



INSCRIPTING THE G/LOCAL: BATHOU AND THE BODO CULTURAL LIFE
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RESEARCH PAPER IN FOLKLORE**ABSTRACT**

The Bathou is an important cultural referent for the Bodo people. At once, constituting a threshold of the sacred, its symbolic architecture is one that allows men and gods to interact with one another. There is a particular structure that allows for walking. Mircea Eliade remarks that in most religions, the visible signifier of movement allows the sacred to break into the profane and declare its importance. One finds a right angle altar around the Kherai itself. This is the point also of the real. But as the critic says, one of the outstanding achievements of traditional society is its ability to demarcate between the right and wrong-translated in moral terms becomes a cleavage between the known world of 'our' people and 'deities' against the outside world of foreigners and demons-those that inhabit a homogenous empty time. But the real is also not a matter of human agency or intervention. It is a moment of 'recreation' when the past and present becomes one and continuous. How to reinvent the primordial act? That part is taken care of when the sijna plant is worshipped and an altar built around the same.

The base of the altar is the consecrating earth, the side walls, the atmosphere, while the plant itself is indicative of the coming of life of something that was not there. How to correlate it with the tremendous economic and political changes going around? For that to happen, it is important to see the altar with its plant as ontologically or at least proving logic whereby the chaos of the 'outside' is rendered explicable and manageable. This negotiation is possible only through dances and body movements. Of course the body movements are symbolic and assume importance in their potential to generate and recall the act of the Gods.

It is important to understand that such dances have a ritual denominator at a primary level. The Daudini arrives on the scene after her bath. She is calm and peaceful. After this, she washes her feet and touches the ground. Attendants accompany her while the notes of Hari-Om resonate all around. Accompanying Lamphi's helps the Daudini to get dressed. In Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman, the old man Elesin, who is his dead king's horseman is dressed up likewise in Alari-to perform his dance that will finally unite him with his dead master. A chorus follows him as he moves along the market place and as is the case with African customs, there are musical instruments that provide a gnomic seriousness to the whole atmosphere. Connections between the African and Bodo Daudini are introduced here as a matter of commenting on the similarities between two different histories and people. Such fortuitous comparisons notwithstanding, relations between man and his environment are important in all places. But, this relationship is never static. As Gert Hofstede remarks in Cultures,

But to return to the Bathou, one finds the Lamphi help the Daudin to get dressed. Her hair is oiled and combed and vermilion is put on her hair. Her cheeks are also colored. All this goes to the accompaniment of the Kham which again is accompanied by other musical instruments like the Siphung and Jotha. The idea is to sanctify the entire environment while the Daudini also sanctifies her dress and ornaments. This she does by putting a burning wick in her mouth that marks her supernatural prowess. Dr Kameswar Brahma explains the various processes involved in the Doudini dance:

[...] while the doudini dances, she imitates the nature of gods and goddess. She demonstrates as many as eight different kinds of dances. By this time she also changes

her nature through three different stages. First she changes her mood, secondly, she assimilates her with gods and goddess and thirdly, she imitates the nature of different gods and goddess. [...] (*Aspects of Social Customs of the Boros* 68)

The Doudini sometimes imitates the Ranchandi and also demonstrates the "tactics a person can use to save himself" (Khapri Chipnai). There is a moment where she executes steps necessary to destroy and then subjugate an enemy Gandoula Bannai). But, all this makes observation and close monitoring mandatory, which is the point when her dance has the suggestion or imprints of a bear (Muphur Gelanai). The qualitative similarity between the dance and movements of a martial arts artist is more than evident. But Jan Koster raises important objections here when he says that the features of a combat in a ritual are often translated into life outside the theater and addresses to the need for a common enemy. In the Christian version of an apocalyptic fight between the good and the evil: Sons of Light are led by Christ, while the forces of Evil follow the Prince of Darkness. Christ's death and resurrection form a decisive victory in this cosmic drama, although the battle still goes on (Ritual Performance and the Politics of Identity 14)

It can be said to Bathou's advantage here that the Kherai propitiates such various deities as Nawab Badsha, a Muslim God and Laokhar Gosai, identified with Lord Krishna. Bathou as such do help social in harmony. If Bodos do believe in combat, it is in response to a need for alertness within a society, determined as much by visual markers as by "acoustic, olfactory space" (Hall The Hidden Dimension 80). Primitive societies emphasized upon cultural memory both to relive history as much to add to newer modes of apprehending the unknown. It is not possible to merely describe all past religions as monstrous without taking the other side of the story.

A crescendo is reached when the Goddess takes up a cup filled with blood from a chicken and drinks it to the tune of a flute. The apparently disturbing aspect to the event, performed within the ritual, graphs the local small tradition into the great tradition of Hindu tantricism, which implicates the female dancer, Daudin (Deodhawni) with the power and mystical energy of Shiva, one among the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar. Shiva's unique position in the Hindu pantheon is as much because of his tantric skills as to his

ability to draw a cosmography of life. The Nataraja principle for example juxtaposes action with creative force. One must act to know and then release that knowledge. But all releases are potentially violent. Hence, the process of release as much as that of creation involves a science that goes with a purity of heart, which all process must capture, explained as the relations between mind and matter and vice versa. It is possible also to see the female shaman as embodying an 'ambiguous being' one who conjoins both the linear discipline of the man with female contiguity of an encompassing intellect and imagination. Subsequently, she is possessed by the spirit of the Mainao (the goddess of wealth). For some moments she sits motionless before the altar of the Bathou Borai. The Oja (Priest) then asks the worshippers to sacrifice a pig in her name and the sacrificed animal is placed before the altar of Mainao while the flute (Siphung), the drums (kham) and the cymbals (jatha) are played continuously. Villagers request her to come with them. But, she refuses to be mobbed to any certainty until they promise to honor her. After much pleading from the villagers and also from the priest who audaciously describes her unwillingness to go as a "sin," she chooses to give in to the common wish. Soon, after, she begins to dance and her admirers join her until she loses her sense. The priests and other men must then quickly help the shaman regain her senses.

Schechner argues, non-mimetic art is "pre-Aristotelian" when it is linked to an event and becomes as Kaprow calls an "actual" (Schechner 28). A shaman too begins under a spell until the original impulse breaks off and like an artwork "becomes itself," (Schechner 29) becomes life. The industrial age with its inbuilt stress often produces such crisis and Soma Choudhury in her study of witch hunting in tea-plantations in Jalpaiguri says as much: Caught between non-capitalist morality and capitalistic discipline, some factory women alternate between states of self-control and spirit possession, and the spirit possession is a reflection of the loss of autonomy and humanity inherent in production work (Choudhuri Witches Tea Plantations and Lives of Migrant Laborers in India 9).

But Schechner claims that in the case of a Shaman, the trance like state is willed and indicate "a genuine alternative to a horrific destiny" (The Fan and the Web 30). Levi Strauss also believes that for primitive people relations between what is thought and what is concrete is not separate and so there is no putting on. The spectators know that the dancer is the God and the dancer combined. When the dancing stops, there is a separation as Schechner recalls as in the case of Tiwi society between the performance and the performer which allow for "exchanges and transformation" (The Fan 30). In the case with the Bathou Shamanism, there is interpenetration and confrontation when the mundane and spiritual lives side by side. The fact of Tantricism has however been seriously contended as a social coagulant by scholars like Ramsharan Sharma:

Tantricism was the ultimate product of colonization of the tribal areas through the process of land grants [...]. One the one hand the new religion welcomed in its rank women, Shudras and incoming aborigines; on the other hand it recognized the existing social and feudal hierarchy. Sujit Choudhury also says that the Brahmins introduced tantricism in tribal society in connivance with the ruling classes of the Brahmaputra

valley only to satisfy some "perverse desire". Choudhury explains this 'desire' by alluding to another scholar Bani Kanta Kakati, who traced in the Kalikapurana, a sliding of the figure of the mother goddess Kamakhya as "primordial" to Vishnu to being a "consort" of Shiva, whose motif is sex or "Kama" (eros) where her menstruating cycles are emphasized. The whole purpose of such definition suited a dirty power game run by the monarchy at the behest of upper castes according to Kakati:

The left-hand worship often required the worship of an actual living girl. There was also the institution of virgin worship. No caste distinction was to be observed while selecting a virgin and if in the process of worship the devotee was stricken with amour, he went to heaven. Then in the worship of certain other aspects of the goddess [...] the devotee was to keep tight vigils in the company of dancers, musicians and prostitutes (Mother Goddess Kamakhya 45).

It can be contended however that the practices that either Chaudhury or Bani Kanta Kakati talks about has its belief in "sympathetic magic" that equated as Choudhury explains "the fertility of woman and the fertility of the field as one and the same quality" (The Bodos 41). Choudhury continues that most agricultural communities participated in sexual unions to nourish the earth and allow for a rich harvest. But, to equate all tantric practices to mere orgy, where "deafening noises of drums and cymbals" portend the symbolic massacre of animals, is being too simplistic. I look at tantra as Russell Paul says as that philosophy that admits the "part as greater than the whole because it contains the whole and goes against Brahmanism that viewed the "whole as greater than its parts" and was also "aligned with the state" (The Yoga of Sound 25). Also as Gordon White says, tantra as it evolved in India, was a religion of the aborigines, much despised by Brahmins. They called their religion Sanatana Dharma, abstained from beef and pork and contact with Maleccas and yet needed the services. One way of doing this was to adopt all tribals within the Hindu fold while denying any legitimate dignity to any local cult. This would allow the "pioneer Brahmins not only field laborers but also a lower stratum in the social ladder which was essential for the smooth functioning of the Brahminical social system" (Choudhury, The Bodos 12).

It could be argued that such absorption of ethnicities follow a parallel trajectory to globalization which is really an emphasis on homogenization. In terms of recent history, globalization works to place the illusory structure of human rights in terms of labor, organized at the behest of capital, in permissible and even achievable consumerism. But, such logic opens any society to the traumatic intervention of machines and dislodges ingenuity when the same goes against the assembly line. Jean Luc Nancy discusses such a process as "the process of un-world" where world forming denotes "a space of human relations" and is especially conducive to a "mastery of the world without a remainder" where accumulations of wealth must incorporate the "exclusions of a margin that is rejected into misery" (The Creation of the World or Globalization 3-5). A related problem says Nancy emerges from theology which he sees as a covert manipulator of its framework. This moment arrives, says Nancy, when a subject looks upon the world objectively so that it is dependent on the former i.e. the subject's

gaze: As for this subject, it is, of course, not of this world, nor any longer "in" the world, in the sense of being-in-the-world: it is not worldly. Positioning itself outside the world, it gains, so to speak, a theological status (6)

Successively, after the Brahmins, the Koch royalty also patronized the conversion of the Bodos as also a superior position to Sanskrit. But, the tribals were allowed to exercise their rights in terms of religion. Bani Kanta Kakati writes: About tribal mode of worship there are certain references in the dynastic history of the Koch kings of Kochbihar. It is narrated that on the eve of his expedition against the Ahoms, king Naranarayana of Kochbihar offered worship to Shiva according to accepted Shastric rites. Thereupon, there was an insistence by his Kachari soldiers that Shiva should also be worshipped according to their tribal customs. This was allowed and the worship was carried out by the sacrifice of swine, buffaloes, he-goats and ...the dancing of woman (deo-dhai) Shankardeva, a religious reformer and one of the most outstanding religious leader of modern India also followed a policy of 'de-tribalization' of tribal societies, which according to the historian Amlendu Guha was passing through a phase of transition. Sankardeva's policy of acculturation was viewed with suspicion by the Ahom rulers first because he was a member of the ethnically antagonistic Bhuyan group but also because his policy of bringing the tribals under a progressive feudal order created a parallel economy that seriously jeopardized the monarchy.

The Ahoms asked their Vaishnavite subjects to install idols, exclude the lower classes from temples, while forcing the Bodos to remain within a tribal fold. But, Vaishnavism also lost because there was a peculiar "rapacity and greed" (Choudhury 57) that characterized the dealings of the Vaishnavite priestly class. Ananta Dev Goswami, the most prominent preacher of his religion was accused of being hostile to the Saranias. Kalicharan Brahma, social reformer and initiator of the Brahma Dharma was himself witness to such high handedness and he introduced his variety of religion to unify the Bodos. Unfortunately, in his zeal to appropriate the masses to a particular version of orthodoxy, he asked the Bodos to give up their songs and dances and even many musical instruments because such songs etc made acculturation difficult. It is unfortunately real that Sankardeva do not command the same respect among Bodos as he does among Assamese, as Jogeswar Boro a practising Bathou follower says:

We got rebirth and survived through Bathou.

Such acts ritualization is not only onto-theological and therefore insidious but can be viewed as marked by a territorial ambition and a transcendental God. Such a God cannot be imitated except at the cost of blasphemy or hostility as with Sufis, who are looked down upon by fundamentalists. Believers are also expected to submit to an all powerful God. Christians keen in prayer as do Hindus. And this allows the entry of intermediaries in the form of priests and godman. Overall, there is an idea of absorption as Stal argues, where mysticism borders on an idea of sexual union or mating as some critics like Goldberg 1931, Mann & Lyle 1995 and Daniélou 1984 argue. In Bathou, the idea of union detours the concept of mating. The performer takes his task at great personal risk because if she is not sprinkled with water the moment her trance breaks off, she may also die. Also, the Shaman's protestations at the

end of the ritual mixes as Levi Strauss suggests the "social and religious, magic and economic, utilitarian and economic, jural and moral" (The Elementary Structures of Kinship 52). And if there is also violence like in the killing of animals, the same was explained Artaud when he suggested that violence purges violent feelings (Schechner 51). The purpose is to creatively disorient the audience who must take some responsibility for acts on the stage or in open places.

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