin to Hindu traditions. Cow dung is used for purification rituals, and its consumption is involved in rites of penance, reinforcing the sacred status of bovines (Basumatary, 2015). Beef consumption is taboo among the traditional *Bathou* followers, although Christian converts may not follow this restriction (Deka, 2019).

Buffaloes and pig sacrifices continue in districts like Kokrajhar and Goalpara, particularly during agricultural or forest related rites. These are often justified as ancestral customs tied to propitiating protective deities like *Bwrai Bathou* or *Harsha Mwdai* (Narzary, 2004).

The elephant is linked with prosperity and auspiciousness. Encountering an elephant at the beginning of a journey or new venture is considered a good omen, drawing parallels with Lord Ganesha in Hindu belief (Brahma, 1992).

The tiger, or Bagh Raja, worshipped to prevent livestock attacks. A folk song sung during *Bwisagu* by cowherds encapsulates this reverence, showing the ecological coexistence between predator and human: “The Musa Raja (tiger king) and wild dogs would not kill the calves, if the owner of the cattle gives alms us....” (Baro, 2020).

The animals have deep ecological attachment in Bodo society. The tiger has the high revered position. The animals and natural elements embodied among the Bodos in such a way that they have derived their clan names. Honoring the *Mwcha or Mocha* (tiger), there is a clan known as *Mwchahary or Mochahry* among the Bodos. This clan is also known as Baglary too. They never kill the tiger. The killing of tiger is sinful among the Bodos. Rather, they observed fasting while the news of tiger’s dead is found. Similarly, the *Daimary* clan is derived from *Dwi* (water). The clan *Bwiswmuthiary* or *Basumatary* is derived from the *Bwiswmuthi* (the mother earth). *Narzary* from the jute, *Khakhlary* from the reed, *Gayary* from betel nut, *Wary* from bamboo, *Hajowary* from mountains and hills etc. These are the best example of ecological consciousness among the Bodos.

## 5.2 Superstitions and Protective Practices:

Cats, especially black cats, are feared as omens of bad luck. Should one cross a traveler’s path, the journey is momentarily paused to avoid misfortune (Deka, 2019). While these beliefs appear superstitious, they also function as cultural safety protocols.

It is also seen that while a *neolai* (mongoose) crosses the road from right side to left side; it is also feared as an omens of bad luck. But when it crosses the road from left to right, it would be for good luck. When a *jibou* (snake) crosses the road from left to right, it shows for the bad luck.

## 6. Birds, Insects and Folkloric Ecology

Birds like the owl, crow, vulture and cock hold significant positions in the Bodo beliefs system. Owls are believed to carry the blessing of Laxmi, while vulture, under certain circumstances, signify wealth—especially if the defecate within a household compound (Basumatary, 2015). Conversely, crows are generally viewed as portents of misfortune.

Cocks are domesticated in almost every household and frequently used in sacrificial rituals. Red cocks are often offered to forest deities before hunting, while hens are sometimes released post-ceremony as assign of gratitude, with killing them afterward considered sinful (Baro, 2020).

The birds like *daosri* (Maina khalika in Assamese), *daothu* (Kopou in Assamese), *fareo* (Paro in Assamese) are the symbol of peace and love. The insects like *khansri* (earth worm), *guma* (grasshopper), *gwmwthing*, *selamala*, *leoat*, *funsu* have the folkloristic ecology among the Bodos.

Bees are seen as harbingers of prosperity. A beehive forming in a household is taken as symbol of wealth and good fortune, a belief that promote tolerance and non-destruction of beehives in human settlements (Narzary, 2004).

## 7.00 Cultural Expression and Ecological Imagination

### 7.1 Folk Literature and Songs

Bodo folk literature and music are rich in environmental motifs. Songs praise rivers, forests, birds, animals, and natural beauty. These creative expressions function as oral ecological education tools, passing environmental wisdom across generations (Basumatary, 2015)

The mythological story of the water goddess, forest, flora and fauna and many cultural activities depicted in Bodo mythological drama *Sandw Baodia* is the best example of cultural expression and ecological integration.

### 7.2 Life-Cycle Rituals and Environmental Integration

From birth to death, life events are marked by rituals performed in proximity to nature. The bamboo and its different materials, grass, cane, basil, betel nut and leaf, *sijou* tree stands witness to all major rites, reinforcing the community's belief in life's sacred bond with the earth (Brahma, 1992). The embeddedness ensures that ecological awareness is not a learned behavior but a living experience.

## 8. Discussion: Lesson from Bodo Environmentalism

The Bodo ecological model, rooted in religious and cultural traditions, offers a compelling case for eco-centric sustainability. Unlike regulatory approaches to environmentalism Bodo traditions cultivate ecological ethics through reverence, fear, and ritual duty. The approach presents a spiritual ecology those modern frameworks of environmental governance often overlook (Teronpi, 2017)

Their practices demonstrate that sustainability is as much cultural and moral as it is scientific or policy-driven. Preserving such indigenous tradition is crucial for creating inclusive models of environmental conservation that locally rooted and culturally legitimate (Deka, 2019).

## 9. Conclusion

The Bodo people of Assam exemplify an indigenous community whose religious and cultural fabric is profoundly intertwined with nature. Their eco-centric worldview, manifested through Bathou Dwhwrum, reflect an ancient yet enduring model of sustainability. By honoring rivers, trees, animals, and birds, and by integrating ecological stewardship into every aspect of life, the Bodos offer a vital lesson in holistic environmental living.

As global ecological crises deepen, the world has much to learn from the Bodo indigenous knowledge systems and their reverential approach to nature. Recognizing and supporting such cultural paradigms is essential to cultivating a more sustainable and ethically grounded relationship with the environment.

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