

KHERAI OF THE BODOS : THEIR IMAGINATION OF THE WORLD

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Abstract

This study has been primarily set in the theoretical perspective of people's culture in general and that of an ethnic community's performance-making process in particular. The ethnic group referred here is the dominant Indo- Mongoloid group, the Bodos of Assam. The framework used is that of theatrical performance and the analytical tools employed are dramaturgical. It attempts to show how an ethnic group engages itself in conserving, through creation and recreation, a traditional performance inextricably linked to a religious ritual facing extinction. In the process, the study also seeks to examine the group's engagement in using the possibilities of theatre as a mode of cultural production. This has also paved ways for questioning conventional orthodoxies and has created new challenges for both the community members and the performers in making sense of the emergent forms and contents of the performance.

Keywords- Bodo, Kherai, Bathou,

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An Introduction to Kherai

Kherai is the most important festival of the Bodos, since times immemorial. The Bodo people performed Kherai for the welfare of the village folk mainly and at times individual pujas were also performed. Since the entire event is symbolic, the ritual is rather said to be danced and sung by the members of the community. Singing and dancing that way are indispensable features of the Kherai ritual. Verbal and non-verbal communication takes place simultaneously throughout the ritual. Besides the welfare aspect, the Bodos being an agrarian community also see Kherai as a purpose to yield good harvest.

The whole performance cycle of Kherai(festival of Bodos) constitutes and recapitulates the major events in the life cycle of the Bodos. These events mainly depict the rhythm of their daily lives. Kherai performances are fragments of various cycles of performance These performances basically depict their histories, their imagination of their world , their fantasies, and also how the community tries to bridge the difference between the two worlds. They create linkages to fill the voids, the voids that have been created by the loss or shifting of memories.

The community members have been practicing the performances withstanding the tradition since long. The people have been devising their strategies over the years to review their own performances and also adapt to the new environment. They have tried to infuse in their performances an energy and a spirit that is spontaneous and fresh. These performances are their own imagination, their own ideas regarding their past, their histories their daily way of life which gets reflected in their religious festival Kherai.

Myths associated with the ritual

A group of cowherds played and made their cows graze in the nearby field. One day a strange looking boy appeared before them and appealed to make him also a member of their group. The leader of the group agreed and provided food and shelter to the boy. As the cowherds had finished their tenure of serving their masters, they had to leave the village. The cowherds requested the old village couple to provide shelter to the boy. The couple agreed. The couple thought of engaging the boy in cultivation. There was bountiful production the following year.

But, one day to his surprise the old man found that some portion of the paddy was eaten up by a peacock. He thought of laying a trap in the field. Next day the boy who had changed himself into a peacock had got caught in the trap. The old man took his long stick and thought of killing the peacock, but to his surprise found the peacock appealing him to save his life. In return he would help the old man in his fields. The old man took pity on the peacock and set him free. As he was released from the trap the peacock started attacking the old man with all his might. The old man couldn't defend himself and came back home with injuries. The boy also changed himself and reached home before the old man. The old man narrated his story before his wife and the boy.

The old man had to send the boy to an astrologer to find out the way to get recovered. The old woman advised the boy to perform Kherai puja to cure the old man. Thus it is said that the Kherai puja was celebrated from that day amidst the Bodo community. There is another myth where the father-in-law has a immoral relationship with his daughter –in –law and to decurse himself he is advised to perform Kherai puja. These two myths prove that Kherai is basically a welfare seeking festival.

There are innumerable meanings associated with the word 'Kherai'. The syllable 'khe' means the sky and the word 'rai' means to invoke. The deities are invoked and welcomed to the earth on this day. Each of the deities are worshipped individually at the altar of Kherai. The main deities and their corresponding attendants are also worshipped and offered offerings at the altar. Though the exact number of deities is 189 in some places the number varies from place to place. Each deity is invoked in a different manner with different incantations and different dances. These differences are on the basis of the attributes and natures of the deities.

It seems that Kherai is a yearlong celebration; the entire year is divided into various phases. The various phases have their own significance depending on the time and its effect on nature. The Bodo scholars have divided celebration of Kherai into four phases i.e., four times in a year Kherai is celebrated for different purposes. Though in the different regions of Darrang, people are probably not aware of the varied types of Kherai prevalent in the Bodo heartland, Kokrajhar. It is also true that for economic reasons people are not able to celebrate Kherai in the village. The

community collects funds from the villagers for the forthcoming festival. There is a general notice given to the community regarding the dates and the budget of the festival. Those who don't pay are penalized and are not allowed to participate in the festival. The community keeps the accounts and on the concluding day presents a detailed report of the estimate incurred during the festival. The remaining money is spent in the welfare works of the village or is kept for future expenses. This is known as Rang Bathou.

The ritual ceremony comes to an end with sending off daudini known as Gadhon –mara. The daudini is given a pair of clothes, betel nut, and money and is escorted to her village with the local men .

Structure of Kherai

Kherai is more than a mere structure and function; it can also be among the most powerful experiences life has to offer. While in a liminal state people are freed from the demand of daily life. They feel at one with their comrades, all personal and social differences erased. People are uplifted, swept away, taken over. This liberation from the constraints of ordinary life can be termed as “anti-structure” and the experience the life cycle of the Bodos. Individual events are nested within, even as they as a series comprise, the small cycle of performances. The overall structure of Kherai is symbolic while its interior structure is dramatic. The two structures are integrated because they believed in the dreamtime and their own lives moving from ordinary to super ordinary reality. The Kherai performances were the links or the point of time and space where the two realities intersected and meshed. Surrounding the performance spontaneous communities is generated; (feeling of group solidarity) is experienced. Ordinary space (secular space) is temporarily made special. Sacred space is a natural space where one enters with care.

The daily life of the tribal people is rewarding but routine. There is a kind of low –key pace to the everyday round of living. During the celebration of Kherai the Bodos are seen to attain a heightened sense of drama. Sharp images appear and colours deepen. The tribals are masters of stagecraft and achieve remarkable visual and musical effects within the limited materials at hand. Gradually i experienced the central truth of the tribal religion: that it is not a thing by itself but an inseparable part of whole that encompasses every aspect of daily life, every individual and every

time. It is nothing less than the theme of existence, and as such constitutes one of the most sophisticated and unique religions and philosophical systems known to man.

Origin of the word 'Kherai'

There are various explanations regarding the word Kherai. Bathou the chief of the gods is also known as Kharia Buroi which means the latent old man was also the godfather of the Bodos. The words "kharia", "khuroi" "khubrai" might have got disintegrated and "kherai" might have got produced from that. There are other explanations about the origin of "Kherai". The sacrificial animals when cut produce a sound "khe" which reaches the sky as an invocation to Gods. The folk etymologies produced give explanations for the origin of Kherai, the entire belt of tribal population of the North -East has similar festivals like Ker, Khernang, and Kheraima of the Tripurians, Dimasas and the Nepales respectively.

Varieties of Kherai

Kherai is a yearlong festival with different rituals and festivities happening all over the year. The festival comes to an end during Bathou Kherai which is a melting point of various beliefs, ideas and imagination, different frames for propitiating gods, variety of performances, colour, stagecraft, etc. In the Kokrajhar region, Kherai is said to be four kinds. These forms of Kherai are celebrated all over the year by the Bodo society.

The different names are :-

- (i) Darshan Kherai is celebrated during the Kati month. Since these are the winter days, the festival shows association with the winter crops for which it is known as Sali kherai and also with the Goddess of wealth Mainao who is identified with Lakhi, the goddess of wealth.
- (ii) Umrao Kherai is held during the month of Ashar and is also associated with the summer crops. It is also meant for the welfare of the villagers.
- (iii) Phalo Kherai is performed during the full -moon night in the month Magha. It was also known as Danshrang Kherai which means full moon night.
- (iv) Noani Kherai is restricted to a individual family affair and was celebrated at any time of the year when the need was felt.(Brahma)

Though these are said to be celebrated all throughout the year in Kokrajhar district, the Darrang district is unaware of any such kinds of Kherai. But in the Darrang district there is celebration all throughout the year and the festival culminates in Bathou Kherai which is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the Phalguna month. The festival starts with:-

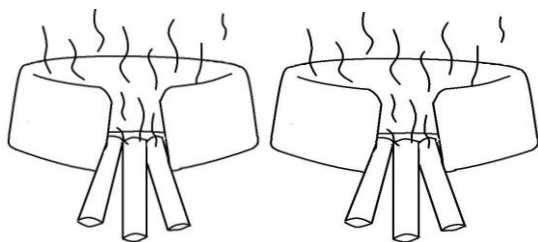
- (i) **Mahila mareh** which is celebrated in the month of April. A few sacrifices are offered in the Bor Deuri's house, it is a small ritual which marks the beginning of Kherai.
- (ii) **Zethor puja** is celebrated in the month of June. People enthusiastically participate in this ritual. Men mostly take part in it. The community offers pig sacrifice to the river goddess Bhoroli, and its attendants (eight cocks). The Bailung chants mantras seeking welfare, assuring whether the people are happy or not. Is there peace or not? The small sacrifices (8 cocks) are made and thrown into the river. The head stays intact at the altar. Finally the pig is sacrificed with much enthusiasm and spirit. The Deori performs the sacrifice. On the banks of the river Bhoroli, two fire hearths are made.

The offerings are made to the goddess Bhoroli in the river Bhoroli. Since Bhoroli is not seen, it is offered in one of the streamlet (Mansiri) about 4 kilometers from the village where the research was being documenting.

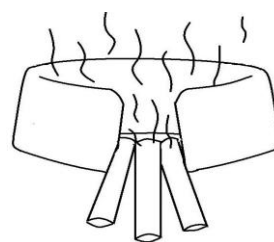
Two kinds of bhoga (offering) are prepared :-

- (i) Plain rice Bhoga is offered to Bhoroli.
- (ii) Cooked rice and pig meat (pork) are offered to Bhoroli.

Public



God



Fire hearths for public and god

diagram-1

The bhogamaker takes an earthen pot full of rice khichdi and pig meat and carries it over his head. The carrier of the bhoga is accompanied by a community member and they offer the bhoga to the river. He twists his feet and tries to make a pit and places the bhoga pot under the water. Then he quickly turns to his back and starts coming out of the river, people rejoice very much when they don't see the bhoga pot coming out. To them Goddess Bhoroli has accepted the offering. There is distribution of the prasada, Both the public and privately cooked foods are mixed and served to the people present on the occasion, There is a community feast, mostly of men, who enjoy the fowl's roasted entrails first and then the cooked special food.

- (iii) **Dangoriya puja** is celebrated in the month of July. A number of twenty-five laizams (offerings) are laid in for the propitiation of various gods and goddesses, all corresponding to Bathou. Holding the sacred water, the priest invokes Bura Dangoriya (a spirit) and says "its all because of your grace this village community has 126 households at present. Do protect us from the Maor spirits. The laizams are placed in various directions for different gods and goddesses aiming at their abodes. During the ritual community sings hymns in praise of goddess Bhagawati.

The interesting feature is that the Bailung initiates in the Bodo language whereas the Pathak recites hundred names of Bhagawati in Assamese language. The community sings the hymns of Goddess Bhagawati in Assamese language though simultaneously the Bailung forwards his ritual incantations in Bodo language.

Aakaxore pora ai nami ahe

bhoyamot patile sabha hari hei

kailaxore pora ai nami ahe

bhoyamot patile than

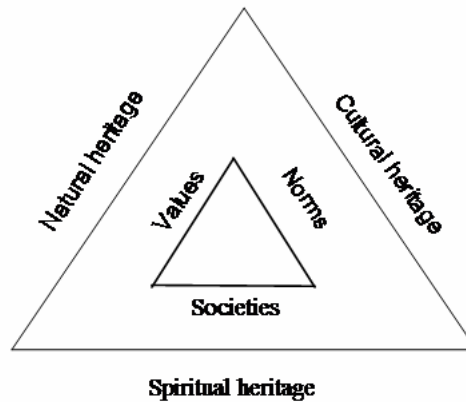
kaxote uroni, murote uroni

hate loi asu

Sokolu debataak namaskaar karisu

(One can see the bi-lingual aspect and the performance of the oral discourse. Though it is observed that a section of the Bodo population has merged with the Assamese society, it is for their existence that they voice their religious feelings and community's concern barring the ideological prejudices Though the process of assimilation and other such developments as such were gradually becoming repressive in character in some parts of Bodo concentration.) Here in this village as Bodo is not spoken by the majority of the people, the younger generation has neither studied nor learnt it in their families. The language remains an enigma for the community. A close proximity is observed between the tribals and the non-tribals.

Analysis: The interesting feature of this ritual is the manifestation of an object that does not constitute idolatry. It is an old tree which the community regards as sacred. This particular tree is being revered since times immemorial. A clearing is used as a ritual arena to hold the ritual. Though there is no permanent access to the ground, but it assumes eternity when invoked. It is cut off from the rest. The priest poses as if he is standing on a platform which points to a reality beyond itself. "The sacred always manifest itself as a reality of a wholly different order from". (Eliade) It is apprehended through its diverse manifestation, which Eliade calls 'hierophanies. Lately, people realized that though the larger portion of the tree has been cut whatever is left must be preserved for the sake of heritage, more importantly, it is the critical tool through which societies define their relations and norms between cultural values and cultural variables. The three pillars (societies, norms, and values) are in an equilateral triangle relationship forming a smart partnership that sustains cultural heritage. However, they work within a larger triangle of natural heritage, cultural heritage and spiritual heritage.



Equilateral triangle relationship of cultural heritage

diagram-2

Here in this case the tree becoming a heirophany, does not lose its nature, it remains a tree in the ordinary sense of the word. A thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies i.e. reveals something other than itself. The particular space in due course of time may have permanent access to the sacred. In encounter with the sacred, time and space are undistinguished in that both reflect the original moment and place of the sacred act of creation.

It is also true that sometimes the sacred is not discovered by the human beings rather the sacred reveals itself to them in that place. It can be inferred that the sacred is not reducible to human effective and constitutive acts then it remains a irreducible mystery The community's attitude towards the sacred, which at once attracts and repels its members is both beneficent and dangerous, can be explained not only by the ambivalent nature of the sacred-in itself, but also by man's natural reactions to this transcendental reality which attracts and terrifies him with equal intensity.

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partnership that sustains cultural heritage. However, they work within a larger triangle of natural heritage, cultural heritage and spiritual heritage.

There seems to be a paradoxical relationship between the sacred and the profane. With every manifestation of the sacred a tension arises due to the transcendental nature of the sacred and its self – limitation in the spatial realm. Whenever the sacred manifests, it limits itself. Its appearance forms a part of the dialectic that occults other possibilities. By appearing in the concrete form of a tree, the sacred ceases to be absolute, for the object in which it appears and remains a part of the worldly environment. In some respect, every heirophany expresses an incomprehensible paradox arising from the great mystery upon which every heirophany is centered.

(iv) **Namghoriya puja** (in the namghar) and **Bator Sabah** (at the periphery of the village) to ward off evils and other spirits from the village) are held in the month of February. **Bator sabah** speaks of the entirety and the conclusion of the Kherai festival . One of the most interesting features of this event is the various altars that are constructed all over the stretch of the village road. All the deities of the Bathou pantheon are worshipped that day on the main altar. The four altars are constructed on the same road at a small distance of few steps.



diagram-3

1st (For public)- Here food is cooked for the rest of the public and is consumed before the spirits enter the ritual arena after driving away the spirits from the village. There is lot of fun and gaiety when people see young boys dressed as spirits with sticks and baskets enter the arena .

The boys make whirring sounds of thunder, ghosts and jump into the water, beat anything that comes in their way. They run and enter the village, beat the fences and the roofs of the houses as to drive away the evil-spirits. The boys wear crowns of plantain stem, make some images of the spirits on the crowns, bare bodied, have long bamboo sticks in their hands and carry baskets to collect that they get in their way. Before they leave the arena they bow before the deities at the altar. The Bailing sprinkles the holy basil water on them before they leave for the village. The community considers them as inauspicious beings and wouldn't like to see them.

They wear grotesque make-up and since its dark their appearance is all the more frightening. People finish their dinner before they arrive on the spot. Once they are back people finish their religious singing before the spirits come. The boys once back, come and surrender before the gods. They are dispirited by the Bailing. These boys perform this act in the ritual as a religious duty conferred on them by the society. They have to continue doing this duty for a minimum of three years. A pledge is taken by the boys before the community. The entire act is energetic and creates lot of dramatic score amidst the community.

2nd (Buda and Budi)- Two fire –hearths are set for Buda (siba) and Budi (consort). A white cock is sacrificed for the Buda and a red cock for the Budi. The fire hearths are covered so that nobody can see what is there inside. The attendants of Bathou are also worshipped along with them.

3rd (189 deities)- The altar is prepared for the worship of the 189 gods and goddesses of the Bathou pantheon.

4th (boat for immersion)- A boat is made of a plantain tree. Fruits and other offerings are placed inside the boat for immersion. The Pathak (recited) recites a few hymns from the folkloric verses and the women gathered on the occasion recite after him. These are the specimens of oral –literature which has a remarkable collection of the names of gods and goddesses. In the manner of that we pray you or who will come to our rescue if not you.

Kherai is celebrated in the month of Phalguna, on the first Wednesday. We can see that the community people are busy the entire year in various celebrations and these come to an end with Kherai celebrations.

Essentialities:

Kherai ritual has certain specific requirements. These are collected by the village community well in advance before the festival commences. People collect money from the villagers for the expenses to be met. A rate is fixed for every household. Those who can provide in surplus from their own gardens do also contribute accordingly.

Ritual requirements:

(i) a sijau tree (*Euphorbia splendens*), (ii) a jatrasi or tulasi plant (iii) few bijuli bamboos (iv) rice dust (v) khangkhla plant (vi) plantain trees (vii) areca nuts (viii) mustard oil (ix) rayon (white) (x) rice beer (xi) rice (xii) earthen lamps (xiii) small brass metal cup (khuroi) (xiv) sufficient quantity of cotton (xv) a small quantity of grass (xvi) sindur (vermillion) (xvii) a small brass vessel (ghati) (xviii) stick of cane or bamboo (xix) some pieces of jati bamboo (xx) a low stool made of special wood (xxi) dhup sticks (incense sticks) (xxii) banana fruits (xxiii) a small cup of brass (khuroi) (xxiv) mustard oil etc.

Musical accompaniments :

- (i) Kham (drum) -2
- (ii) Jotha (cymbals)- 1 pair
- (iii) Siphung(flute) – 1

Daudini's requirements:

- (i) a red skirt(mekhela)
- (ii) a red wrapper (around the breasts)
- (iii) a red blouse
- (iv) sudang (a leather belt)
- (v) silver necklace
- (vi) keru (ear- rings)
- (vii) gam kharu(bracelets)
- (viii) japi
- (ix) bet
- (x) bow and arrow

Sacrificial requirements:

- i) thungri (sword)- one pair
- ii) dhal (shield)- one pair

The role of the ritual officials :

The Bodos didn't have any priestly class as such, but the presence of Bailung and Bordeuri is to be questioned . It can be ascertained that since the people started living together since the process of acculturation had taken place long back .There were inter –community marriages between the Ahoms , Misings and the Deuris. There were Ahoms who were scattered in every nook and corner of the state. Bailung is the man who recites the mantras for the ritual and Bordeuri performs the sacrifice for the ritual. In some of the places, the term Ojha is used for the ritual priest. He assists Daudini in the Kherai ritual and instructs the devotees in the puja.

The community has immense faith in the oja , they believe that he can foresee the intentions of the gods

He through the help of the lady priestess (daudini) sends the prayers to various gods and goddesses. Since its not a hereditary position, a person possessing the necessary knowledge of the rituals may take over as official priests. They may even supervise the oaths and other trials in the village. But their activities during Kherai are of much significance. Mostly their affairs are action –oriented. The Bailung recites the incantation and the Deori performs the sacrifice. The official priests, who have been doing it for a long time, become well –versed with the process. They remember exactly as to what is to be offered where? They can even suggest changes provided there is a problem like scarcity of the sacrificial animals or the daudini lying unconscious on the ground. The Bailung sits in a half sit knee bend position and Deori bends his head over the thungri , as trying to concentrate or meditate for the successful completion of the sacrifices. The daudini herself takes the charge of lady priestess and performs certain feats to please the gods and the goddesses. She is the intermediary between the members of her society and the supernatural world with which she supposedly communicates either by talking to the spirits or through spirit possession. By employing various techniques of divination (singing , dancing , eating , falling into trance , playing to the accompaniment of music etc , they solve various problems. Basically she is a ritual specialist who has the individual ability to

communicate and deal with the supernatural. She performs a number of dances for the initiation of the ritual.

1.) Tel bati dance (a cup of blood) on her (daudini's) head, the dancer takes clockwise and anti clockwise movements, drinks the blood and the dance comes to an end.

2.) Paro uruwa (pigeon release) - Both hands combined in a gesture show a pair of pigeon, She dances with the pair making them fly high and low. She takes circular movements and then finally takes the live pigeon in her hands and makes them fly in the sky.

3.) Taruwal ghurua (moving of swords) – The Daudini takes the pair of sword in her hands and with wrist movements clockwise and anti clockwise keeps turning the thungris (swords) and finally dugs them deep in the ground.

4.) Suli Ghurua (moving the hair)- The dancer bows her head over the thunгри (sword) and keeps moving her head in a frenzied (manner) movement as she gradually arrives at a trance.

5.) Salita Khowa (swallowing the fire wick) The dancer lights the wick and places the burning wick inside her mouth, keeps rhythm in her feet. Finally she takes a deep breath and exhales.

6.) Mekhela Pindha (wearing of the ceremonial skirt) The dress is placed on the thunгри. The dancer takes the dress and moves it round her body with encircling movements. Both of her hands balancing the skirt make a gesture of women wearing mekhela.

7.) Koloh loi (pitcher carrying) The performer carries the pitcher filled with sacred water and with the gesture of carrying the pitcher on her shoulders, right and left dances to the tune of the kham and siphung and enacts the act of sprinkling the holy water.

8.) Thunгри nach (sword dance) The daudini takes out the pair of thunгри from the pit and balances it in both hands. She keeps moving the sword in the air. She keeps one thunгри at the front and one at the back as enacting the art of self defence. The sword is placed at the thighs and the other at the back.

9.) Paro- uruwa (releasing of the pigeons) She dances with a live pair of pigeons and finally makes them fly. Finally with folded hands leaves the ritual arena to the public performance.

With these dances the ritual is initiated and later in the larger space elaboration of the entire ritual performance takes place. This preliminary in a way is also an energizer for the ritual. The audience takes it as a warming up for the entire period of the ritual. The audience can also assess the outcome of the ritual as to how successfully Daudini will carry on the ritual and the

performance. The anxiety and the enthusiasm lie entirely on the activities of the daudini. It is seen that the audience is capable of orienting itself in a situation by accepting the performed tricks on faith, treating these as signs of evidence of something greater than sign system itself.

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Notes:-

- i) The data analyzed in this paper is collected from a village namely Dhekidol 20 kms from the Tezpur town in Sonitpur district.
- ii) The abovesaid observations were made during my field-study in a Bodo village namely Dhekidol in Sonitpur district. The Kherai ritual held in the month of March 2008 was celebrated with much resentment in the community. Expenses for organizing the festival were too meagre. Event time was cancelled thrice.
- iii) Due to the non-availability of the priestess (Daudini's) they thought of managing the event with a proxy . They also had alternative fears of acceptance by the larger society. For some it was too early to drop the traditional practice. Somehow they arranged for the money and daudini finally.
- iv) My principal informant Sri Tajuram Narzary also a community elder tried to convince me by showing his family genealogy which showed that some 150 years ago , an ahom elder (khara bura) came from Sivasagar got settled in this village and married a Bodo girl . Since then Kherai is celebrated.
- v) There stood a big tree trunk on which were inscribed some letters regarding the ancestors. The tree was chopped some years ago, by the villagers for wood. The place where the tree stood a prayer hall (namghar) was built. The tree's remaining part is cemented with a column within the namghar structure as to make the community feel the presence of an authentic setting. This stands as a testimony for tradition also.
- vi) The participant performers were never referred to as dancers or nasoni's but as supporters or rather helpers. They join the sequences and are watchful of the Daudini's activities. The organizers keep requesting the public to come and participate. They are supposed to keep an eye on the proceedings of the ritual along with performance.